Truth-Claims and Responses to Religious Pluralism:
An Understanding of Embrace through a Case Study of Dayananda Sarasvati and Ramakrishna

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Truth

Truth is tall and rather unconventional looking. He has golden hair and a short beard. He does not like statistics and is not particularly concerned about facts, but he loves a good story. He chronicled the contemporary film scene for a while. He quite when his reviews started being quoted out of context. Though he never hides what he feels, by nature he is gentle and not at all sarcastic. However, he does have a fierce temper. He has observed that people who only listen with one ear when he says something in a kind way are always impressed by his anger.

Truth has been employed as a thief stealing illusions. He can climb over any security fence we have constructed to keep out disturbing influences. Although he can unlock any window or door, he is no longer interested in breaking in or getting away. No longer is he thrilled by the chase nor by defying authorities, he has given up on the challenge of trying to find new ways to escape.

X-rays, photographs of cells, and the history of plants fascinate Truth. When Truth's fingers touch my shoulder, I hear bone touching bone. Truth has set down his bundle of needs, and his shoulders are soft and spacious, outlined by light.

Truth learned to act in the theater of qualities, and his studies in mime continue. He lingers in the long pauses between the questions and the answers. He has made an alter to his loneliness. Certainty and Uncertainty are both welcome at his table. Truth is willing to wait for a long time with little attention or visible encouragement. Truth is not willing to live without love.

Taken from J. Ruth Gendler, *The Book of Qualities*

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Introduction

It has been said, "Those who only know their own religion, know none."[1] However, it has also been said that, "Those who are not decisively committed to one faith know no others."[2] These two complementary statements suggest that unless I recognize that my own faith tradition is one among many, I cannot begin to understand others or myself. Yet a tension arises in the second statement, which says that if I do not realize the distinctiveness of my own faith tradition, I cannot recognize the meaning of uniqueness in another. This tension raises central concerns in broader discussions of religion, including religious plurality, the role of "truth," truth-claims, and belief, and the very definition of religion itself.

Although defining "religion" will be attempted later in the paper, one function of religion is a personal or social quest for an ultimate reality outside of or within one's self. In this, the believer (here I mean either an individual or a religious group) claims that he or she has found the "true religion," or the "true revelation" as the "true path" to salvation, therefore defining and finally making sense of the goal of one's existence. Thus, it seems contradictory for such religions or people to accept any expressions of the Ultimate Reality other than their own, illustrating the point, "Those who are not decisively committed to one faith know no others."[3]

Yet, one of the defining characteristics of the world today is the need to come to terms with religious plurality, which is the product of increasingly permeable cultural, linguistic, racial and geographical boundaries. There is an increasing amount of connection and interaction between different religions, as we all become spiritual

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[1] Found in: Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, 1.
[2] Found in: Heim, 1.

neighbors to one another. For example, the United States, which is traditionally a Christian culture, is quickly becoming home to a large Muslim population.[4] However, this creates a problem for those religions that claim to have the "absolute truth" for the world. How are those religions supposed to react to the uncertainty associated with religious pluralism? This work will concentrate on a particular set of reactions: violence, exclusion, tolerance, and embrace, which are found when individuals or religious groups are living in situations of religious plurality.

Generally speaking, when an individual or a religious group's truth-claims are challenged by religious plurality, there are common patterns of response: to create either **violence,** "we" must destroy "them"; **exclusion,** "we" must separate ourselves from "them"; **tolerance,** "we" must simply put up with "them"; or **embrace,** "we" must appreciate the validity in and humanity of each other.[5] By comparing case study in this thesis, I seek to understand how different religious groups and their individual members can respond to this pluralism; how does their understanding of "truth" affect their responses to religious plurality? Why is it that different groups of people rely on their "religion" to justify a reaction to religious pluralism, yet end up with such different reactions? What is it about religion that can lead people to justify such a wide variety of reactions?

Thesis Paragraph

In this thesis, I argue that how a person or religious group understands the concept of "truth" affects the way he or she will respond when in a situation of religious plurality,

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[3] Found in: Heim, 1.
[4] Cite statistics
[5] Note here that the category "them" was never used. As will be discussed later in the paper, embrace transcends the boundaries between "us" and "them," as it strives to create a feeling of unity, or "we."

with either violence, exclusion, tolerance or embrace. To illustrate my point, I will analyze a case study of two nineteenth century Indian religious philosophers: Dayananda Sarasvati, who claimed that strict adherence to the Vedic scriptures was the only way to "absolute truth"; and Ramakrishna, who acknowledged that each religion is a valid path to a different God, and all are part of an "ultimate reality" or "truth." By examining the context in which each philosopher emerged and looking at their understanding of truth and responses to religious pluralism, I then intend to make statements about religion in general. Ultimately, although throughout history and still today religion has been understood to justify violence, exclusion and tolerance, I argue that there is a more positive way of understanding religion that creates life-enhancing space for all religions. I argue that a goal of religion should be to create an appreciation for humanity. It should break down barriers between "I" and "You" to create a feeling of "We." I believe one way this can happen is through an understanding of "truth" that embraces the "other." Embrace offers an understanding of religion that allows different religions to "get along" with the other without giving up their personal beliefs or truth-claims, leading to an encouragement of mutual inter-faith dialogue. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith says:

> The first great innovation in recent times has been the personalization of the faiths observed so that one finds…the situation is one of 'we' talking about 'they.' The next step is dialogue, where 'we' talk to 'you.' If there is listening and mutuality, this may become that 'we' talk *with* 'you.' The culmination of this process is when 'we all' are talking *with* each other about 'us.'[6]

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[6] Livingston, 428.

Chapter 1: Definitions

At this point, it is important to clarify the definitions of a few key terms and ideas that will be used throughout this paper.

Religion

The term "religion" is very difficult to define because any one definition will undoubtedly have its own difficulties.   However, the need to define the term "religion" is great, because of the underlying ambiguity of religion. Before we can attempt to define "religion," we must know what the definition itself avoids and includes. An adequate definition must avoid narrowness and vagueness, in that it should not overlook or dismiss features that are characteristic of other religious traditions; the definition must also avoid being reductive or prejudicial, making judgments on religious traditions.[7] Therefore, an adequate definition of religion should include both distinctiveness and generality; the definition should be distinctive enough for us to be able to distinguish religious phenomena from other forms of cultural life and expression, and yet it should be general enough to avoid being relevant to only one religion or religious life within a particular cultural setting or time period. [8]

In his book, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion,* James C. Livingston states that although there have been many inadequate attempts at a definition of religion throughout history, we should combine several definitions that may complement and supplement one another. He offers several examples that, when taken together, point to several essential features of the phenomenon we call "religion."

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[7] James C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, 7.
[8] Livingston, 7.

First, Livingston notes sociologist Martin Yinger's definition of religion: "Religion can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life."[9] We are then pointed in the direction of anthropologist Clifford Geertz's definition:

> "Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[10]

By combining these and other existing definitions of religion, Livingston is able to come up with his own definition, which is the one I will be using in this paper: "Religion is that system of activities and beliefs directed toward that which is perceived to be of sacred value and transforming power."[11]

Truth

When examining the question of how people understand the truth in their religion, we must ask several questions: Is there a concept of an Ultimate Reality; if so, how is it to be reached? What is the role of "absolute truth" in their beliefs; can it mean just one thing or is it inherently ambiguous? Most fundamentally, what is "truth"? What is the nature of truth? In the case of conflicting truth-claims, are they all valid? We must examine the definition of truth as it is viewed relative to another truth-claim.

Attempting to define truth can be likened to the fable of the blind men trying to describe an elephant. "One touches its trunk and describes it as a snake; another touches its ear and describes it as a winnowing fan; another touches its leg and describes it as a

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[9] Livingston, p. 9.
[10] Livingston, p. 10.
[11] Livingston, p. 12.

tree; another its tail and describes it as a broom."[12] Just as the blind men cannot describe the elephant as a whole because they only "know" a part, there is no way any individual can know truth as a whole, for he or she is only able to grasp one part of it. There *is* truth; the problem is seeing or conceptualizing it. However, just as the blind men could combine their descriptions to hypothesize what an elephant looks like, we too can combine our ideas to understand a more complete definition of truth.

One commonly accepted general definition of truth is the "knowledge and expression of 'what-is' for the purpose of achieving the greatest well-being possible, such as salvation, absolute freedom or total harmony."[13] Inherent in this definition is that in knowing the truth, a person is genuine because he or she places his or her entire being or self-consciousness in the comprehensive context of "what-is." Because the individual sees religious truth as embedded in their "reality," they may perceive it to be absolute. However, in this paper, I define religious truth is an ongoing relationship between the individual's self-consciousness and the reality of what they "know," of "what-is." Therefore, the object of religious truth or knowing is not simply information about another thing or person, but recognition of the deepest reality or resource for the fulfillment of life.[14]

In the contemporary world, we are greeted by a rising sense of urgency to develop strategies for, at the least, safely surviving within a plurality of religious truth-claims, if not for discovering and embracing the unity in truth that sustains the source of well being for all humanity. However, this is difficult for those in traditions that identify their survival and highest fulfillment within a single form of truth, whether this is defined as

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[12] Eric Sharpe, *Understanding Religion*, 46 – 47.
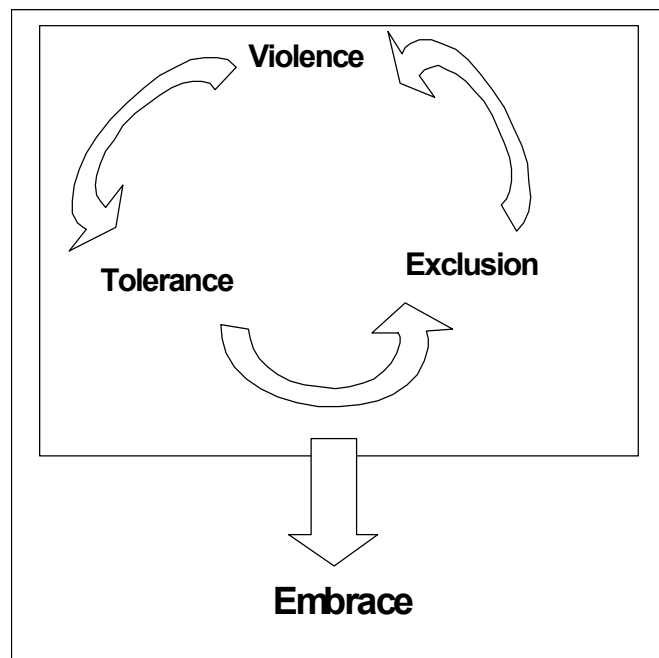[13] Frederick J. Steng, "Truth" *Encyclopedia of Religion,* vol. 15, 63.

orthodoxy, the doctrines within religion, or praxis, the way religion is used. The modern challenge is how to live in the midst of conflicting truth-claims and how to respond in a life-giving way for those inside and outside one's personal truth-claims. The survival and well being of people in all cultures calls for a re-examination and critical assessment of the way varied truth-claims are used and how those truth-claims give weight to different ideas of "what-is".

The Circular Continuum

How an individual or group understands the concept of religious truth intimately affects what how they justify their reactions to religious pluralism. Generally, we can see that when faced with religious plurality, a group has used religion to justify **violence,** "we" must destroy "them"; **exclusion,** "we" must separate ourselves from "them"; **tolerance,** "we" must simply put up with "them"; or **embrace,** we must appreciate the validity in each other. Violence, exclusion, and tolerance exist upon a circular

continuum, one in which the boundaries between the different responses are fluid. For example, one response might not fit into the "violence" category perfectly for it might also include elements of the "exclusion" or "tolerance" response.

However, it is important to recognize this circular continuum

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[14] Frederick J. Steng, "Truth" *Encyclopediaof Religion,* vol. 15, 63.

because we are able to see the response to and effects of these reactions. If a "goal" of religion is to create a harmonious space for different religions to thrive, and to exist in a space where we can talk with each other, then using religion to justify violence, exclusion or tolerance is not constructive. Their ways of viewing truth leave no space for a dialogue of understanding between the religious traditions. However, as I will show, using religion as an embrace in the face of religious pluralism is a way to break out of the unconstructive circular continuum. Embrace goes beyond this continuum to foster conversation, which simultaneously relies on and encourages an understanding and appreciation of the "other."

Violence

When confronted with religious plurality, some people feel uncertain about how to respond. Different religions with conflicting truth-claims and beliefs are confusing and even threatening. Thus, they cling to their personal truth-claims and use them to justify violence against the "invading" other, be it an individual or a religious group. However, violence is a word that could mean many things, depending on what one emphasizes. For example, Robert McAfee Brown defines violence as "…a violation of personhood. While such denial or violation can involve the physical destruction of personhood in ways that are obvious, personhood can also be violated or denied in ways that are not obvious at all, except to the victim."[15] The "violation of personhood" can be much more than physical harm. Within this definition, three of the responses to pluralism: violence, exclusion, and tolerance, would fit into Brown's definition of violence. However, despite the fact that all three exist as violence, one must recognize a difference in the *kind* of violence committed. For example, there is a difference between

slaughter and exclusion; killing the "other" and excluding the "other" is not the same thing. Brown illustrates an important point, however, that violence, exclusion and tolerance are indeed violence. In this paper, I will define religious violence as the intentional aim to do harm to another individual or group, which can take the form of oppression, abuse (physical or mental), domination, and slaughter.

In this category, truth is understood specifically and is seen as a means to exclude. Truth is seen as the possession of only the group, and no one else can or will be able to realize the truth. This leads the group to believe there is a need to rid the world of the "other," thus possibly fulfilling or making more space for their own "truth." Their "truth" is offended or threatened by the existence of another group's truth claims. Here, the religious group might say: "We" have the Truth, and the Truth is only available or accessible to "Us." "They" think they have the Truth, but "They" are wrong. "They" and their way of thinking must be destroyed or eliminated from the world, and it is "Our" job to do it.

An important thing to note is that when talking about violence, it is easy to label those who engage in it as or "evil." However, in some situations, the group may be using violence as a way to remain faithful to their truth-claims, as a way to "purify" the world they are living in. This, of course, does not justify what they are doing, but it does make one stop and think before immediately pointing fingers and assigning labels.

Exclusion

As mentioned above, when using Brown's definition of violence, exclusion could be considered violence. However, "exclusion" differs from "violence" because of one major difference: the interaction with the other. When using religion to justify violence,

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[15] Robert McAfee Brown, *Religion and Violence,* 7.

the religious group interacts with the "other," even though that interaction is violent. In exclusion, on the other hand, the "other" is acknowledged, but their truth-claims or ways of viewing the world are immediately discounted and qualified as wrong. The only interaction that takes place is in order to distance the self from the other. This can be done, as Miroslav Volf illustrates, by, "…a cutting of the bonds that connect, taking the self out of the pattern of interdependence and placing the self in a position of sovereign independence."[16] In other words, exclusion is not realizing that one's identity is inextricably bound to the identity of the "other," for the individual or group does not recognize the bonds tying them together. Thus, the other religions are seen as an enemy or non-entity; they are disregarded and abandoned. Ultimately, the others are dehumanized.

Here, "truth" is understood as "We" have the Truth, which is the ultimate reality of the world, and is the only way to any form of salvation. "They" may believe they have some other kind of Truth, but it does not matter because "We" have the Absolute Truth. "We" know that we are "right" and therefore it does not matter what the other thinks. "We" are in a position superior to "theirs" and are not connected in any way. Therefore, "they" are dismissed as wrong and must be ignored.

As I will show later in the paper, we can see religion being understood in this way by Dayananda Sarasvati, as well as the modern reform movement he founded, the Arya Samaj. Dayananda believed that there was Absolute Truth found only though the Vedic scriptures; although he studied other religious traditions, he believed that they were inherently faulty and needed to be discarded. He considered his religious "truths" to be

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[16] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, 67.

above all others and therefore he and his religion were above all others. He dismissed all other religions as "false religions" and focused on elevating his religious "truths."

Tolerance

In some definitions, religious tolerance is a good thing. It does not necessarily put one religious group's truth-claims in a superior position to another's, nor does it use violence against the "other." However, the history of the word "tolerance" comes from medieval pharmacology and toxicology; it has to do with how much poison a body can handle until it kills you. Today, being able to tolerate pain and being a tolerant person are different things. Despite the change in contextual meaning, I think a valid point is made. How many Muslims can you put up with before it "kills" you? How much exposure to Christianity can you handle before it "kills" you? Tolerance in the face of religious plurality is trying to find out how much pluralism you can truly handle before it becomes too much. Tolerance acknowledges the other religions and other ways of thinking, yet those who use it are still convinced of the inherent fault found within and are dismissive of the "other." The other's truth-claims are immediately dismissed as being false without consideration of the possible truth found within them. Instead of destroying or ignoring the "other," those who use religious tolerance believe that they must simply "put up with" the differences or conflicting truth-claims. This, however, is still creating a type of ranking system, with the religious group still holding themselves to be "better" or "more right" than the other, though not as sharp of a contrast as in exclusion. As Vivekananda, the disciple of Ramakrishna, said, "Toleration means that I think you are wrong and I am just allowing you to [live]…"[17]

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[17] Claude Allen Stark, *God of All: Ramakrishna's Approach to Religious Plurality*, 1974, 137.

Truth is understood as "We" have the Absolute Truth. "They" think they have the truth and "they" are wrong, but we cannot do anything to change them. "We" simply have to "put up" with the other's incorrect and otherwise worthless views because "we" have to simply survive beside "them." However, if tolerance runs out, when "we" cannot put up with "them" anymore, this could quickly lead to exclusion, and possibly into violence.

The reactions of violence, exclusion, and tolerance are very natural reactions when one's religious truth-claims are being threatened by other religious truth-claims. However, we must examine these responses in a way that empathizes with the group that is being responded *to*. What does it mean that violence, exclusion, or tolerance is used against a different religious group and how are they supposed to respond?

For example, imagine a group of Muslims, aside from any previous reactions about how the Christians are treating them, who recognize that their personal truth-claims are conflicting with neighboring Christian truth-claims. To protect themselves, they respond to this religious plurality with mere tolerance, simply "putting up" with the Christians on an everyday basis. However, we must also examine this situation from the Christian's point of view. The Christians, aside from any previous attitudes they may personally hold against the Muslims, see their religious truth-claims not given any validity and their religion labeled as inherently wrong. How then are they to respond? Generally, it is safe to say they would respond with an equal dose of tolerance, a "putting up with" the Muslim beliefs, or even responding with exclusion, discrediting and dismissing any beliefs they may have. How then are the Muslims to respond? The responses of the religious groups continue along the circular continuum until one or both

groups respond violently, leading to warfare, death, and all-around hate. However, after violence is committed and the war is "won,"[18] the "losing side" must tolerate the power of the "winning side," thus perpetuating this circular continuum even further. Is this what we desire for a society that is increasingly becoming religiously diverse?

I believe there is a way to respond to religious plurality that does not lead into this circular continuum of violence. There is a way to break out of the cycle. Religious believers can respond to religious plurality in a mutually life-enhancing way, a way that uses a response that embraces the other.

Embrace[19]

When groups are faced with religious pluralism, some use their religious beliefs as a means to embrace the "other," as an acknowledgment that there are other religions and an acceptance of the validity, not necessarily of the "truth" of those ways of thinking. Persons within other religious traditions are equally justified in trusting their own distinctive religious experience and in forming their beliefs and truth-claims on the basis of it. As was stated earlier, religious truth relies on a person's known reality, or "what-is", which cannot be expected to be consistent between individuals, much less between different cultures and contexts. Therefore, the ability to and the need for embracing do not mean that we completely agree with other religious beliefs and truth-claims. Miroslav Volf recognizes the importance of differentiation of identities: "Identity is the

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[18] This is assuming one side can "win" a war. I personally believe that it is impossible to "win" a war; both sides lose.

[19] One may think it would make more sense semantically to use the word 'inclusion,' in contrast to the term 'exclusion.' However, there exists a philosophical approach to religious diversity termed *inclusivism*, argued for by the Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner. In Inclusivism, there is only one Absolute provision for salvation truly made known in only one religion. However, salvation and grace of that Absolute is manifested in various ways through various religions, regardless of whether or not they have heard and acknowledged the basic tenets of the one "true" religion. Michael Peterson, et al. *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 2003, 280-281.

result of the distinction from the other; and the internalization of the relationship to the other arises out of the complex history of 'differentiation' in which the self and the other take part by negotiating their identities in interaction with each other."[20] Thus, we must be able to differentiate between our religious tradition and that of others; we need to recognize and describe the separate yet connected bonds between them.

In this category, truth is understood in a very different way. Here, the distinction is not made between "We" and "Them." Instead, *we* talk with *each other*. In order to respond with embrace, we must be able to have our personal beliefs and hold them to be "true," but must also admit that a member of a different religious tradition holds his or her personal beliefs to be "true" in the same way. This way of understanding truth does not necessarily say that all religions (if any at all) have the "absolute truth," and this way does not require sacrifice of personal beliefs. Truth is understood in a way that asks the group to say, "We believe this to be true, but another's beliefs may also be true, or at least come by their beliefs validly."

Embrace in the face of religious plurality is a key concept in Ramakrishna's beliefs. Ramakrishna used his beliefs to embrace the "other" in the face of religious pluralism; he did not negate important differences between religious traditions. Ramakrishna's experiences within each religion led him to declare not that all religions are the same, but he upheld the sanctity and validity of each tradition he tried.[21] Ramakrishna, however, did not blindly accept all religious traditions. He had criteria for what makes a religion "valid" or not, as will be illustrated later. The important point is

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[20] Volf, 66.
[21] Stark, 6.

that Ramakrishna recognized the interconnectedness of different religions; he recognized the common bonds and differences between them.

Summary

I believe that these four ways of responding to religious pluralism: violence, exclusion, tolerance and embrace, are integral while the world becomes increasingly pluralistic. While the case studies will focus mainly on the ideas of exclusion and embrace, it is imperative to know the other categories do exist and recognize the differences and similarities between them. However, it is also very important to know that these categories are ways we try to pigeonhole religious reactions for the sake of analysis. Because this categorization is never completely accurate, we must take note that the boundaries between the reactions are fairly fluid, allowing for existence within several categories at once. Thus, I say these categories exist along a circular continuum. We must also be able to recognize that each category creates a different kind of "harm" and "good" that is not on the same level as the others, yet they exist as part of "violence" nonetheless.

Chapter 2: Case Studies

Now, with the groundwork of definitions and the establishment of the circular continuum: violence, exclusion, and tolerance, we move on to the case studies of Dayananda Sarasvati and Ramakrishna. In this next section, I will present two examples of how an understanding of "truth" affects an individual or group's responses to religious plurality.

Context

Throughout history, India has had its share of conquerors, beginning with the Aryan peoples of the second millennium B.C and culminated in a unification of the entire country for the first time in the seventeenth century under the Moguls. These conquerors were mostly nomadic or semi-nomadic people who adopted or expanded the agricultural economy and contributed new cultural forms or religions, such as Islam. The Europeans, mainly the English, arrived in great numbers in the early seventeenth century and had made a profound impact by the eighteenth century. For the first time under colonialization, India was forced into a subordinate role within a world system based on industrial production rather than agriculture.[22]

There were many motives behind British penetration into India starting in approximately 1757: commerce, security, and a purported moral uplift of the people. The British continued the expansion into India well into the 1850s, defeating Hindu and Muslim rulers who had been struggling to keep their tottering power and territories.[23] The power gained from conquering these new empires and British feelings of superiority fed into each other; the British conquered Hindu and Muslim kingdoms as a result of

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[22] James Heitzman and Robert L. Worden, *India: A Country Study*, 1996, xxxvi.
[23] Heitzman, 31.

feelings of superiority while, at the same time, they felt greater as a result of conquering these kingdoms. Instilled with this sense of ethnocentrism, British intellectuals and Christian Missionaries started a compulsory movement to bring Western intellectual and technological innovations to the Indians. Many British argued that it was Europe's mission to "civilize" India and govern it until the Indians proved themselves competent for self-rule.[24]

An immediate consequence of this was an unequaled rise in aggressive missionary activity, where missionaries gained permission to proselytize in the company territories after 1813. The missionary's greatest impact on the people was through publishing and the foundation of schools, orphanages, technical institutions, dispensaries, and hospitals. Although the actual number of converts was negligible, the Christian missionaries definitely made their ideas, ways of life, and beliefs known to Indian society.

Again convinced of their "duty" to educate the Indians, the British took it upon themselves to "enlighten" the general public by exposing them to British literary traditions. For example, the English language was introduced as the medium of instruction in 1835, replacing the previous Persian language in public administration and education.[25] However, education policies such as this did not bring complete liberation from "ignorance" as was hoped, but instead tended to reinforce current lines of socioeconomic division within Indian society.

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[24] Heitzman, 32.
[25] Heitzman, 34.

The 1850s contributed to the British illusion of permanence in India by the introduction of the three "engines of social improvement:"[26] the railroads, the telegraph, and the uniform postal service. Because of these three "engines,"

> …The increased ease of communication and the opening of highways and waterways accelerated the movement of troops, the transportation of raw materials and goods to and from the interior, and the exchange of commercial information.[27]

Feelings of British ethnocentrism and superiority powered the British penetration into India, which had a remarkable impact on Indian society. Their influence in India ranged from commerce, to communication, to education, and to religion. The Indian people had very mixed reactions to the British influence; some accepted and assimilated into the new way of life, while others disliked and even rejected British ideals. It is out of this context that our case studies, Ramakrishna and Dayananda Sarasvati arose, each having different reactions to the surrounding culture.

Dayananda Sarasvati:

For Dayananda Sarasvati, there could and should be only one religion that is true, which is the Vedic faith revealed by God for all humanity for all of time. It was because of the corruption of sectarian Hinduism and the militant spirit of Christianity and Islam that spurred the creation of his exclusive theology of religion. At this time, some Hindu reformers were trying to prove that Hinduism was not inferior to other religions, while others were attempting to prove that Hinduism was superior to others. Sarasvati went one step further. For him, the Vedic religion is not only superior to all other faiths, but it

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[26] Heitzman, 34.

is the only religion that is absolutely true, while all other religions are false and the product of ignorance, only worthy to be discarded. He had a two-pronged approach: to purify Vedic Hinduism from the corruption, and to attack the other religions that threatened the existence of Hinduism.

Life

In 1824, Dayananda Sarasvati was born into an orthodox Brahmin family as Mool Shankar in a village in South Gujarat.[28] As a child, Sarasvati was extremely serious about his studies. He began to study Sanskrit and the *Vedas*[29] after he received Vedic initiation at the young age of eight years. To illustrate his devotion to his studies, he had memorized the whole of the *Yajur Veda Samhita,*[30] some portions of the other remaining three *Vedas*, and some minor works on Sanskrit grammar.[31]

Growing up, Sarasvati's father wanted him to become a devotee of Shiva,[32] and was insistent upon his son earning religious merit at a very young age. One night, when Sarasvati was fourteen years old, he demanded that Sarasvati observe the fast of *Shivaratri.*[33] Sarasvati was forced to stay awake all night and keep vigilance while his father and others slept. As he was sitting all alone in front of the Shiva idol, he saw rats

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[27] Heitzman, 35.
[28] Gulshan Swarup Saxena, *Arya Samaj Movement in India (1875-1947)*, 1990, 21.
[29] "Specifically, the *Vedas* are often understood to comprise four collections of hymns and sacrificial formulas. In a more general sense, however, the term *Veda* does not denote only these four books but a whole literary complex, including the *Samhitas*, the *Brahmanas*, the *Aranyakas*, the *Upanishads,* the *Sutras,* and the *Vedangas*." R. N. Dandekar, "Vedas" *Encyclopediaof Religion*, vol. 15, 214.
[30] The *Yajurveda Samhita* is the final of the four books which make up the *Vedas* (the *Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Samaveda*, and *Yajurveda)*, and may be regarded as the first textbook on Vedic ritual as a whole. R. N. Dandekar, "Vedas" *Encyclopediaof Religion*, vol. 15, 216.
[31] Saxena, 22.
[32] Siva is one of the three deities emanating from the Hindu Supreme God – Vishnu, Siva and the Goddess. Siva has various aspects and names: *Sadasiva, Bhairava, Mahesvara,* and *Kamesvara.* He is said to have five "faces," each being a divine form. He holds at least four attributes or "weapons" and has six "limbs," all deified. Andre Padoux, "Tantrism: Hindu Tantrism" *Encyclopediaof Religion*, vol. 14, 279.
[33] The last night of each month is *Siva's* night (*Sivaratri*) and the evening of each day throughout the year is time for his worship. Stella Kramrisch, "Siva" *Encyclopediaof Religion*, vol. 13, 340.

eating the sweets offered by the devotees of God. Shocked, he could not believe this idol

that allowed rats to eat his offerings was the same God, the divine hero he had read about

in the *Puranas*.[34]

> "I awoke my father and asked him to tell me whether the hideous emblem
> of Shiva in the temple was identical with the Mahadeva of the scriptures?" "Why
> do you ask this?" inquired my father. "I feel it is impossible…to reconcile to the
> idea of an omnipotent, living god, with this idol which allows the mice to run over
> his body without the slightest protest."[35]

Despite his father's reassurances that the idol was not the real Shiva, Sarasvati was not

satisfied. From then on, he made up his mind to turn his back on idol worship and not

rest until he acquired knowledge of the real Shiva (Almighty God).[36]

The death of a sister and an uncle led Sarasvati to begin struggling with questions

such as, "What should I do to alleviate this human misery? Where shall I find the

assurance for and means of attaining salvation?"[37] The final break came for Sarasvati

when he found out his parents were arranging his marriage; this information caused him

to flee and become a homeless wanderer.

From 1846 to 1860, Sarasvati wandered in all directions, searching for knowledge

and Truth. He spent time studying the philosophy of the *Upanishads*[38] with several

teachers until he was initiated into an order of *sannyasins*[39] as Dayananda Sarasvati in

1846. He accepted a *sannyasin,* Vrijananda, as his guru in 1860, who convinced him that

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[34] *Puranas* are non-*Vedic* scriptures, supposedly composed between 6th century A.D. to 16th century A.D.
[35] Yadav, K.C., *Autobiography of Swami Dayanand Sarasvati*, 1976, 15.
[36] Saxena, 23.
[37] Saxena, 24.
[38] The *Upanishads* are "codified Sanskrit philosophical speculations of varying lengths in both prose and verse form, composed orally and set to memory…," primarily written in the classical and medieval periods. William K. Mahony, "Upanishads" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 15, 147.
[39] One who has renounced the world; a monk.

the only truthful texts were those composed by the *rsis,* literally "seers," before the *Mahabarata*.[40]

For the next ten years, Sarasvati spent most of his time in small towns along the Ganges river (now in Uttar Pradesh), meeting representatives of various Hindu communities. In talking with them, he got into many debates with sectarian pandits,[41] confirming his earlier suspicions about idol worship and led him to reject all of the Hindu sectarian traditions.[42] This became the basis of his argument for a united Hinduism based on the monotheism and the morality of the *Vedas*.

Throughout this time, Sarasvati's message was limited only to orthodox and upper-caste Hindus, because he continued to dress as a *yogin*[43] by wearing the loincloth, ashes and holding his debates only in Sanskrit. Ironically, however, the upper-caste and orthodox Hindus were the ones who disagreed with his views at the start. He then spent some time at an *ashram*[44] with such people as the philosopher Tagore and members of the Brahmo Samaj,[45] who influenced him in many ways.[46] They helped him adopt a new style and broader perspective to his teaching, thus reaching out more to lower-caste and non-orthodox Hindus. He realized the value of educational programs and public lectures instead of his previous style of debating, which was only with priests or *pandits*.

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[40] Thomas J. Hopkins, "Dayananda Sarasvati" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 4, 246 – 247. The *Mahabarata* is a Hindu epic; it is the story of the descendants of Bharata. The actual composition was carried out between 500 and 400 B.C.E. Alf Hiltebeitel, "Mahabarata" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 9, 118.
[41] A pandit is a learned person, but it is also used as a honorary title.
[42] Thomas J. Hopkins, "Dayananda Sarasvati" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 4, 247.
[43] A high-caste spiritual person.
[44] A spiritual school or community.
[45] The Brahmo Samaj ("congregation of *brahman*") was a modern Hindu reform movement. "As an expression of the social and religious views of a small but influential group of westernized Indians, the Brahmo Samaj sought to create a purified form of Hinduism, a Hindu dharma free of all Puranic elements such as temple rituals and image worship." Thomas J. Hopkins, "Dayananda Sarasvati" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 2, 299.
[46] Thomas J. Hopkins, "Dayananda Sarasvati" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 4, 247.

Sarasvati gave up his loincloth, adopted street clothes, and started preaching in Hindi to make himself more accessible to the masses of Indian society. With his new style, Sarasvati's message remained the same, yet the numbers in his audiences grew.

Sarasvati's first major audience was in Bombay (now Mumbai) on April 10, 1875. It was here where he founded the Arya Samaj (meaning, "society of honorable ones"), a Hindu revivalist movement, whose theology was shaped by Sarasvati's beliefs. "Doing good to the whole world is the primary object of this society; i.e. to look after its physical, spiritual, and social welfare."[47] Soon after this founding, Sarasvati took a trip to Punjab (1877 – 1878) and saw for himself the threat Hinduism was facing from proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries and the Muslim teachers. This made him denounce these 'alien religions' in his public lectures and writings.[48] The first chapter of the Arya Samaj was established in Lahore in 1877, which soon became the headquarters for a rapidly expanding movement in Punjab and the western Uttar Pradesh.[49]

Towards the end of his life, Sarasvati was engaged in a war at two levels, one against the corrupted Hinduism of his time and another against other religions that threatened the existence of Hinduism. Sarasvati delegated the control of the Arya Samaj to the local chapters and spent his last year perfecting his message. Just before his death on October 30, 1883, Sarasvati declared that the Vedic hymns revealed to the *rsis* were

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[47] Saxena, p. 2. Sarasvati's effects on society through the foundation of the Arya Samaj will be examined in a later section.
[48] Daniel, P.S., *Hindu Response to Religious Pluralism*, 2000, 67.
[49] Thomas J. Hopkins, "Dayananda Sarasvati" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 4, 247

the sole authority for truth, and he reaffirmed his faith in the one eternal God whose revelation made salvation for the entire world.[50]

Understanding of Truth

In the section "Maharshi Swami Dayanand Saraswati's Beliefs" at the end of the *Satyartha Prakash*, Sarasvati confesses: "I hold that the four *Vedas* – the repository of knowledge and Religious Truths – are the Word of God."[51] This clearly shows that for Dayananda, the Vedas are the sole authority in the quest of truth and its knowledge.[52] But how did he arrive at this doctrine?

Sarasvati starts with the assumption that by nature, humans are finite and cannot come to the knowledge of truth by themselves. Whatever humans already know is because they are taught by someone who knew it already. But how did the knowledge first come to humans in the beginning of the world? Sarasvati believes that this knowledge had to have come from an eternally omniscient source; therefore, because God is alone omniscient, God is the only source of all knowledge. Humans can only know truth if it is revealed to them by God, for without this divine revelation, humans would be stuck in ignorance and have no hope of emancipation from misery. Revelation in the *Vedas*, therefore, is an act of kindness on God's part.

How does this revelation come to humankind? Sarasvati holds that the revelation was by direct communication from God to the four *rsis*,[53] Agni, Vayu, Aditya and Angiras, all of whom were created at the beginning of the world. Because God was

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[50] Thomas J. Hopkins, "Dayananda Sarasvati" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 4, 247.
[51] Sarasvati, 565.
[52] The following summary taken from Daniels, 70 – 72.
[53] "The *rsis* to whom the *Vedas* were first revealed were not their authors. They were simply the "seers". They heard it; that is why the *Vedas* are called *sruti*, "what was heard." There is nothing human in them….they are wholly divine. Daniels, 71.

present in their hearts, God instructed them, and they, in turn, taught it to all people. Because the *Vedas* were revealed to the *rsis,* they are known as the "seers" or the messengers. God, being the revealer, is the true author of the *Vedas,* for it was God who produced them.

Knowing the way Sarasvati understood truth within the Vedic revelation is very important. However, as J.T.F. Jordens points out, we must also be aware of four *a priori* assumptions Sarasvati held about the Vedic religion. It is with this combined understanding that we will be able to better comprehend his reaction to religious pluralism.

A priori assumptions

Jordens identifies four *a priori* assumptions held by Sarasvati, which are fundamental in his interpretation of the *Vedas* and his approach to other religions.[54] First, Sarasvati had the view of the *Vedas* literally containing the eternal wisdom of God and thus having the quality of eternal truth. Therefore, Vedic statements could not possibly refer to historical or geographical data; Sarasvati believed that the *Vedas* existed before all history. He explained names of persons, places, particular events, or historical considerations in the *Vedas* as statements of principle or injunctions given dramatic form. Consequently, Sarasvati believed religions that base themselves on historical events have fallen away from the eternal truth, such as the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Sarasvati's second assumption was that the *Vedas* taught a pure monotheism. In his first chapter of *Satyarth Prakash* ("Light of Truth"), he lists and explains many of the different names of gods appearing in the *Vedas,* each of which he states was the name of a different attribute for the one Lord. He writes, "…Thus are the hundred names of God

described. But there are still innumerable names of God besides them. For as God's attributes, actions and names are infinite, so are His names indicating them, infinite in number. Of them, each denotes an attribute, action or a phrase of his nature."[55] The gods spoken of by many names within the *Vedas* are none other than simply attributes of the same Lord revealed in the *Vedas*.

The third assumption Sarasvati held was that because the *Vedas* are the revelation of eternal truth, they could not contain anything that would offend reason or attack morality.[56] Most of Dayananda's criticisms of the other religious traditions were based on irrationality or immorality. He thought that miracles are irrational and myths sometimes suggest immoral acts, thereby needing to be discredited.[57] In so doing, Sarasvati demythologized the *Vedas*, assuming that the revelation of the eternal truth would follow.

A fourth assumption held by Sarasvati was a way to keep the modern educated mind consistent with the Vedic claim to omniscience.[58] He believed that since the *Vedas* embody the totality of truth, the truths of modern science must also be present in the *Vedas*. Jordens points out, however, that since Sarasvati's knowledge in modern science was very limited, this point was rarely elaborated. However, this was a way to combine the modern day secularizing science and the age-old traditions of faith.

Therefore, from this way of understanding the Vedic revelation and by understanding his *a priori* assumptions, we can see how Sarasvati comes to the

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[54] The following summary is taken from Jordens, 271-272.
[55] Sarasvati, Dayananda, *Light of Truth, an English Translation of Satyarth Prakash.* Ed. by Acharya Vaidyanath Shastri, Acharya Jagdish Vidyarthi, and Bharatendra Nath, 1970, 27.
[56] Jordens, 271-272.
[57] Coward, Harold G., "The Response of the Arya Samaj," in *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism,* edited by Harold G. Coward, 1987, 43.
[58] The following summary is taken from Jordens, 271-272.

conclusions that shaped his response to other religions. The first conclusion is that the *Vedas* are eternal. Dayananda believes that as the knowledge or wisdom of God, the *Vedas* are eternal as God is because God's knowledge is eternal. Although he does recognize that the *Vedas* as books have been created by paper and ink and therefore cannot be eternal, the "words, the ideas expressed by those words and the relationship between the words and what they express are eternal."[59] In sum, though the books have an origin in time, the truth and knowledge contained within the books are eternal.

In the second conclusion, that the *Vedas* are infallible, Sarasvati believes that as God's knowledge, the *Vedas* are pure, perfect, and absolutely free from error. Truth and knowledge, wherever they are found, are of the *Vedas* because they are divine in origin and thus the source of all knowledge and truth. Therefore, the *Vedas* contain not only the religious truth, but also every knowledge and truth, even scientific truth because Divine knowledge does not lack anything.

The significance of such an understanding of Vedic revelation is important to Sarasvati's view of true religion, for he made the *Vedas* the epitome of true religion. As Jordens illustrates, for Dayananda, the *Vedas* as the only revelation proceeded from God and spread by the *rsis* "contained the blueprint of the ideal religion and ideal social system."[60] They are the entirety of truth, religious and otherwise. Thus Sarasvati reaches the conclusion that there can be only one true religion and that religion is the one that is based on and derived from the Vedas. It is with this mindset that Sarasvati began his approach to religious pluralism, turning his attention to both the purification of Hinduism and defending Hinduism from other religions that were attacking it.

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[59] Daniels, 73.
[60] Jordens, 280.

Response to Religious Pluralism

As was mentioned above, Sarasvati had a two-pronged approach to dealing with religious pluralism. He started with the sole intention of reforming Hinduism, which he thought had become corrupt over time, therefore, he advocated for a return to Hinduism's pure Vedic roots. However, Jordens shows that he became concerned with the problem of religious pluralism after his visit to Calcutta in 1872, where he came into contact with the Brahmo Samaj, who were influenced strongly by Islam and Christianity. This led him think of Hinduism in the wider context of other religions, especially considering the aggressive proselytizing happening by Christian and Muslim missionaries.[61] By the end of his life, Sarasvati was trying to purify the Hindu religion and protect and uplift it from the context of religious pluralism.

Response within Hinduism

Sarasvati's vision of pure Vedic Hinduism was much different than the Hinduism of his day; he rejected many of the elements of the Hindu religion, including idolatry, polytheism, priestly privilege of the Brahmins, and popular deities and rituals.[62] As was mentioned previously, Sarasvati could not accept the idea of idol worship, nor did he believe in Hinduism as polytheistic. Sarasvati also insisted that the *Vedas* be open for all to study, not just to Brahmins, for God revealed them for all of humanity. Sarasvati rejected the caste system, yet he still advocated for a four-fold division of society, one where the thinkers, seers and the teachers still occupied the highest place. These societal divisions would be divided based on an individual's merits, not his or her birth as in the contemporary caste system. Therefore, Sarasvati claimed that his religion was

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[61] Jordens, 78.
[62] Daniels, 66.

"monotheistic, open to all, rationalistic and compatible with modern science"[63] and based on the *Vedas*, which is the only true revelation of God.

<u>Response to other religions</u>

Based on his belief of Vedic Hinduism as the eternally revealed universal religion that is absolutely true and can be sustained by reason and principles of morality, Sarasvati implies that there is no need of other religion, for all that the world needs is the one true religion, which is Vedic Hinduism.

In his book *Satyarth Prakash*, Sarasvati refers to all other religions as "false faiths."[64] One of his claims is that there was a time in the ancient past when "only one religion prevailed in the world, and that was Vedic." This religion was taught everywhere and everyone firmly believed in it. As a result, there existed a state of perfect peace and harmony. Sarasvati claims that this state of harmony was broken about 5000 years ago when the *Mahabarata* War broke out and many of the sages and learned men were killed. "The light of knowledge began to grow dim and with it the dissemination of the Vedic Religion came to an end." In the place of the true Vedic religion came "false creeds begotten of ignorance," which leads Sarasvati to call these new creeds "false religions" that were founded and organized by the priests, teachers, and *gurus*[65] for their own selfish ends. These leaders practice fraud and hypocrisy within the religions "so that they may get a name for holiness in the world, and thereby obtain plenty of money to enjoy themselves." Therefore, for Sarasvati, all religions except for Vedic Hinduism are false and the product of hypocrisy and exploitation, by which the leaders enjoy a life of

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[63] Daniels, 66.
[64] The following quotes are taken from Sarasvati, 282 – 284.
[65] Used in the sense of "teacher" or "spiritual guide." Stuart W. Smithers, "Spiritual Guide" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14, 33

ease and luxury.[66] However, given what he believed about Hinduism of his day, this corruption also existed within Hinduism.

If all of the other religions are the "product of ignorance," then one can assume Sarasvati's beliefs on the question of "truth" existing in the other religions. However, Sarasvati was one the first 19th century Hindu reformers to take seriously the study and discussion of other religions.[67] In attempting to relate his own thinking to the wider world, Sarasvati's main concern was with the challenge of religious pluralism. Despite his never-ending study of Sanskrit and an absolute reliance on the *Vedas* as the source of religious truth, Sarasvati devoted much of his time to the study of other religions, such as other Hindu sects, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. He took pains to make sure that he studied only original sources, carefully making comments and criticisms. Since not all the texts were translated into a language Sarasvati spoke, at times he had a text personally translated for him so he could study it.[68]

Although his thorough study and critique of these other religious traditions should be commended, the same cannot be said for his sympathetic ability to enter into the spirit and content of the sacred scripture of another religion. Their beliefs and teachings were always harshly tested against the backbone of the Vedic truth. Jordens observed that Sarasvati made no effort "to grasp the deeper meaning of myth or symbol, or to probe the religious and historical rationale of a custom or rite."[69] His *a priori* assumptions, based on his own perception of Vedic truth, made it impossible for him to gain much

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[66] Daniels, 86.
[67] Coward, Harold G., editor, *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, 1987, 40.
[68] Coward, 40.
[69] Jordens, J.T.F., *Dayananda Sarasvati: His Life and Ideas*, 1978, 266.

understanding of any religion that did not share the same assumptions.[70] However, he was not alone in his reactions. Many of the Christian missionaries of this time were making the same kind of arguments in attempting to demonstrate the irrationality and immorality of Hinduism, and to prove that the Bible contained the absolute truth.

Both Christianity and Islam were very active in the areas of India through which Sarasvati traveled and taught. It was in Calcutta, particularly, where Sarasvati's eyes were opened to see Hinduism in the context of these religions. There he spent time with the Brahmo Samaj, a sect of Hinduism that has been strongly influenced by Christianity and Islam.[71] As mentioned above, although this encounter led Sarasvati to shift his focus from only upper Hindus to make it more "user-friendly," his message did not change. Christianity and Islam were criticized harshly against the comparison of the Vedic religion, as were the Brahmo Samaj for placing too much stock in those two religions. The result was not an appreciation or acceptance of Christianity and Islam, but a reaffirmation of the superiority and absolute "truth" of the Vedic religion.[72]

While in Calcutta his challenge was mainly intellectual, the issue of religious pluralism had become very practical in the Punjab. "Missionaries were very active and effective in converting Hindus to an extent that the Punjabi Hindus felt that their community was seriously threatened."[73] To support the Punjabi Hindus, Sarasvati began his attack upon Christianity, which was clearly directed against the Protestant evangelicals present in India in the 1870's, where the Bible was taken as the literal word of God and a logically consistent system of truth and morality. As Daniels says,

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[70] Coward, 40.
[71] Coward, 46.
[72] Coward, 46.
[73] Daniels, 47.

"Dayananda's critique effectively challenged this theology of the Bible by focusing on its illogical and inconsistent assertions. Following the lead of the Christian missionaries, the approach adopted by Dayananda was that of 'my scripture' against 'your scripture' with the debate being carried on in a very scholastic and argumentative way."[74]

One of the main ways Sarasvati and the Arya Samaj externally attacked the invading forces of Christianity and Islam and the looming presence of religious plurality was through the orthodox Hindu notion of *shuddhi*, or ritual purification. The traditional purpose of *shuddhi* (literally "purification") was to provide a way to restore purity and caste fellowship to Hindus who had broken caste taboos. The purification ceremony traditionally had taken place through several ritual acts: bathing in a sacred river, pilgrimage, feeding Brahmins or *prayaschitta*, or partaking of the five products of the cow.[75] However, this concept soon became a powerful technique for both internal Hindu reform and a response to the converting activities of other religions.

It was on one of Sarasvati's visits to the Punjab in 1877 that he began to think about the concept of *shuddhi* as a way to counteract the threat of Christian missionaries to the Punjabi Hindus. He was asked to think of a way to prevent Christian conversion at a local mission school in Ludhiana, for the high-quality education institutions set up by the missionaries strengthened the temptation for Hindus to convert to Christianity. Sarasvati and the Arya Samaj realized this and worked to set up their own educational institutions which were based in the Vedas and modern science. However, a requirement for these schools was the *shuddhi* of the students, requiring their re-conversion and purification back into Vedic Hinduism. The concept of *shuddhi* and the establishment of competing

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[74] Daniels, 48.
[75] Coward, 50.

schools soon became a weapon with which they could protect themselves, for they were no longer sitting targets for Christian and Islam conversion.[76]

Effects on Society

Because of his very strong beliefs and his public figure, Sarasvati had many effects on Indian society, while he lived and continued after his death. First of all, Sarasvati made Hinduism a religion of the book, an exclusive religion based on the Vedas as the only revelation of God. However, Sarasvati also turned Hinduism into a religion that used conversion and proselytizing to be known throughout the world.[77] At a time in India when Hindus as a whole felt conquered and humiliated, politically, religiously, and culturally, Sarasvati's exclusivism of Vedic Hinduism had a huge effect. As Daniels states, "It roused the Hindu pride, and his claim of the ancient *Golden Age* based on the Vedic Dharma produced a sort of religious nationalism."[78]

However, Sarasvati's response to religious pluralism produced a very dangerous effect in India, a land of many religions, by contributing to hostility between the Arya Samaj Hindus and other religious communities. His methods of attacking other faiths, through distributing literature, public speeches and conversion through *shuddhi*, were motivational tools in the hands of his followers. This was a very important factor in the rise of Hindu-Muslim communal outbreaks that continue to reoccur in many parts of India. [79]

There is, however, a positive side to Sarasvati's exclusivity in religion. As was discussed earlier, he first directed his attacks on the corruption, abuse, immorality, and

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[76] Coward, 53.
[77] Daniels, 106.
[78] Daniels, 107.
[79] Daniels, 107.

inhuman practices he found within Hinduism itself. Practices such as untouchability, image worship, and prohibition of education to low caste and women had found religious sanction. Sarasvati fought these abuses when he found them, for he proclaimed that a religion that sanctions such inhumane practices and immorality is to be immediately discarded.[80] He would not stand for tolerance of these evils, even if others believe they were justified within the religion itself. It was on this subject that Sarasvati welcomed discord and disharmony, for he knew this corruption needed to be discarded.

Ramakrishna:

One of Ramakrishna's most famous teachings about religious plurality is, "Many paths, one goal." As I will show in this chapter, this did not mean that Ramakrishna blindly accepted all religions. In order for a religion or someone's religious beliefs to be valid, the believer had to meet several criteria that will be laid down later. However, Ramakrishna believed in the experience of the sanctity of religion, regardless of the tradition someone may follow.

Life

In 1836, Ramakrishna was born and named Gadadhar Chatterjee in a small, isolated Bengali village. As he grew up, people began to realize a striking characteristic of emotional and aesthetic sensitivity in the boy; when he was feeling overwhelmed by emotion or beauty, he would lose consciousness and go into an ecstatic trance.[81] This sensitivity and perception made him very aware of and influenced by the deeply religious atmosphere around him.

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[80] Daniels, 107.
[81] G. Neevel Jr., "Ramakrishna" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, 209.

Ramakrishna had his first "taste" of God when he was still a small boy. On his way to a temple, he encountered a beautiful scene; he saw a deep cloud with a number of cranes flying in front of it. This beauty transported him and gave him "divine joy."[82] Resulting from this experience and continuing throughout the rest of his life, Ramakrishna began asking the questions, "If God exists, can I experience him now, directly and immediately? Will this course of action lead me toward God or away from God?"[83]

During his childhood, Ramakrishna was frequently in close contact with various *sadhus*,[84] representing many different aspects and sects of the Hindu tradition. These meetings not only whetted his appetite for the experience of God and the detachment toward worldly pursuits, but also infused his consciousness with an appreciation for different modes of worship.[85] He began on a quest to go beyond the senses and the finite, reaching toward a union with the infinite.

When his brother died, Ramakrishna was appointed to take over as head priest of a temple devoted to the Divine Mother, *Kali*,[86] which also had shrines to *Shiva*, *Krishna*[87] and *Radha*.[88] During this time, he became "positively insane, spending several years in a state of divine madness or inebriation in which visions of various deities came

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[82] Stark, 13.

[83] Stark, 17-18.

[84] A saint or a monk in the Hindu religion.

[85] Stark, 20.

[86] *Kali* is one form of the Goddess known in Hindu tradition. She represents the other face of the divine feminine, namely "the insatiable hunger of the many fecund and life-giving goddesses, whose energies must be constantly replenished and reinvigorated by blood sacrifices." David Kinsley, "Goddess Worship: The Hindu Goddess" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 6, 52.

[87] The name *Krishna* literally means "black" or "dark." He is customarily said to stand alongside of Rama in the Hindu pantheon as one of two preeminent *avataras* (manifestations) of the great god, *Vishnu*. Robert Seltzer, "Krsna" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 8, 384.

[88] *Radha* is known not only as *Krishna's* earthly beloved, but also as his eternal consort. Danna Marie Wulfe, "Radha" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, 195.

repeatedly."[89] He was imbued with a deep sense of longing for the Divine, but especially the Divine Mother, for her revelation, her experience, and her vision.

The constant presence of the Divine Mother became a natural aspect of Ramakrishna's life. He developed a sort of communication and rapport with her, relying on her for his daily wants and needs, consulting her with all the decisions in his life, and seeking her guidance in regards to his spiritual path. His devotion to and reliance on the Divine Mother gave him an irresistible urge to experience God in other ways. Because he loved her so much, he wanted to see if he could achieve that feeling elsewhere. He began asking the questions: if the Divine Mother was true, what of the other aspects of God? Were they equally true? Ramakrishna came to the conclusion that an aspect of the Ultimate Reality existed *if* and *when* it can be experienced or perceived directly. As we will see, this belief became central to the whole of Ramakrishna's life.

In 1861, Ramakrishna acquired his first spiritual advisor, a woman named Bhairavi Brahmini. She became his guru in the Tantric discipline,[90] a ritual that seeks to overcome all socially based distinctions and enables one to directly experience that all aspects of existence are manifestations of the Divine Mother.[91] Her influence on Ramakrishna was very important because she helped define for him the role of womanhood in the spiritual and temporal world. Because it was his mission to establish the worship of the Divine Mother, it thus followed to elevate the ideal of womanhood into Divine Motherhood.

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[89] Neevel, "Ramakrishna" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, 209.
[90] The word "tantra" is a Sanskrit word that literally means "warp" or "loom." Tantrism can be described as "reinterpretations, in a new spirit, of traditions (Hinduism or Buddhism). It is an integration within an all-embracing system of micro-macrocorrelations." Andre Padoux "Tantrism: Hindu Tantrism" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14, 272.
[91] Neevel, "Ramakrishna" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, 210.

One of the most significant results of *tantra sadhana* was the permanently transforming influence they had on Ramakrishna's personality; he was said to have become child-like and without egotism.[92] This change provided the structure into which he interpreted all of his religious experiences; because of his yearning to experience the divine in all its forms, Ramakrishna devoted his time to experiencing other sects of Hinduism such as:

> Ramakrishna verified the path of the ancient *rishis* of the Upanishads in *santa bhava* by attaining the pinnacle of *Advaita Vedanta*;[93] he pursued the *vatsalya bhava* and the difficult *madhura bhava* practices, which are the parent-child relationship and the paramour or 'sweet' relationship respectively of the spiritual aspirant toward God; and he performed the worship of his own wife as the embodiment of the Divine Mother.[94]

Ramakrishna did not just limit his desire for "God-experience" to Hinduism, however. Toward the end of 1865, Ramakrishna took advice from another reunciant, Totopuri, a master of Shankara's absolute non-dualism. This philosophy teaches that the sole reality of the impersonal absolute is to be realized in *nirvikalpa samadhi,* a state of consciousness devoid of all conceptual forms.[95] As a result of Ramakrishna's experience of non-duality, where he merged his own existence with that of the Absolute and no longer retained a separate identity, he realized his one-ness with the universe. He now had knowledge that his own personal existence was inseparable from the existence of all living creatures.[96] "*Advaita Vedanta* is almost the same as Buddhism as far as the method of spiritual discipline and final goal are concerned. Both discard the concept of a Personal God and dualistic thoughts and forms of worship with equal emphasis. [Both

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[92] Stark, 50.
[93] *Vedanta* literally means the "end" or "culmination" of the *Vedas*, while *Advaita* means "non-duality." This is a school of thought that finds reality through non-dualistic practices.
[94] Stark, 51.
[95] Neevel, "Ramakrishna" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, 210.

emphasize] moral perfection, contemplation, and the unreality of the objective world and withdrawal of mind completely. Through his *Advaita* practice, Ramakrishna had mastered both the method and the aim of Buddhism."[97] His realization of the non-dual absolute was the culmination of his spiritual quest within Hinduism and Buddhism, providing the basis for his teaching of the truth of all religions and paths leading to a unifying goal.

From this, Ramakrishna expanded his quest for religious experience beyond the Hindu religion. He devoted three days to Allah and four years later, he devoted four days to the worship of Christ. Within these other religions, he had visionary realizations that he held to the same status of the realizations of the various Hindu deities he had. While he did not have a guru to guide him thought the practice of Christianity, he accepted a Muslim guru, more specifically a Sufi mystic, named Govinda Rai during his practice of Islam.

Govinda Rai, Ramakrishna's Islamic guru, was a Hindu-born Sufi mystic. He was drawn to the combination of religious zeal and social liberality that he found in Islam.[98] Ramakrishna, in turn, was drawn to him because of Rai's devotion to his religion. Therefore, in order to practice Islamic mysticism, he undertook a total transformation, for he could not fully experience Islam while still calling on Hindu deities. Under Rai's guidance, Ramakrishna completely immersed himself in Islamic life; he dressed like a Muslim, prayed to Allah five times a day, and ate Muslim food.[99]

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[96] Stark, 66.
[97] Stark, 58.
[98] Stark, 74.
[99] Stark, 74. Govinda Rai, Ramakrishna's teacher, tried to convince him to avoid eating beef because of Ramakrishna's Hindu upbringing and beliefs, but Ramakrishna was so focused on immersion that he insisted on eating beef.

However, through all of this, and all of his religious exploration, Ramakrishna never renounced Hinduism. He did not stop believing per se in the Hindu truths, but he temporarily put his beliefs on hold so he could fully experience Islam.

Ramakrishna practiced Islamic devotion for three days, and this experience had a profound effect on him and his life. He gained the knowledge of unity; he learned the reality of love for God and humans because he saw God in humans and felt an identity with all.[100] Ramakrishna also gained many Muslim devotees, for after he finished experiencing Islam, he continued to respect and worship Allah and referred to Allah in his teachings.

Four years after his experience in Islamic devotion, Ramakrishna devoted four days to the worship of Christ. He fully accepted Jesus as an incarnation of God, yet because he did not have a Christian guru, not much is known about his time spent experiencing Christianity. However, his experiences with both Christianity and Islam profoundly influenced his teachings about the importance of religious experience and devotion, which will be defined in the next section. He said, "Whoever performs devotional exercises, in the belief that there is one God, is bound to attain Him, no matter in what aspect, name, or manner he is worshipped."[101]

Understanding of Truth

Ramakrishna has been commonly known as a mystic *par excellence*; Mahendranath Sircar, author of *Eastern Lights: A Brief Account of Some Phases of Life, Thought and Mysticism in India*, even called Ramakrishna a "super mystic."[102] However,

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[100] Stark, 77.
[101] Stark, 103.
[102] Sircar, Mahendranath, *Eastern Lights: A Brief Account of Some Phases of Life, Thought and Mysticism in India*, 1935, 224.

in order to understand Ramakrishna's understanding of truth and how that affected his response to religious pluralism, we need to understand his mystical and spiritual, or otherwise "strange" behavior when he entered samadhi[103] or during his semi-waking consciousness he considered to be the state of *bhava.*[104]

The Hindu scriptures clearly assert that God is the true Self of a person, thus it is possible for a person to identify his- or her-self with the true Self or with God. However, this can only happen through experience, or *praxis* in mysticism. According to Narasingha P. Sil, this mystic experience is produced by two basic techniques: contemplation, or the non-analytic apprehension of objects, and the renunciation of mundane and worldly pleasures. He goes on to say the mystic experience is a consequence of "a deautomatization of the psychological structures that organize, limit, select, and interpret perceptual stimuli."[105] In other words, when one has a mystical experience, one has the ability to go beyond the perceptions and ways of thinking he or she has learned through his or her culture; the individual is able to interpret perceptual stimuli in a totally different way. This new way of perception leads to a way of being interpreted as "childish" or "primitive" by those outside of the mystical experience, which many did of Ramakrishna's behavior.

Psychologists have found several criteria for the mystical experiences: "that a mystic's perception and cognition are vivid, sensuous, syncretic, physiognomic, animated, and de-differentiated with respect to the distinction between self and object and

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[103] *Samadhi* literally means "placing together." It is the merging of the subject and the object, the essential characteristic of the mystical state of unification to which it refers. Georg Feuerstein, "Samadhi" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 13, 32.
[104] Sil, Narasingha P., *Ramakrishna Revisited: A New Biography*, 1998, 19.
[105] Sil, 20.

between objects."[106] In other words, most mystical experiences emphasize the phenomenon of unity between self and others. We can see that this unity is an obvious characteristic of Ramakrishna's beliefs; Lex Hixon shares a personal testimony of Ramakrishna:

> Houses, doors, temples—everything seemed to disappear altogether—as if there was nothing anywhere! And I beheld a boundless infinite illuminated sea of consciousness! However far in whatever direction I looked, I saw a continuous succession of effulgent waves surging forward, raging and storming from all sides with great speed. Very soon they fell on me and drowned me to the unknown bottom. I panted, struggled, and fell unconscious.[107]

Because of Ramakrishna's emphasis on the practice or experience of unity with the Divine, he did not rely on written doctrines of revelations. Ramakrishna believed that the most important part that makes the religion valid was whether or not a believer was sincere in his or her devotion. Therefore, Ramakrishna's beliefs toward doctrines and revealed religions were summarized by his disciple, Vivekananda:

> Do not care for doctrines; do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches or temples. They count for little compared with the essence of existence in each man, which is spirituality; and the more a man develops it, the more power he has for good. Earn that first, acquire that, and criticize no one; for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them.[108]

Ramakrishna's emphasis on religious truth of an individual or group's devotion carried through and had an impact on how he responded to religious pluralism.

Response to Religious Pluralism

The centerpiece for Ramakrishna's approach to religious plurality is the statement, "Many paths, one goal." Many people use this statement to summarize all of Ramakrishna's beliefs, which are supplemented with Ramakrishna's experiences within

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[106] Sil, 20.
[107] Hixon, 32.

different religious traditions. However, this statement can be seen as an "easy way out"

for difficult scrutiny of religious plurality, sidestepping critical examinations of one's

own and other's religions.[109] Just as fundamentalist Christians are taught to have a Bible

verse ready for any and every occasion where Christianity might be challenged, this

statement can be seen as a programmed response to a serious question that is brought up

about the nature or truth of a religion. For example, when challenged with the "truth" of

a religious fundamentalist group, some who believe this statement would use it to simply

say that the fundamentalists have their own way of religion and what matters is that the

end goal is the same. They use the statement, "Many paths, one goal" as an excuse to get

out of taking a hard look at the truth or "correctness" of other religions.

This statement can be found in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, which is a

compendium of six to seven years of Ramakrishna's life including his sayings, teachings,

and beliefs. Ramakrishna popularized the idea of "many paths, one goal" through a

number of images and concepts familiar to Indian life. For example, there is the

illustration of the rooftop:

> God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole.[110]

Ramakrishna also used the illustration of travel:

> God can be realized through all paths. It is like your coming to *Dakshineswar*[111] by carriage, by boat, by steamer, or on foot. You have chosen

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[108] Swami Vivekananda, *Inspired Talks, My Master and Other Writings*, 1987, 181.
[109] Neufeldt, R.W., "The Response of the Ramakrishna Mission," in *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism,* edited by Howard G. Coward, 1987, 66.
[110] Translation used is Swami Nikhilananda's, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 1969, 1008.
[111] The city in which Ramakrishna lived and taught.

the way according to your convenience and taste; but the destination is the same. Some of you have arrived earlier than others, but all have arrived. [112]

Ramakrishna uses these images and illustrations throughout his teachings and writings, especially when the conversation turns to religious pluralism. The conclusion is drawn that these mean that any path is equally as good as another to bring one to the rooftop, and all that matters in the choice of the path is the temperament and the predisposition of the individual. The paths are all true and all equally good in that they will bring one to the same goal. Therefore, having chosen a particular path, one should come to exercise a friendly attitude rather than animosity towards other faiths. Here, this matter could be left to rest.

To leave the matter here, however, is much too simplistic. Ramakrishna did not believe that this programmed response, one that supported the assertion that all religions are true without question, provided an adequate understanding of his stance on religious pluralism. The sayings and writings of Ramakrishna move beyond the superficial assertion that all religions are unquestionably good and true; what emerges is a position which is very willing to criticize and judge religious beliefs and practices while affirming that all are good. In other words, Ramakrishna did not blindly accept every single religion is inherently good. He knew that there needed to be questioning, criticism, and confirming in order to justify the inherent goodness in the religious traditions. [113]

Therefore, in order to grasp Ramakrishna's understanding of the "many paths, one goal," we must recognize two significant elements. [114] First, there is a need to define that which is necessary for anyone to reach the goal, which is the essence of any truly

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[112] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* 39.
[113] Neufeldt, 67.
[114] The following summary is from Neufeldt, 69-72.

religious path. The second element is best stated in a question: How much does the acceptability of various religious traditions have to do with the devotee and his or her path, and how much depends on God, or God's compassion? To put it in Lutheran terms, does it have to do with an individual *choosing* the path or more to do with the individual being *chosen* by God?

First, in order for a religious path to lead you to the goal, it must have certain essentials. Without these essentials, the path could be misleading and possibly dangerous, for either yourself or others. Ramakrishna stated that the most obvious essential was that of *bhakti*, "devotion" or "love." However, for Ramakrishna, *bhakti* has several components, one of which is a loving devotion to God. For example, he says:

> The one essential thing is bhakti, loving devotion to God…A man should practice sadhana and pray to God with a longing heart for love of his Lotus Feet. He should direct his mind to God alone, withdrawing it from various objects of the world…you may speak of the scriptures, of philosophy, of Vedanta; but you will not find God in any of those. You will never succeed in realizing God unless your soul becomes restless for Him.[115]

However, in order for this loving devotion to be valid, it is essential that it also be earnest, sincere, and single-minded.[116] Ramakrishna says of this:

> With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions. The Vaishnavas will realize God, and so will the Saktas, the Vedantists and the Brahmos. The Mussalmans and the Christians will realize Him too. All will certainly realize God if they are earnest and sincere.[117]

However, a *sadhana*, or religious path, that is earnest, sincere and single-minded is not enough. Ramakrishna believes that it must also include renunciation, where one comes to the end of his or her enjoyment of the world.[118] It is when one renounces or gives up

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[115] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 573-574.
[116] Neufeldt, 70.
[117] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 124.
[118] Neufeldt, 72

his or her worldly duties, such as sexual pleasures, gold and rituals, that he or she can completely devote his or her life to and become one with God. It is not enough for Ramakrishna that one perform worldly duties in a detached manner; Ramakrishna calls for both inward and outward renunciation, for at some point, all worldly duties must be renounced.

Ramakrishna even goes so far as to suggest that there must be the acquisition of a correct perception of reality. [119] In other words, one must be informed of the belief that God is all and all is God, and that must end in the direct vision or experience of this belief. It is not enough to simply say that one is devoted. Devotion needs to be shaped by religious truth, by a conceptualizing or reality, of "what-is". This may begin as a belief but must at some point be experienced directly. Through this experience, the devotee will gain direct vision of God and of his or her spiritual path. Therefore, a *sadhana* must contain certain essentials before Ramakrishna could exclaim that all paths lead to the same goal. The chosen path must include devotion or longing that is sincere, earnest, and single-minded. Further, it must include outward and inward renunciation and the belief-cum-experience that all is God.[120]

Ramakrishna's insistence on direct vision through the experience of God becomes the vantage point from which one can judge, criticize, or interpret the true meaning of all the scriptures. Just as one is to give up sexual pleasure, rituals and gold, Ramakrishna says the sign of perfect knowledge is a renunciation of reasoning and scriptures. He says, "God cannot be realized through scholarship. He is beyond scriptures – the Vedas,

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[119] Neufeldt, 72.
[120] Neufeldt, 71.

Puranas,[121] and Tantras. If I see a man with even one book in his hand, I call him a rajarshi, though he is a jnani. But the Brahmarshi has no outer sign whatsoever."[122] It is not the literal meaning of the words in the scriptures that are important, but the meaning behind the words. It is from this point that leads Ramakrishna to interpret the truth behind other religious traditions.

Here, we are brought back to the second element in the statement, "many paths, one goal." How much does the acceptability of various religious traditions have to do with the devotee and his or her path, and how much depends on God, or God's compassion? Ramakrishna's explanation is not entirely dependent on the devotee choosing the path and following it *rightly*, for it might have more to do with God than a human's choice. While there are those who choose a certain path and follow it rightly, there are also those who choose a path and follow it poorly, for example, not being sincere, or not renouncing the world. However, Ramakrishna believes that all people will eventually reach the goal because God is compassionate and will draw them towards God.[123] Despite how much error there may be in a chosen path, God will honor the longing in the choice of a path because God loves all equally and God *is* all.

This allows Ramakrishna to say that all will eventually realize God, but it also leaves him room to say there is error and confusion in some of the religious paths. While God has provided various paths or forms of worship for diverse people, Ramakrishna believes these forms are arranged to suit individuals at different stages of knowledge.[124]

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[121] Literally "old narrative and ancient lore." The *puranas* came to designate a body of works, encyclopedic in scope, incorporating legends, myths and customary observances. Caterina Conio, "Puranas" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, 86.
[122] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* 1012.
[123] Neufeldt, 74.
[124] Neufeldt, 72.

Here we come upon Ramakrishna's idea that among religious paths and disciplines, there exists a hierarchy with some forms of religion being more "effective" or closer to realizing God than others. As Neufeldt describes:

> The inferior devotee says, "God exists, but He is very far off, up there in heaven." The mediocre one says, "God exists in all beings as life and consciousness, the *Antaryamin* or Inner Guide." The superior one says, "It is God Himself who has become everything; whatever I see is only a form of God. It is He alone who has become maya, the universe, and all living beings. Nothing exists but God."[125]

As one progresses up the hierarchy, one gets closer to the realization of God, which to Ramakrishna is the ultimate goal. Therefore, in the face of religious plurality, some traditions will have much more error and confusion in them, which will serve to slow down one's progress towards realization. However, in order to speed up that progress, one must not only follow the chosen path rightly, but one must also choose the path which most clearly expresses the nature of reality.

Ramakrishna's insistence on essentials allows him to enter into criticism of traditions to the extent that he does. These traditions can be judged as useful to the extent that they contain the ingredients essential for God-realization. Ramakrishna's religious experiments should be understood in this sense. By saying that all paths lead to God, Ramakrishna meant to counter a dogmatism which says, "My religion alone is true" rather to suggest that all paths are equal in the sense of containing equally good views and practices.

In his book, *Great Swan: Meetings with Ramakrishna,* Lex Hixon shares a conversation Ramakrishna had with the Divine Mother which summarizes his response to religious pluralism:

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[125] Neufeldt, 72.

Everyone foolishly assumes that his clock alone tells correct time. Christians claim to possess exclusive truth, and even modern liberal thinkers reiterate that same claim to exclusivity. Countless varieties of Hindus insist that their sect, no matter how small and insignificant, expresses the ultimate position. Devout Muslims maintain that Koranic revelation supersedes all others. The entire world is being driven insane by this single phrase: "My religion alone is true." O Mother, you have shown me that no clock is entirely accurate…if any sincere practitioner, within whatever culture or religion, prays and meditates with great devotion and commitment to Truth alone, Your Grace will flood his mind and heart. His particular sacred tradition will be opened and illuminated. He will reach the one goal of spiritual evolution…how I long to pray with sincere Christians in their churches and to bow and prostrate with devoted Muslims in their mosques! All religions are glorious![126]

In the end, one is left with an acceptance of traditions, but it is an acceptance with certain limitations and qualifications.

Effects on Society

Appearing at a time when Hinduism faced a two-pronged assault from Christian evangelical missionaries and the reformist secessionist group, the Brahmos, Ramakrishna completely reversed the process by popularizing traditional Hindu eclecticism in simple vernacular. Because of this, Ramakrishna always had a group of followers, or devotees, who listened and learned from his teachings. Shortly before Ramakrishna's death, there was a small band of his disciples who took formal vows of renunciation to become swamis or "masters" of Ramakrishna's teachings. Out of this monastic order has come the Ramakrishna Mission, a broader movement that has spread Ramakrishna's gospel first throughout India, and then throughout the world. Vivekananda, one of Ramakrishna's most famous students, formally launched this mission at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. The Ramakrishna Mission was directly inspired by Ramakrishna's worldview and message that regardless of religious tradition, the poor, along with all other beings, are manifestations of the Divine Mother and thus

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[126] Hixon, 15.

deserve loving devotion and service. Vivekananda also provided the mission with an

organizational structure based largely on Western religious models, so the mission's

emphasis upon social service was influence by the example of Christian missions.[127]

[127] Neevel, "Ramakrishna" *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, 211.

Chapter 3: Analysis of Case Studies

Dayananda:

Dayananda's idea of truth within religious pluralism is very exclusive; he only believed in the absolute "truth" of the Vedic religion. He preached of the "truth" revealed to humans from God in the Vedas, which exist for all of humanity. Dayananda's original goal was to purify the contemporary Hinduism of what it had become, for he saw that it was full of corruption. However, when Sarasvati saw that his religious tradition was being threatened by Christianity and Islam, he began to become concerned with how Vedic Hinduism could exist in the context of religious pluralism. He saw these religions as "false religions," which were just created for the manipulation of the believers and the self-interest of the priests and leaders. Sarasvati was convinced that no truth existed in other religions, for all of the truth the world needed was in the Vedas. Therefore, he was open to conversion into Vedic Hinduism, but he would not acknowledge the validity of any other religious traditions.

Sarasvati clung to this way of using religion as an identity in a time when his identity was being threatened. However, his way of using religion excluded all other forms of religious belief from the idea of truth. While he did academically study other religions, Sarasvati never allowed himself to appreciate the truth-claims of the other religions and disregarded them in the quest for his own truth. By automatically labeling the other religions as wrong or false, Sarasvati was closing himself off to the opportunity for religious dialogue. Sarasvati always looked upon the religious "other" as an object, in terms of "I" and "it," or at least in terms of "I" and "you."

Ramakrishna:

Ramakrishna's "Gospel" of truth within religions is not primarily based on the belief that they all lead to the realization of the same formless absolute, in which all difference is transcended and negated. It is based more on his own mystical experience of the truth and reality of all manifest forms, including different religions and their divinities, as manifestations of the Divine Mother, and upon his conviction that this divine power is at work everywhere. Human ignorance, greed and lust can obscure this divine presence, but he had confidence that a sincere and dedicated devotee of any religion would discover the Divine Mother at work, leading her child to herself.

However, Ramakrishna's way of understanding truth is not acceptable to those who have a more exclusive view of what truth entails. Someone like Sarasvati, who believes the "absolute truth" exists within a single religious tradition, would not think Ramakrishna's understanding of truth was satisfactory. How could a person hold certain beliefs to be true, yet also claim to believe in the truth of other apparently conflicting beliefs? This is where embrace comes in. Embrace is not a blind acceptance of other's beliefs; it is an ability to hold on to personal truths while still appreciating the validity of other's beliefs.

So what does all of this mean? When a group with specific truth-claims is put in a situation where those truth-claims are contradicted by the presence of other truth-claims, the essentials of "truth" come into question. In a situation of conflicting truth claims, is it possible to have more than one truth? If not, how is one to decide for oneself what truth-claim is "right," or whether it must be decided *for* one? If so, how can these claims exist side-by-side without conflict and even more importantly, how can they exist

to create mutual harmony?

Dayananda Sarasvati and Ramakrishna both lived in India during a time of religious pluralism, yet they both responded in very different ways. Sarasvati believed in the revealed truth of the Vedas while Ramakrishna believed religious truth came from a sincere and ardent devotion to a religious tradition, no matter what that religion should be. There is a difference in how they view "truth," as something that is revealed, as in doctrines, or something that is experienced. We must ask the question: is attempting to compare truth as doctrine and truth as experience similar to comparing apples and oranges?[128]

Regardless of this debate over whether truth exists as doctrines or experience, as stated earlier in the paper, religious truth is an ongoing relationship between the individual's self-consciousness and the reality of what they "know," of "what-is." However, for as long as we have different religions, there will always be conflicting truth-claims. Each group will claim to have the "true" religion or that their "truth" is right for all of humanity. Thus, with the interconnectedness of this world, religious believers have choices to make: They can either battle it out until there is only one victorious truth-claim remaining (violence), ignore the truth-claim of others, clinging only to their personal beliefs (exclusion), simply survive side-by-side with the others (tolerance), or discover the principle of unity in the pluralistic religious truth that creates a life-enhancing way of life for all involved (embrace).

What an individual or group chooses depends not only on how they understand "truth," but also on what they believe a goal of religion is. If one believes that a purpose

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[128] This discussion of truth as doctrines and truth as experience is another separate topic by itself, which I will not have time or space to address in this thesis. However, it is an important point to consider.

of religion is to assert their own truth-claims above all else, then that could feed into the circular continuum of violence, exclusion and tolerance. However, I believe that a foremost goal of religion should be to create space for an appreciation of humanity; religion should break down divisions between religious traditions while simultaneously appreciating the differences and similarities. The first three choices do nothing to foster that space. They create a subordination of religion based on truth-claims, always putting themselves in a position of superiority over the other. They label the other as inherently wrong, and thus respond to religious pluralism accordingly. It is easy to see what kind of effects this would have in society if each religious group were attempting to do this. We would be in a constant state of violence.

However, in order to respond to religious pluralism with appreciation, we must realize that different religious traditions are distinct in ways that should be acknowledged and valued. The distinctive teachings of each religion inform outsiders about what that community considers important relative to its distinctive view of reaching the "truth." Truth, like faith, is a personal reality.[129] Truth is a quality of meaning for persons and it is sought through, not in, the traditions of all religions. Any attempts to synchronize religions or assimilate them into some meta-religion fail to do justice to their uniqueness and distinctive salvations. We should be able to differentiate between the religions, recognizing that though they may be different, their identities are integrally connected with each other.[130]

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[129] To say that truth is a personal reality is implying that there is nothing which is absolute; everything is dependent upon the person. This is a debate that has raged throughout history and continues to this day. While I do not have the time or space to fully incorporate this debate, it must be noted that it is something I struggled with during the writing of this paper. I recognize that arguments can be made on neither, one and/or both sides, in this paper, I have presented my beliefs to the best of my ability.
[130] Volf, 65.

In his book, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Miroslav Volf identifies four integral steps of embrace: opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms, and opening the arms again.[131] These four steps, which constitute an embrace, can be seen as steps for understanding an embrace as a response to religious plurality. You must create space in your own mind, heart, and life for the other, wait for the other to recognize that space, make your presence known and feel the other's presence in your life, and lastly, open yourself up again for another embrace.

In the first step of embrace, one body is reaching for another, creating space in oneself so the other can come in.   As Volf describes, "I do not want to be myself only; I want the other to be part of who I am and I want to be part of the other."[132] The opening of the arms is both a creation of space and an invitation for the other to come in and be received. However, this same act is also an intentional signal of one's own desire to enter the space of the other. The open arms reach out, but they must stop and wait for the other to respond to their invitation.

The second step of embrace is this period of waiting with open arms. An invitation has been given by opening the arms, "a movement for whose justification no invitation from the other is needed and no reciprocation on the part of the other necessary, a movement…for whose justification …the simple desire of the self not to be without the other suffices."[133] But here, one is halted at the boundary of the other. One must wait for the other to receive the invitation and have the desire to also open his or her arms. If embrace takes place, it is always because there is desire on behalf of the self and

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[131] The following summary is taken from Volf, 141-145.
[132] Volf, 141.

the other. Waiting illustrates the fact that although embrace consists of individual action, it can never be fully realized without reciprocity, with the other moving towards the self.

This reciprocity, the closing arms of the self and the other, is the third step of embrace. "It takes *two* pairs of arms for *one* embrace; with one pair, we will either have merely an invitation to embrace (if the self respects the other) or a taking in one's clutches (if there is no such respect)."[134] When closing one's arms, one must enter the space of the other, which includes feeling the presence of the other and making one's own presence felt. The way the arms are closed, either crushing the other or letting one's self be crushed in the other's embrace, could turn the act of embrace into an act of violence or exclusion. In an embrace, however, both the identities of the self and the other are preserved and transformed in interaction with each other.

In order to genuinely preserve each identity, the embrace must consist of a re-opening of the arms, the last step in the embrace. Though both the self and the other are enhanced and deepened by the embrace, the other must be let go so that the other's specific and individual identity is preserved, while simultaneously the self preserves his or her own identity. Recognizing that the self and other are inscribed onto each other, and knowing that each still holds individual differences paves the way for a second and third invitation to embrace. It is in this act of re-opening the arms that one finds one's self with open arms, the first step of embrace. The very act which signals the end of an embrace is the same signal for the start of another. "This movement is circular; the actions and reactions of the self and the other condition each other and give the

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[133] Volf, 142.
[134] Volf, 143.

movement both meaning and energy."[135]

These four steps to embrace can be applied to an individual's reaction to religious pluralism, whether he or she is reacting to another individual or a group. An individual must both create space for the other in his or her heart and mind, which must carry over to his or her way of life. It is when the desire to embrace affects the individual's daily life that the other can recognize the invitation for embrace; the other can see the individual opening his or her arms. Thus, the individual must wait for the other person or group to respond to the invitation, illustrating the importance of the need for reciprocity when reacting to religious pluralism. Once the other recognizes the invitation and reciprocates the desire for embrace, both individuals can begin closing their arms around each other. Both "sides," the individual and the other, make each presence known in each other's lives through various kinds of interaction and dialogue. While they are affecting each other's life in very important ways, for the individual and the other to re-open their arms is an integral step, for they are recognizing that both are connected, yet they are separate in their beliefs and ways of life. However, they both have shared this embrace and now are in a position to begin another embrace.

Embracing is the ability to differentiate your identity from that of the other, to recognize that both "our" identities are created in tandem with each other, so that we truly do exist as a "we." Being able to identify ourselves as "we" is being able to recognize that we have separate beliefs that we each personally hold to be true, each of which is justified in our own right. In the case of conflicting truth-claims, we cannot be expected to accept them as a personal "truth," nor can we expect others to accept our truth-claims as "true." However, we must be able to appreciate the validity in each other's beliefs, for

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[135] Volf, 145.

a part of the other's identity of "what-is" is embedded in that truth-claim, just as part of our identity is embedded in our truth-claims.

In summary, we are brought back to the tension that exists between the two statements that introduced this paper: "Those who only know their own religion, know none,"[136] and "Those who are not decisively committed to one faith know no others."[137] This tension is further illustrated by the differing responses to religious pluralism presented by Dayananda Sarasvati, who believed exclusively in the revealed truth of the Vedas, and Ramakrishna, who believed religious truth came from a sincere and ardent devotion to a religious tradition, no matter what religion is. Out of the different responses to religious pluralism, violence, exclusion, and tolerance exist on a circular continuum, each being fed by and simultaneously feeding the other responses. However, only by the differentiation of our identities and responding to religious pluralism with embrace, can we know any particular religious tradition as it actually is, namely part of the whole, one of "our" ways of being religious. By responding to religious pluralism with embrace, we are able to see the humanity in the other, thus going beyond distinctions of "we" and "they" and moving towards recognition of a greater, more inclusive and collective "we."

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[136] Found in: Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, 1.
[137] Found in: Heim, p. 1.

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