

# Ars Quatuor Coronatorum

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# Swami Vivekananda

## The Mystic and Freemason Apostle of Universal Brotherhood

Bro Fabio Venzi

Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy – by one, or more, or all of these – and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.

Swami Vivekananda  
*Raja Yoga*

**W**Henever the Masonic Institutions are criticised, attacked, or slandered in any way or means, the first, almost instinctive, reaction of many Brethren is to mention to the assailant the names of famous people who had been members of Freemasonry, thus highlighting the importance of the Institution and the nobility of its

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*Presented to the Lodge 14 November 2022*

aims. The most renowned names include Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and George Washington, followed in random order by famed men of literature such as Goethe, Rudyard Kipling, Oscar Wilde, and Giosuè Carducci (to cite but a few), politicians including Garibaldi and Winston Churchill, scientists such as Jenner or Fleming, entertainers comprising John Wayne and Louis Armstrong, and hundreds of others. However, in this lengthy list of renowned Masons, I have failed to find even one mention of one of the greatest mystics of the twentieth century, the Indian Swami Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda was a key figure in the introduction of the Indian philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to the western world. The main purpose of his mission undertaken between the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century was to preach tolerance between the religions, seen as different forms of a sole eternal and universal Religion (Truth).

Through his activities in the West Vivekananda raised Hinduism to its historically deserved status, i.e. as one of the leading world religions. The renowned British historian of religions and lecturer in Hinduism, Gavin Flood, views Vivekananda as the first true thinker to clearly articulate a concept of Hinduism as a world religion deserving of a place next to Christianity, Islamism, Judaism and Buddhism. Today, the majority of Hindus belonging to the English middle classes embrace the vision of Hinduism as proposed by Vivekananda. The neo-vedanta and the reformist ideas put forward by Vivekananda were destined to influence the conceptions of another reformer who would have changed the face of India, Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>1</sup>

A man of vast spiritual plenitude, eclectic interests, spiritual Master, musician, and artist, Vivekananda realised that intellectual powers may only achieve their highest expression when they tend towards a sentiment of consecration to a spiritual ideal. In the absence of this consecration, the powers may even transform into enemies of mankind; accordingly, he devoted himself entirely to a spiritual ideal, with fate providing him with the greatest of teachers: Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>2</sup>

Vivekananda was indeed an disciple of the greatest mystic of the nineteenth century, Sri Ramakrishna, who appointed him his successor. Vivekananda dedicated his life to the realization of programmes established by Ramakrishna, he spread the Hindu Tradition throughout the world and carried out humanitarian projects that took the shape of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Missions. In particular, following the Teacher's suggestions, he sought to establish a new religious order aimed at embracing the doctrine of a universal religion, which Ramakrishna himself mentioned he had experienced. The aim of these two organisations was, and indeed still is today, to improve the spiritual and material conditions in India and amongst humanity, without distinction

<sup>1</sup> G. Flood, *L'Induismo: Temi, tradizioni, prospettive* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006,) 354–55.

<sup>2</sup> S. Nityabodhananda, Preface to the Italian edition of *Yoga Pratici*, (Rome: Ubaldini Editore, 1963), 8–9.



Swami Vivekananda. Reprinted from Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York.

of caste, belief, race, nationality, gender or religion, and to spread the concept of 'universal brotherhood' amongst the followers of diverse religions, based on the premise that the different 'Beliefs' are no more than different forms of a sole Religion, an eternal and universal Religio Perennis.

Specifically, the doctrine proposed by Vivekananda coincides with the Vedantic conception whereby the divine, the absolute, lives within all beings irrespective of social standing. In line with the views of Ramakrishna, human beings are capable of achieving a union with the divine they harbour within and, on recognising the divine essence of others, may promote love and social harmony.

Vivekananda took part in the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, producing a marked influence, and is today the most widely remembered figure amongst the attendees of the conference. As mentioned, his membership of Freemasonry remains, inexplicably, virtually unknown; he was initiated in Calcutta on 19 February 1884, an experience I shall document herein.

## HIS LIFE

### Childhood and Adolescence

Vivekananda was born at 6.49am on Monday, 12 January 1863 into an educated, wealthy family in Calcutta, on the feast day known as *Makar Sankranti*, one of the few Hindu festivals celebrated according to the solar calendar<sup>3</sup>, during which millions of Hindus offer up devotions and donations to the River Ganges.

His mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi, accepted her son as an offering from Vireshwara Shiva and gave him the name of Vireshwara, whilst his family named him Narendranath Datta, being affectionately known as Narendra or Naren.

Narendranath displayed an interest in spirituality and, from an early age, meditated in front of images of deities such as Shiva, Rama, Sita, and Mahavir Hanuman. Narendra had a sweet and joyful character, although he was also vivacious and full of energy; throughout his childhood, before falling asleep, he often had strange visions: on closing his eyes he sensed a sphere of light between his eyelashes that changed colour, grew and then exploded bathing him in an intense white light. For years, Narendra was convinced that this event was a phenomenon common to many, until his spiritual Teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, asked him whether, as he was falling asleep, he saw a light, aware that a

<sup>3</sup> 'Makar Sankranti', as suggested by the name, refers to the 'Sankramana' (transition) of the sun through the 'Makara' (Capricorn) constellation in its celestial pathway. As the position of the constellation is fixed, the sun crosses its celestial orbit on almost the same day each year. (+1 day when there are years missed in the Vedic calendar to make up for). Thus, Makar Sankranti is celebrated on 14 or 15 January each year.

similar vision was indicative of an important spiritual past and an innate propensity to meditation. This vision of light accompanied Vivekananda throughout his life.

At the age of six, Narendra was enrolled in primary school, although subsequently his parents opted to engage a private tutor as the boy displayed considerable intelligence and a remarkable memory on learning by heart lengthy passages from the epic poems *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In 1870 he started to attend the secondary school Metropolitan Institute 'Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar', where he stayed until his family moved to Raipur in 1877. Rather than being confined to his studies, his boundless energy tended to be devoted to a wide range of activities ranging from theatre to sport and to scientific discoveries. Over time, Narendra calmed down and devoted himself to more intellectual tasks.

Following the return of his family to Calcutta in 1879, he gained his secondary school diploma and was admitted to the 'Presidency College' in Calcutta to start his high school studies. A year later he enrolled in the 'General Assembly's Institution' founded by the Scottish General Missionary Board, and subsequently known as 'Scottish Church College'. He was a tireless reader interested in a wide range of topics, including philosophy, religion, history, social sciences, art and literature. His main interests however were focussed in particular on the Hindu scriptures, namely Veda, Upanishad, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Purana.

In 1881 he passed his Fine Arts exam and, in 1884, was awarded his Bachelor of Arts. He delved deep into the works of David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Baruch Spinoza, Georg W. F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Auguste Comte, John Stuart Mill, and Charles Darwin. He was particularly impressed by the evolutionism of Herbert Spencer and corresponded with the latter, translating his book *Education* (1861) into Bengalese.

### The Experience of the Brahma Samaj

During his College period, Narendra became a follower of the Brahma Samaj, a forward-thinking and liberal religious movement. The British education system which had been established in India had put the Hindu society in touch with the European culture and with its lifestyle, thus resulting in numerous Hindu youths criticising the traditional ideals in their country, with particular regard to the caste system. The Brahma Samaj, founded by Rajah Rammohan Roy (1774–883), was an eclectic intellectual movement which was not deep-rooted in traditional Hinduism. The movement indeed advocated a distancing from the rituals and adoration of images and contested the dominion of orthodox Hinduism inducing its followers 'to the worship and adoration of the Eternal, the Unsearchable, the Immutable Being, who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> S. Nikhilananda, *Swami Vivekananda* (Assisi (PG): Edizioni Vidyanda, 2000), 18–19. Further aims of the reformist movement Brahma Samaj focused on the emancipation of women, the abolition of young marriage, the

Together with numerous other Hindu youths, Narendra was also fascinated by the progressive ideas and became a member of the movement; however, as we will learn, even this experience was not sufficient to meet Narendra's deep spiritual requirements.

### Meeting with Ramakrishna

Narendra first heard mention of Ramakrishna from Professor Hastie who, during a lesson on Wordsworth's poem, *The Excursion*, on referring to the state of trance, specified how religious ecstasy was the result of purity and concentration, underling the rarity of these events in modern times, and concluding 'I have only met one person who has achieved this blessed state, and this is Sri Ramakrishna of Dakshineswar. If you go to visit the saint you will understand what trance is'.

The first encounter between Narendra and Sri Ramakrishna took place in November 1881 in the home of a devotee of the Teacher, Surendranath Mitra to which Narendranath had been invited to entertain the guests with melodious chants. During the encounter, Sri Ramakrishna was highly impressed by the young man and invited Narendra to visit him in Dakshineswar, on the Ganges, a few miles outside Calcutta, where Ramakhrisna lived.

Ramakrishna is considered one of the most important Indian mystics. He was born in Bengal in 1836 to a very poor family belonging to the Brahmin caste; at the age of six he experienced his first spiritual ecstasy, with the trances becoming increasingly frequent. At the age of sixteen, he decided to abandon his studies and to take up the position of priest in the Temple of Kali in Dakshineswar, where the deity was worshipped in the guise of the Divine Mother.

On returning to his childhood village in Bengal, Ramakrishna married but soon returned to Dakshineswar to immerse himself completely in his religious life, forsaking all family links. Once he had fully assimilated the Hindu tradition under the guidance of expert Teachers, he was initiated into a monastic life and furthered his knowledge of the Christian and Islamic traditions in the persuasion that these were also pathways that led to an awareness of the Consciousness of God.

Ramakrishna realised that he had a divine mission to carry out on earth, and that through his involvement, the Divine Mother would have founded a new religious order to embrace all men willing to accept the doctrine of a universal religion, which he himself had experienced. In setting up this project, Ramakrishna attracted a series of men and women featuring markedly diverse beliefs, levels of education and social positions, whilst also captivating numerous youths, amongst which Narendra stood out with his vast potential that Ramakrishna had grasped during their first encounter in Dakshineswar.

possibility of allowing Hindu widows to remarry and diffusion of mass education.

Initially, following his meeting with Ramakrishna, Narendra was confused as the man he had met claimed he had seen God and displayed behaviours bordering on madness; at the same time however, he emanated an incredible sense of inner peace. Narendra returned to Calcutta and promised he would again go back to Dakshineswar.

His second visit to Ramakrishna was even more disconcerting. As stated previously, the young Narendra initially considered Ramakrishna's visions and ecstasy as 'mere figments of imagination' or even 'hallucinations', and for this reason was reluctant to follow his teachings. However, a few minutes after the start of their meeting, Ramakrishna approached Narendra staring at him unwaveringly and touched him using his right foot; subsequent to this contact, Narendra started to experience an incredible vision: the walls, room and garden of the temple in Dakshineswar all faded away and he himself slowly started to disappear. Panicking, he started to shout and Ramakrishna interrupted the vision smiling at him and commenting: 'Alright, everything will happen at the allocated time.' During the third visit, Ramakrishna induced Narendra into a state of unconsciousness and asked him questions relating to his past, to his mission on earth and to the duration of his present life, obtaining confirmation that his future pupil had achieved perfection prior to his last rebirth and had an important future and mission to undertake.

After five long years studying with the Teacher, Vivekananda abandoned the ideas assimilated during his experience with Brahmo Samaj and accepted Ramakrishna as his guru and ideal of his spiritual life. He had realised that philosophy and science were powerless in achieving the true liberation of the soul, thus implying the need for a power that lay beyond the rational mind.

Sri Ramakrishna's manner of teaching charmed Narendranath. It modified the puritanical view of life which he as a Bramo had. Sri Ramakrishna could not bear the word 'sin'; he had no such phrase in his spiritual vocabulary as 'born in sin'. He admitted that man was born with limitations; but whereas other fixed their attention upon the limitations, he saw that the destiny of every soul was the conquest of all limitations. On the occasion when Naren was denouncing certain weaknesses of schoolboys, the Master chanced to overhear and said, 'Why talk of these matters? Talk of the Lord and nothing else'. Such was his method of teaching and its substance.<sup>5</sup>

The Teacher did not oblige Narendra to follow the rigid eating rules or force him to believe in the deities of the Hindu mythology, realizing that the overtly philosophical mind of the youth had no need to adhere to the ritualist disciplines of adoration. Under Ramakrishna's guidance, meditation over time led Narendra to lose consciousness of his body and to acquire the necessary inner peace, with his Aspirants mentioning in a biography dedicated to Narendra:

<sup>5</sup> *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* by His Eastern and Western Aspirants, Vol. I (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama; Bourne End: Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, 1989), 138.



The love which Sri Ramakrishna bore for Naren had this as one of its fruits, that a balance was struck between intellect and heart; for it was above all through the vehicle of love that Naren could be taught and influenced. By nature Naren was a philosopher: Sri Ramakrishna made him a devotee also. But lest be thought that the Master developed only devotional fervour in his Aspirant, it should be remembered that the highest metaphysical realization which Naren ever came to experience was likewise owing to the Master. Intellectual insight, tempered and softened by spiritual love, was the nature of Naren's spirituality. Though in general appearance he was a philosopher, the Master used to say that only a Bhakta, a devotee of God, could have such amiable and pleasing features.<sup>6</sup>

Ramakrishna taught Narendra that religion is a form of vision which, ultimately, surpasses all barriers relating to caste and race and breaks the shackles of time and space; the common aim of all is indeed to achieve a 'complete unity of man with the Divine'. In particular, Narendra learnt of the divinity of the soul and the non-duality of divinity, the unity of existence and the necessary harmony of all religions, as demonstrated by Ramakrishna himself, who had achieved awareness of God by following the disciplines of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

With regard to the designs Ramakrishna had for Narendra, the Teacher was aware he was too gentle to undertake any direct involvement for the good of humanity, thus implying the need for stronger souls to carry out his work, and Narendra was his predestined heir. He has a mission to perform, with the Teacher stating: 'Naren, today I have given you everything I had: I am now nothing more than a fakir, a penniless beggar. Using the powers I have endowed you with, you will do great things in the world, and prior to that time you shall not return to the source from whence you came.'

On 15 August 1886, seriously ill, Ramakrishna had Narendra called for and entrusted him with his disciples and imparted the last instructions relating to the establishment of the new monastic order; shortly after 1am on 16 August Ramakrishna uttered the name of Kali three times and entered into samadhi abandoning his physical body.

Following the death of the Teacher, 15 disciples now needed a place in which to gather and commence their didactic activities. The generosity of one of the disciples, Surendranath Mitra, provide them with a house in Baranagore, between Calcutta and Dakshineswar; the new monastery was called Baranagore Math and acted as the first headquarters of the monks of the *Order of Ramakrishna*. Narendra and the other disciples spent most of their day in meditation, and years later he recalled thus the first few days after the foundation of the Order: 'We have had a lot of religious practice at Baranagore Math. We rose at 3am and immersed ourselves in japa and meditation. How strong our spirit of detachment was then! We no longer wondered whether the world existed or

<sup>6</sup> *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 145.

not.' In 1892 the Order was moved to Alambazar, near Dakshineswar, where it remained until 1897. The definitive headquarters of Belur Math was occupied in 1898.

## HIS EXPERIENCE IN FREEMASONRY

### Initiation into Freemasonry

The only biography of Vivekananda to provide any details of his experience in Freemasonry is *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, a book written by his close Aspirants, where the event is mentioned briefly on pages 117 and 118:

For the sake of his future career Vishwanath made Narendranath become a Freemason, for by this time he had reached the minimum age-limit of 21 years. On 19 February 1884, he joined the Anchor and Hope Lodge No. 234 (now the Grand Lodge of India No. 1). In those days, it was the fashion for educate Indians, mainly lawyers, judges, and government officials, to become Freemasons; and Vishwanath's friends, W. C. Banerjee, the most distinguished advocate at the time, and Nimaichandra Basu, the attorney-at-law, were active members of that Lodge. When Narendranath's uncle asked Vishwanath why he wanted Narendranath to be a Freemason, the father replied that it would help him in later life; and in fact it did help. For, when, as Swami Vivekananda, Narendranath was facing difficult days in America in 1894, Mr. G. C. Connor, the Freemason who had examined him in 'the English work' at the Anchor and Hope Lodge, at Calcutta, in 1884, gave letter of introduction to certain Freemasons in Chicago, so that Swami would receive 'cordial consideration', as he (Mr. Connor) had received in India. After joining the Masonic Lodge, Narendranath 'passed' their test on 5 April 1884 and was raised to 'the sublime degree of Master Mason' on 20 May of the same year. It is probable that he ceased to be a Freemason soon after, on account of financial difficulties and the change in his way of life.<sup>7</sup>

The interpretation provided by his disciples of his experience in Freemasonry seems to be somewhat an underestimation and inaccurate; indeed, particularly in view of his extraordinary intelligence and independence of thought, it is most unlikely that Narendranath would have let himself be persuaded by his father to undergo an initiation into Freemasonry merely for practical reasons, without fully embracing the principles of the initiatic pathway he prepared to embark upon. His synchrony with the aims of Freemasonry is evident particularly in his writings on ethics (an example was yielded by the book on Karma Yoga) and his tolerance in matters of religion, as indeed represented by the Masonic rituals. With regard to the assistance he is purported to have received from

<sup>7</sup> *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 117-118.

the United States Freemasons in the guise of a letter of introduction to G. C. Connor, it should be clarified how, immediately after his presentation in Chicago at the Parliament of Religions, Vivekananda became extremely well-known throughout the American territory and was inundated with requests to give seminars and conferences. Indeed, months before the letter of introduction to Connor, he had held two Conferences in the Masonic Temple Chicago, invited by the Freemasons of the city.

In the writings of his Aspirants, we learn how on 9 February 1884, Narendranath Datta was initiated into the Anchor and Hope Lodge No. 234 in Calcutta, a Lodge at the time under the jurisdiction of the District of the United Grand Lodge of England (today, the Lodge is registered as the 'Anchor and Hope Lodge' No. 1 in the Grand Lodge of India).

This is all confirmed in a document present in the archives of the Library of the United Grand Lodge of England which include the dates of his 'Passing' to the Degree of Fellow (5 April 1884), and his Raising to Master (20 May 1884). For these documents I personally thank Bro. John Wade.

The image shows an open register book. The left page (numbered 281) is titled 'Anchor and Hope Lodge' and contains a table with columns: 'NAME OF MEMBER', 'RANK', 'ENTERED', 'DATE OF RISE', 'REMARKS', 'REMARKS', and 'REMARKS'. The table lists numerous members with their names and ranks. The right page (numbered 281) is titled 'Calcutta' and contains a grid for recording dates, with columns for months (12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1) and days (1 through 31). The grid is mostly empty, with some faint markings.

Register of the 'Anchor and Hope' Lodge No.234 in Calcutta, currently held in the archives of the Museum of Masonry in London.

## SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: MYSTIC AND FREEMASON

1894	Feb 19	from 28/1	Bombay, Narendranath Datta			Calcutta	Warren	
"	do	from 19/12/1893	101, Nilmadhab			Chennai	Worsiff	16.7.88
"	do	from 15/1	14, West	10		Calcutta	Black	16.7.89
"	do	do	Mitter, Narendranath			do	Landover	do
"	do	from 15/1	Datta, Narendranath	21		do	Richard Black	do
"	Mar 18	from 18/1	Mukherjee, Narendranath			Washington	Black	
"	do	from 18/1	Chatterjee, Narendranath			do	do	16.7.89
"	April 15	from 15/1	10, Narendranath			Calcutta	Mitchell	16.7.89
"	do	do	Mitter, Narendranath	32		Baripore	Zemindar	
"	May 20	from 20/1	10, Narendranath			Beohar Behar	Nalanda	16.7.89
"	June 17	from 17/1	10, Narendranath	36		Jharkhand	Mitchell	
"	Sept 16	from 16/1	10, Narendranath			Calcutta	Richard	
"	do	from 16/1	10, Narendranath			Madras	Gemini	

Details of the dates of Initiation, Passing, and Raising of Narendranath Datta.  
Reproduced by the kind permission of the Museum of Masonry in London.

Vivekananda delivered two lectures in the Masonic Temple in Chicago,<sup>8</sup> focussed on the topic of the Vedanta philosophy, an event confirmed by the *Chicago Inter Ocean* newspaper on 4 November 1893: ‘Swami Vivekananda gave a parlour lecture Friday afternoon in Hall 309, Masonic Temple. His subject was “The Divinity of Man”. The lecture was a brilliant one and elicited repeated applause from the select and cultured audience. Subject for Tuesday, “Hindoo Philosophy, Embracing Monism and reincarnation”; for Friday, “Love from the Abstract to the Concrete.”’<sup>9</sup>

The news was also reported by the *Chicago Tribune* dated 3 December 1893: ‘Swami Vivekananda recently gave a parlor lecture in the Masonic Temple on the “Divinity of Man”, and those who were present expressed the one sentiment that it was grand and uplifting for all Christianity. He will speak on the same theme tomorrow night at Central Music Hall. An instructive and interesting feature will be replies to questions asked by the audience concerning the custom and condition of the people of India at the conclusion of the lecture.’

The event was further confirmed by a letter that his friend Mrs S. K. Blodgett wrote to Josephine McLeod, in which we read: ‘Another time I was at a lecture of his in the Masonic Temple in Chicago...’

As mentioned previously, the Lectures delivered in the Masonic Temple in Chicago preceded the letter dated 22 January 1894 which G. C. Connor, Past Grand Master of Tennessee, wrote to Gilbert Wordsworth Barnard, a renowned representative of Freemasonry in Chicago, recommending the provision of support to his Indian ‘Brother’ Vivekananda:

My dear Brother, I take very great pleasure in introducing to you personally, and as a Freemason, our East India Brother Swami Vivekananda, Whom I examined in the

<sup>8</sup> Completed in 1892, The Masonic Temple in Chicago was the highest building in the city and was demolished in 1939.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Vivekananda Abroad A Postcard Pilgrimage’, accessed 23/01/23, <http://vivekanandaabroad.blogspot.com>. The author is a member of the Vedanta Society in Kansas City.

English Work, in which he was made a Master Mason, in Anchor and Hope, 236 [an error as the Lodge is numbered 1093] E.C. He was educated in India, and is a Monk of the oldest, and most humane of the Religions of the world – and, because of my own family relations to the city of Calcutta, I am anxious that this amiable representative of that wonderful land receive as cordial consideration in my country as I received in his. And because of such desire I have given him letters to you and General Smith. I will add that I am here to attend the Convention of all the Lodges of this city tonight, and the Brethren are very much disappointed that his lecture engagement prevent Vivekananda from being with us. Sincerely Yours, G. C. Connor.

### Principles and Symbolic Elements of Freemasonry Present in the Thinking of Vivekananda

Religious tolerance is one of the principal mainstays of the writings of Vivekananda; indeed, to combat fundamentalisms, the religions must necessarily be ‘inclusive’, i.e. willing to accept that their own particular views of God should be compatible with that of others. To achieve this aim, Vivekananda was of the opinion that all restricted, narrow, and aggressive ideas in the religions (integralism) must be removed, with the religions consequently becoming ‘inclusive’, and not attempting to scorn each other merely because their particular views of God differ. To meet this requirement, Vivekananda advocated the establishing of a common sentiment between the diverse forms of religious expression, also deriving from the study of religious expressions differing from those we each hold.

In light of the above, to conclude that by means of this ‘perennialist’ vision, Vivekananda was proposing an unlikely religious ‘syncretism’ would be completely *wrong* and *misleading*; indeed, in his closing remarks to the Parliament of Religions he specified:

Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. I am not going just now to venture my own theory. But, if anyone here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, ‘Brother, yours is an impossible hope.’ Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid. The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth; or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant, it develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant. Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

In Masonic ritual all this is symbolically represented by the ‘Point within a Circle’. In the Emulation Ritual, during the opening of the of the lodge in the third degree, the

Worshipful Master asks the Senior Warden, on the verge of leaving the east for the West to seek for that which is lost, what exactly it is that has been lost. The Senior Warden replies that the items lost were 'the genuine secrets of a Master Mason', lost due to the premature death of the architect Hiram Abiff; the Worshipful Master then asks how he hopes to find these secrets, with the Senior Warden replying: 'With the Centre.' To the next question of the Worshipful Master 'What is a Centre?', the response of the Senior Warden is 'key': 'A point within a circle from which every part of the circumference is equidistant', the Centre 'is a point from which a Master Mason cannot err.' Subsequently, in the closing of the lodge in the second degree, reference will again be made to the 'Centre' as a 'sacred symbol' that alludes to the Grand Geometrician of the Universe, or God.

It is consequently from the centre that religions originate and ultimately flow towards the centre, and is in the centre alone that the unification of the primordial tradition and all the associated historic manifestations takes place, which, whilst remaining different and separately distinct, all reveal the essence of a divine and indivisible truth as: 'The centre is, above all, the origin, the point of departure of all things; it is the principal point, without form and without dimensions, therefore indivisible, and thus the only image that can be given of primordial unity. From it, by its radiation, all things are produced, just as unity produces all numbers without its essence being modified or affected whatsoever.'<sup>10</sup>

God's truth can only be but one, although the paths that lead to God are numerous because everything is within him and each point on the circumference is equidistant from the centre. Tradition, therefore, is the confluence of all paths that lead to God to ensure that God is truly the endpoint one intends to reach and man is the point of departure for this return to the divine cycle.

This fundamental symbology is adopted repeatedly in his writings by Vivekananda, with one of the excerpts extracted from 'Soul, God and Religion' reading:

If there is one universal truth in all religions, I place it here – in realising God. Ideals and methods may differ, but that is the central point. There may be a thousand different radii, but they all converge to the one centre, and that is the realization of God: something behind this world of sense, this world of eternal eating and drinking and talking nonsense, this world of false shadows and selfishness. There is that beyond all books, beyond all creeds, beyond the vanities of this world, and it is the realization of God within yourself.<sup>11</sup>

In his discourse on the Atman Vivekananda again refers to this symbology:

The Hindu believes that every soul is a circle whose circumference is nowhere, but whose centre is located in the body, and death means the change of this centre from

<sup>10</sup> R. Guénon, *Simboli della scienza sacra* (Milan: Adelphi, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> S. Vivekananda, 'Soul God and Religion', in *The Complete Works*, Vol. I (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2018), 314.

body to body. The soul is not bound by the conditions of matter. In its very essence it is free, unbounded, holy, pure and perfect. But somehow or other it finds itself tied down to matter, and thinks of itself as matter.<sup>12</sup>

Once again, this symbology returns in an essay on the Jnana Yoga:

Each soul is a circle. The centre is where the body is, and the activity is manifested there. You are omnipresent, though you have the consciousness of being concentrated in only one point. That point has taken up particles of matter and formed them into a machine to express itself. That through which it expressed itself is called the body. You are everywhere. When one body or machine fails you, the centre moves on and takes up other particles of matter, finer or grosser, and works through them. Here is man. And what is God? God is a circle with circumferences nowhere and centre everywhere. Every point in that circle is living, conscious, active, and equally working. With our limited souls only one point is conscious, and that point moves forward and backward. The soul is a circle whose circumference is nowhere (limitless), but whose centre is in some body. Death is but a change of centre. God is a circle whose circumference is nowhere, and whose centre is everywhere. When we can get out of the limited centre of body, we shall realise God, our true Self.<sup>13</sup>

### The Aspirant and the Teacher

Vivekananda underlines how in any spiritual journey striving towards an awareness of the Divine, the presence of a guide, a Teacher, is inescapable, however, the Indian mystic reiterates how, whilst the Teacher must be capable of ‘transmitting’, the disciple, or, in the case of Freemasonry, the ‘Initiate’, should in turn possess the appropriate qualifications to ‘receive’, or rather his soul ‘should be primed to receive’:

Every soul is destined to be perfect, and every being, in the end, will attain the state of perfection. Whatever we are now is the result of our acts and thoughts in the past; and whatever we shall be in the future will be the result of what we think and do now. But this, the shaping of our own destinies, does not preclude our receiving help from outside; nay, in the vast majority of cases such help is absolutely necessary... The person from whose soul such impulse comes is called the Guru – the Teacher; and the person to whose soul the impulse is conveyed is called the Shishya – the Aspirant. To convey such an impulse to any soul, in the first place, the soul from which it proceeds must possess the power of transmitting it, as it were, to another; and in the second place, the soul to which it is transmitted must be fit to receive it.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Swami Vivekananda, L’Atman, Ramakrishna Mission Italia.

<sup>13</sup> S. Vivekananda, ‘On Jnana-Yoga’, in *The Complete Works*, Vol. V (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2018, 271.

<sup>14</sup> S. Vivekananda, *Yoga Pratici* (Rome: Ubaldini Editore, 1963), 111–112.

What 'qualifications' define an 'Initiate'? Vivekananda lists three main aspects: purity, a real thirst for knowledge and perseverance, as we read in his text on Bhakti Yoga:

The condition necessary for the taught are purity, a real thirst after knowledge and perseverance. No impure soul can be really religious. Purity in thought, speech, and act is absolutely necessary for anyone to be religious. As to the thirst after knowledge, it is an old law that we all get whatever we want. None of us can get anything other than we fix our hearts upon.<sup>15</sup>

With regard to the need for a morally integral conduct, in the 'Initiation' ceremony, the Masonic ritual teaches us how the Candidate should be in a state of spiritual and material 'purity'. Symbolically, this function is revealed at the moment in which, during the ceremony, the Candidate is asked to put on a pair of pure white 'gloves': the colour represents the symbol of inner and external purity and remind the Initiate that his hands should always remain 'pure'.

Likewise, the Candidate is handed a white 'apron'. The ritual specifies that the apron should be made of 'lambskin', 'since the lamb has been from time immemorial universally acknowledged as the emblem of purity and innocence ... that purity of life and actions should always distinguish a Freemason.'

A fundamental qualification for a teacher is to be a profound connoisseur of the Scriptures, particularly from a 'spiritual' point of view, with Vivekananda thus stating:

In regard to the teacher, we must see that he knows the spirit of the scriptures. The whole world reads Bibles, Vedas, and Korans; but they are all only words, syntax, etymology, philology, the dry bones of religion. The teacher who deals too much in words and allows the mind to be carried away by the force of words loses the spirit. It is the knowledge of the spirit of the scriptures alone that constitutes the true religious teacher.<sup>16</sup>

In studying books we are sometimes deluded into thinking that thereby we are being spiritually helped. But if we analyse the effect of the study of books on ourselves, we shall find that in the end it is only our intellect that derives profit from such studies, and no our inner spirit. This inadequacy of books to quicken spiritual growth is the reason why, although almost every one of us can speak most wonderfully on spiritual matter, when it comes to action and the living of a truly spiritual life, we find ourselves so awfully deficient. To quicken the spirit, the impulse must come from another soul.

The person from whose soul such impulse comes is called the Guru – the teacher; and the person to whose soul the impulse is conveyed is called the Shishya – the student. To

<sup>15</sup> S. Vivekananda, 'Bhakti Yoga - Qualification of the Aspirant', in *The Complete Works*, Vol. III (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2018), 51.

<sup>16</sup> S. Vivekananda, 'Unity, The Goal of Religion', in *The Complete Works*, Vol. III (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2018), 52.



convey such an impulse to any soul, in the first place, the soul from which it proceeds must possess the power of transmitting it, as it were, to another; and in the second place, the soul to which it is transmitted must be fit to receive.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, in the context of Masonic rituals, the Worshipful Master is reminded during the 'Exhortation' how, following his installation he has a fundamental and inescapable commitment to 'Further his knowledge of the Holy Scriptures' which will guide him and support him in directing the lodge.

But how does one recognize a Teacher? A Teacher, explains Vivekananda, must undeniably possess specific requisites and face trials contributing towards qualifying him as such, but will also be recognizable from his aura, or rather from the light he emanates, which the disciple will discern immediately. To convey this concept, Vivekananda uses the allegory of the Sun, i.e. the 'Light':

The sun requires no torch to make him visible, we need not light a candle in order to see him. When the sun rises, we instinctively become aware of the fact, and when a teacher of men comes to help us, the soul will instinctively know that truth has already begun to shine upon it. Truth stands on its own evidence, it does not require any other testimony to prove it true, it is self-effulgent. It penetrates into the innermost corners of our nature, and its presence the whole universe stands up and says, 'This is truth'. The teacher whose wisdom and truth shine like the light of the sun are the very greatest the world has known, and they are worshipped as God by the major portion of mankind. But we may get help from comparatively lesser ones also; only we ourselves do not possess intuition enough to judge properly of the man from whom we receive teaching and guidance; so there ought to be certain tests, certain conditions, for the teacher to satisfy, as there are also for the taught.<sup>18</sup>

In the Masonic ritual, the Worshipful Master is required to possess specific qualifications. In addition to the 'moral' (to be of good reputation, esteemed, honest and reliable) and 'ritual' requisites (he should have been regularly Initiated, Passed, and Raised), it is also fundamental that he be 'well qualified in the noble sciences', but, particularly, he is reminded that the model to imitate is the Sun, using the same allegory cited above: 'That glorious luminary of Nature which, rising in the East, regularly diffuses light and lustre to all within its circle; in the same way, it is your singular task to communicate light and instruction to the Brethren of your Lodge.'

Vivekananda wrote, and above all, lived, as a mystic; his entire life was indeed a lengthy journey in the search for enlightenment, seeking a union with God in the Spirit, as Hinduism is a religion of God as a Spirit (atman) capable of pervading the entire universe.

<sup>17</sup> S. Vivekananda, 'The Need of Guru', in *The Complete Works*, Vol. III (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2018,) 48-49.

<sup>18</sup> S. Vivekananda, 'Qualification of the Aspirant and the Teacher', in *The Complete Works*, Vol. III (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2018, 51.

Accordingly, his essence is reassumed in the renowned Vedic expression *tat tvam asi*, 'thou art that,' or rather, 'you, man, are the same thing as God.'

Vivekananda's membership of Freemasonry has undoubtedly resulted in the ennobling of our ancient institution, thanks to the presence of one of the most magnanimous souls that mankind has ever known.

## THE PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS

### Pilgrimage in India

In 1888, having received a blessing from Sri Sarada Devi, Sri Ramakrishna's consort, known to the world as the Holy Mother, Narendra left the monastery and, together with other monks, embarked on an itinerant life; his sole possessions were a *kamandalu*, i.e. 'a water receptacle,' a staff, and his two favourite books, *The 'Bhagavad Gita* and *Imitation of Christ*. He went to Varanasi to visit the great temples and preach the messages imparted by the Vedanta philosophy; he visited Ayodhya, the ancient capital of Rama, the hero of Ramayana, Agra, with its magnificent Taj Mahal, and other important Indian cities.

The years spent in pilgrimage heightened Narendra's awareness of the terrible conditions in which the Indian population lived, the appalling poverty and the backwardness of the masses. His intention was to contribute towards alleviating the suffering of his people and to bring western technologies into contact with Indian culture, with the aim of improving agricultural and industrial activities.

Having spent a few days in the city of Baroda, Swami (as he was now known) arrived in Khandwa, in Central India, where for the first time he mentioned his wish to take part in the Parliament of Religions due to be held a short time later in Chicago. Vivekananda was convinced that the Indian people needed two types of knowledge – technological knowledge to improve their terrible economic and social conditions and spiritual knowledge to allow them to gain in self-confidence and to strengthen their sense of morality. He had learnt early in life the importance of scientific knowledge and technology in contributing towards uplifting his nation, and was thus persuaded that through his participation in the Parliament of Religions in the United States, he would have been able to convey the ancient wisdom of India and in exchange receive the technological support needed to uplift his people.

He therefore decided to leave for the United States, and in this same period, at the request of the Rajah of Khetri, one of his disciples, Swami decided to assume the name of Vivekananda. Vivekananda reached Bombay accompanied by the personal secretary of the Rajah of Khetri, who had given Vivekananda an outfit of orange silk and an ochre-coloured turban, together with a first-class ticket for the *S.S. Peninsula* due to depart on 31 May 1893.

## The Parliament of Religions

The Parliament of Religions was inaugurated on 11 September 1893 as an appendix to the World's Columbian Exposition held to celebrate 400 years since the discovery of America.

The Parliament was attended by representatives of Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Islamism, Mazdeism, and others besides. The delegates presented in front of seven thousand people, with Cardinal Gibbons of the Catholic Church sitting in the middle, opening the encounter with a prayer. The delegates read out their messages, but once Vivekananda's turn arrived, he panicked and asked to be allowed to present later. Subsequently, in a letter to his followers in India, he explained that he had been afraid of the public as the other delegates had accurately prepared their presentations whilst he had no speech ready. However, this hesitance only served to raise an increased interest among the audience. When he was ready, he commenced with the words: 'Sisters and Brothers of America', and a moment later thousands of people rose to their feet to give him a resounding applause. Vivekananda continued by thanking the young nation in the name of the oldest monastic order in the world, the Vedic order of the sannyasin.

With regard to the content of his full contribution, the comment made by the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Romain Rolland, in his splendid biography is most fitting:

He, he alone spoke of all their Gods and embraced them all in the Universal Being. It was the breath of Ramakrishna breaking down all the barriers through the mouth of his great Aspirant. For a moment the Pyrenees no longer existed! The Parliament of Religions gave the young orator an ovation. During the ensuing days he spoke another ten or twelve times. Each time he repeated with new arguments, but with the same force of conviction, his thesis of a universal religion without limit of time or space, uniting the Whole Credo of the human spirit, from the enslaved fetishism of the savage to the most liberal creative affirmations of modern science. He harmonised them into a magnificent synthesis, which, far from extinguishing the hope of a single one, helped all hopes to grow and flourish according to their own proper nature. There was to be no other dogma, but the divinity inherent in man and his capacity for indefinite evolution.<sup>19</sup>

Referring to Vivekananda's speech, the Honourable Merwin-Marie Snell, President of the scientific section uttered:

One of his main merits has been the great teachings he has imparted to the Christian world, and particularly to the people of the United States, with regard to the fact that more vulnerable religions than Christianity exist, far exceeding the latter for philosophical profundity, spiritual intensity, independent vigour of thought, in the depth and sincerity of human compassion, without losing any of their ethical beauty and practicality.

<sup>19</sup> R. Rolland, *La vita di Vivekananda e il vangelo universale* (Catania: Edizione I Pitagorici, 2017, 49–50).

Vivekananda was undoubtedly the figure from the Parliament who left the greatest mark on American society, with the *New Yorker Herald* writing. 'He is without doubt the most eminent figure of the Parliament of Religions. Having listened to him speak, we realise the stupidity of sending missionaries to his educated country', and the *Boston Evening Post* read: 'Based on the grandiosity of his sentiments and his aspect, he is the favoured darling of the Parliament. He is applauded on merely crossing the stage; he accepts this sign of esteem from thousands of people with a childlike spirit of gratification and not the slightest trace of pride. During the sessions of the Parliament of Religions, it is customary for Vivekananda to be held back until the end of the programme to make sure no-one leaves before the end.'

Vivekananda held a series of conferences in the United States, the first organized by an agency and the remainder personally arranged, visiting cities including New York, Washington, Baltimore, Detroit, Memphis, Indianapolis, and Boston. Throughout this period, he composed the text of the 'Raja Yoga', which was to become one of his most popular works; on numerous occasions the contents of his talks, and in particular his critical 'vision' of religious institutions even produced reactions of bewilderment.

In 1894 Vivekananda founded the Vedanta Society in New York, organically associated to the Ramakrishna Mission, an organization having the aim of divulging the Vedanta philosophy.

### Trip to Europe and Return to the USA

Towards mid-August 1895 Vivekananda left the United States to take his message to Europe. At the end of the month he arrived in Paris, where he was presented to numerous important figures in the French capital, and subsequently travelled on to London where he was enthusiastically welcomed by Miss Muller, whom he had met in the States, and by Mr Sturdy, a scholar of Sanskrit. His first public conferences received highly positive feedback from the participants and from the newspapers of the time. His greatest admirer was Margaret E. Noble, who was later to become one of his favourite disciples.

On 6 December 1895, after two months of intense work in England, Vivekananda returned to New York. As soon as he arrived he immediately set up a series of seminars focused on work as a spiritual discipline, subsequently published in a book entitled *Karma Yoga*. Following a short stay in Boston Swami returned once more to New York, where he held a series of public conferences: at the Madison Square Garden he focused on 'love' as a spiritual discipline, a topic that he summarized in the volume *Bhakti Yoga*. On 25 March 1896 he held the renowned conference 'The Vedanta Philosophy' at Harvard University. The impact on the audience was so great that he was offered the Chair of Oriental Philosophy, an offer which, together with that received from Columbia University, he refused.

In the meantime he received increasingly frequent requests from India asking him to return, and in April he therefore decided to go back to London to finish his work there ahead of his return to India. From May onwards in London he held five lectures a week and a free discussion session on Fridays, in addition to a series of three Sunday conferences in a gallery of the 'Royal Institute of Painters' in Water Colours in Piccadilly. He also held numerous conferences in clubs, private associations, and drawing rooms, including the Co-Masonry lodges of Annie Besant.

On 13 December 1896 Vivekananda's friends and most fervent admirers, totalling more than 500 people, organized a large farewell party at the 'Royal Society of Painters', with Swami Abhedananda staying on to complete his work. Of the British, Vivekananda admired their strong characters, their firmness, loyalty, devotion to the ideal, and perseverance in undertaking the tasks assigned. He changed his pre-conceived ideas and defined them as

A nation of heroes, of true kshatriya . . . They are taught to hide their feelings and not disclose them. If you know how to reach the heart of an Englishman, he will be your friend for life. When he gets something in his head, he will not leave it alone, and the immense energy and practical sense of the race makes his idea germinate and bear fruit immediately.<sup>20</sup>

On 16 December 1896 he left England to return to India with his disciples, among whom were Captain and Mrs Sevier and J. J. Goodwin, crossing the European continent to reach the port of Naples. During his travels in Italy he visited Milan, Pisa, Florence, and in particular, Rome, where he spent Christmas week. In Naples he visited Vesuvius and Pompei, subsequently taking the ship in arrival from Southampton and departing on 30 December with a scheduled arrival in Colombo on 15 January 1897.

## Return to India

In Colombo, capital of the island of Ceylon (today Sri Lanka), he was welcomed by thousands of people who bore him in an evocative procession through numerous triumphal arches. Vivekananda accepted all these honours with his usual humility, seeing them as homage not to him, but rather to the spiritual ideals of India. During the passage from Colombo to Madras he received the same welcome in the cities of Kandy, Anuradhapuram, Jaffna, Pamban, Rameswaram, Ramnad, Paramakudi, Madurai, Trichinopoly, and Kumbakonam. In Ramnad he received a touching welcome from the Rajah who had encouraged him to undertake the trip to the United States.

In May 1897 Vivekananda met up with the lay Aspirants and monks of Sri Ramakrishna at the home of one of the Teacher's disciples, Balaram Bose. To arrange the setup of the

<sup>20</sup> S. Nikhilananda, *Swami Vivekananda* (Assisi (PG): Edizioni Vidyanda, 2000), 169.

mission, previously implemented activities needed to be coordinated by a man who would have held full decisional powers, and Vivekananda specified that 'The association should bear the name of him whom we have followed to become *sannyasi*, based on whom you regard as head of the family, taking him as your model, and whose holy name, influence, and teachings, twelve years after his passing, have spread inconceivably throughout the East and the West.'

Thus, the Ramakrishna Mission Association was born. The scope of the association was to spread the ideas of Ramakrishna and to preach brotherhood amongst the members of the different religions, manifestation of the sole religion and universal truth. In particular, the statute clarified that 'the scope of the association is to preach the truths expressed and demonstrated by Ramakrishna for the good of humanity, and to help others to put these into practice to promote their temporal advancement.' In particular, the association intended to train men to gain qualifications and teach the forms of science and knowledge capable of promoting a material and spiritual wellbeing amongst the masses, to promote and encourage the arts and industries, at the same time spreading the ideals of the Vedanta as manifested during his life by Sri Ramakrishna. Essentially, the Ramakrishna Mission may be viewed as an applied form of Karma-Yoga, the yoga of actions and good deeds. Throughout India today there are universities, high schools, and hospitals managed by the Ramakrishna Mission. Subsequently, the lands of Belur Math were purchased to provide a permanent site for the monastery, thus giving rise to the Ramakrishna Math, still today the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. This was largely made possible thanks to the donations provided by Miss Muller and Miss Ole Bull. The new temple was consecrated on 9 December 1898.

### Back to the USA and Definitive Return to India

On 20 June 1899 Vivekananda departed from Calcutta to return once again to London, accompanied by sister Nivedita and Swami Turiyananda. The ship *Golconda* made stops in Madras, Colombo, Aden, Naples, and Marseille, finally reaching London on 31 July. After a few weeks in the capital, on 16 August Vivekananda embarked for New York. On his arrival, he was delighted to see the excellent results obtained by the work carried out by Abhedananda, and he immediately got to work with a series of encounters and conferences. He then moved on to the west coast, where he held numerous conferences in Los Angeles and Pasadena. Back in New York he held conferences at the Vedanta Society, which boasted the collaboration of numerous professors from the universities of Harvard and Columbia.

During this period, Vivekananda clearly felt the nearing of the end of his earthly mission, and he had acquired a full awareness of how life on earth was no more than a mere theatrical representation.

He then returned to Detroit from where, on 20 July, he embarked for Paris where he took part in the Congress for the History of Religions held on the occasion of the Universal Exposition, although due to poor health Vivekananda only took part in two sessions.

On 4 October 1900, he left Paris to return to India, crossing through Vienna, Constantinople, Athens, and Egypt, where he visited the museum in Cairo. He then reached India, disembarking in Bombay and subsequently arriving in Belur Math on 9 December 1900. His health continued to deteriorate, but Vivekananda kept on working towards his ideals and held encounters and conferences throughout the country, although the organization of the centres he had set up was now delegated to his disciples.

On Friday 4 July 1902 Vivekananda rose early and went alone to the chapel where he meditated for three hours. At seven in the evening the bell tolled to announce the adoration in the temple, Vivekananda went to his room and instructed one of his disciples who took care of him, that no-one was to enter the room unless they were called. He meditated for an hour and called the disciple, asking him to open the windows, and he lay on the bed. Approximately one hour later his hands started to tremble slightly and he took a deep breath, which he repeated a few minutes later. His eyes glazed over, his face assumed a divine expression and an eternal silence fell.<sup>21</sup>



<sup>21</sup> Nikhilananda, *Swami Vivekananda*, 273.