review article

Luna Sabastian: “Babies, Mothers, and India’s Lesser-Known Father”

*Guru to the World*: *The Life and Legacy of Swami Vivekananda*, by Ruth Harris, Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022, 560 pp., $39.95/£ 33.95/€36.95, ISBN 9780674247475

Known to every Indian though not generally in the West where he is eclipsed by the only Indian everyone knows – Gandhi – Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) is by no means an understudied (or uncontroversial) figure. He figures hugely in Religious Studies, where his spectacular success, crimson-robed and saffron-turbaned, at the World’s Parliament of Religions (that was part of the World Columbian Exposition) in Chicago in 1893 conventionally marks the watershed of “world religions” with a plural “s:” away from the *vera religio*, or true religion, of Christianity. The literature speaks of the “invention” of world religions.[[1]](#endnote-1) Vivekananda also figures as the populariser of neo-Vedanta, both at home and in the world, which regrouped Hinduism around Advaita Vedanta, the doctrine of radical non-dualism, or monism. Vivekananda may have announced this Vedantic Hinduism to the world as *the* universal religion, but it was an earlier generation that had distilled Hinduism down to the Vedantic formula of *tat tvam asi*, “thou art that,” meaning the absolute identity of the *atman*, or personal soul, with the Absolute, *brahman*.[[2]](#endnote-2) Subsuming the proverbial diversity of Hindu beliefs and practices under a unifying “ism” was no easy feat. The literature of the 1990s and 2000s speaks of the colonial “construction” of Hinduism.[[3]](#endnote-3)

It is safe to say that Vivekananda gets blamed as much as he is, and always was, admired: blamed for being one if not *the* arch-architect of neo-Hinduism, which, at the same time as it made Hinduism respectable as a “world religion,” shore it off lived religion: the devotionalism of everyday Hindu religious practice. It took the spice out of Hinduism and left something bland, cerebral, and even strangely quotidian in its universalism: the *atman* and *brahman* are one, all religions are different paths to the same oneness, let’s all tolerate each other’s religions – and by the by, Hinduism is the most tolerant of them all, the religion of peace where Christianity, the religion of the colonisers, is the religion of violence.[[4]](#endnote-4) This all sounds trite today; it raises questions of self-orientalism and of authenticity. Yet Vivekananda, as Harris shows, deliberately defied Western expectations of the oriental saint as much as he played into them, offending his American acolytes with his delight in smoking and luxury, his undeniable appetite, and unrestrained jokes.

But most of all, Vivekananda gets blamed as a trailblazer for Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva.[[5]](#endnote-5) True, many scholars exonerate him and speak of his “appropriation” by the Hindu Right,[[6]](#endnote-6) but crucially, all who write on Vivekananda are pressed to engage with the question of his progenitorship of Hindu nationalism. *Guru to the World* is clad in saffron – the colour of *sannyasins* (ascetics) and Vivekananda’s turban, but whose signification today is overdetermined by Hindu nationalism: “saffron” politics is a shorthand for Hindu nationalism, and with “saffronisation” we have a neologism for the process of making the Hindu nationalist vision hegemonic in Indian society. Ruth Harris’s book jacket is, therefore, a provocative and no doubt a conscious choice. It is cheeky not least because the book refuses to get drawn into questions of accountability and influence. The author acknowledges Vivekananda’s troublesome legacy in today’s Hindu majoritarian India in the introduction and conclusion; there is a photo of the Indian Prime Minister Modi garlanding a statue of Vivekananda that is carried on a float. But beyond that there is a deliberate choice to excavate Vivekananda from the politics of contemporary Hindu nationalism, to steal him – and the colour saffron – back from the Hindutva-wallahs. Harris does this, as every good historian should, by showing him in his own time-context. The Vivekananda that emerges from her story is infinitely more intriguing than the Vivekananda we thought we knew.

Vivekananda was born Narendranath Datta on 12 January 1863 and grew up in Calcutta. He was the product of an Anglicised education that bred in generations of Indians a deep, psychologically charged familiarity with the English language and its literature, Western thought, and the Bible that Ashis Nandy once described as an “intimate enmity.”[[7]](#endnote-7) It would later give Vivekananda the ability to dazzle American audiences and repackage his master’s teachings for them. Yet, in a methodologically refreshing choice that is consistent with her taking religion seriously throughout, Harris’s book also engages with the hagiographic accounts of Vivekananda. These speak of divine harbingers that accompanied his birth and the spiritual prowess he possessed even as a child. The adolescent Narendranath was drawn to Brahmoism. The Brahmo Samaj had been founded in 1828 by the great reformer Ram Mohan Roy; it believed in the monotheistic core of Hinduism and rejected caste along with polytheism and much of everyday Hindu devotion. Only his discipleship to Ramakrishna (whom he first met in 1881) would reconcile Narendranath to Hindu devotionalism, even in its irrational aspects, that Brahmoism had taught him to hate as “superstition.”

Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886) is famous for his saintliness and divine madness. Transgressing social convention in his search for union with the divine, he would become the monkey god Hanuman and urinate from the branches of a tree, or dress himself in a wig and sari to turn into Radha, the milkmaid, in her adoration of Krishna. He even became baby Krishna, the “butter thief” himself demanding food at the hands of a female seeker, whom he thus allowed to experience God. Ramakrishna had divine visions and experienced the bliss of the complete loss of his ego in union with the absolute, which he described as a salt doll dissolving in the sea. The master stands in for authentic Indian religion, undoubted spiritual power that Vivekananda himself never pretended to rival, and a “theology of childishness”[[8]](#endnote-8) and of femininity; the disciple, in the eyes of his critics, stands in for a whitewashed Hinduism palatable to Western audiences that he strained to marry with scientific rationality, and above all, he stands for masculinity. Yet pushing back against those who view the disciple as the butcher of his master’s teachings, Harris shows how Ramakrishna performed a radical transformation on Narendranath Datta, which made Swami Vivekananda.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Vivekananda’s religion that comes out in *Guru to the World*, for me, is the dualism that haunts his Vedantism. (Harris never uses terms such as “neo-Vedanta” or “neo-Hinduism,” thus appearing to distance herself from the constructionist account of Hinduism). The author shows Vivekananda’s erstwhile opposition to the doctrine of nondualism, having been brought up in the school of Brahmoism, which conceived of a Creator-God in a dualistic way as separate from creation and us humans. The acceptance of non-dualism, the idea that God is not separate but imminent, at the hands of Ramakrishna was hard-won. However, ascetic traditions both East and West assume a dualism by every other name when they seek to release the spirit from the snares of the body. Plagued by illness throughout his adult life, Vivekananda’s body was particularly hard to shake off. Second, *bhakti* devotionalism and the more unsavoury Kali-worship are usually thought to not have survived the transmission from Ramakrishna, the guru, to Vivekananda the disciple. Harris shows that Vivekananda remained a *bhakta*, worshipped Kali, and called on Shiva through to the end of his short life, in 1902. *Bhakti* centres the loving adoration and merging with God as the path to liberation. Its dyad of lover (devotee) and beloved (God, the object of devotion) suggests a measure of separate identity that deep devotion bridges into union. *Bhakti* was folded into the unqualified monism of Advaita Vedanta, but originally, it sprang up as a dissent from Brahmanical orthodoxy, Vedanta, Sanskrit, the Vedas, and caste. Perhaps it is this evacuation of dissent and the disciplining into Brahmanical tradition that makes Vivekananda’s project so easily foldable into Hindu nationalism.

Vivekananda’s reception history similarly defies any neat identification with Vedantic orthodoxy. In America, he was nicknamed the “‘cyclonic monk,’” who blew in with the irresistible energy of a tropical storm. Similarly for the Indian social scientist Benoy Kumar Sarkar, a Bengali raised on the Swadeshi movement that Vivekananda would inspire but not live to see, Vivekananda was not a man of the Vedanta or even primarily a Hindu but an energiser, a “Carlyle of Young India” who “realise[d] and exploit[d] the dynamic possibilities of a philosophy undreamt of by Shankarâchârya,” the eight-century arch-philosopher of Advaita Vedanta.[[9]](#endnote-9) With “practical Vedanta” and a this-worldly ethic of *seva* (service), Vivekananda fought the monism of quietism that views the world as a web of *maya* (illusion) from which one should seek release.[[10]](#endnote-10) It is this idea of service to society and to the nation that would later make him so attractive to Indian nationalism.

Harris’s book is a *readerly* book (as opposed to a writerly one). The book is written with a staggering disregard for the fiefdoms of area studies (Ruth Harris herself is a Europeanist best known for her work on the Dreyfus Affair), and it is written for academics and non-academics alike. This requires a whole lot of explaining. Harris offers non-patronising explanations of the Indian context all along. The paragraph about the significance of feet in Indian culture is my particular favourite.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Yet Vivekananda inhabited many contexts. *Guru to the World* is an intellectual biography of a towering individual, but one with an impressive supporting cast that above all offers a snapshot – a movie still – of a “global idealist moment.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Harris’s pick through the exciting field of American religion, ca. 1880 to 1900, is incredibly informative and rewarding. This was a time when austere Protestantism ceded ground to new currents of religious thought ranging from faith healing, New Thought, Theosophy, and Christian Science, to seances, mesmerism, and magnetism. American spirituality was “New Age” *avant la lettre*. It softened the landing of Vivekananda’s message, when it came in 1893. This also shows that there are no neat origins. Vivekananda, as much as he was a trailblazer and smoothed the path for Western yogis to come, benefitted from an already impressive history of American engagement with Hindu idealism, but with one caveat, as Harris explains: he wanted to take back ownership of these ideas and deliver a proper Vedanta, not a phony product like Theosophy or Emerson’s Transcendentalism a generation earlier.

This begs a further question: just how American is this story? In turning to America, Vivekananda sought to triangulate the coloniser-colonised bind with Britain. America proved both an escape and powerful ally, and a fruitful field of action. Vivekananda’s mission to Britain was not half so successful. Would he have taken off, say, in France? Did Germany, with its thoroughly domesticated Indian idealism, even need a Vivekananda? My sense is that there is something very American about the book’s global story.

Women were central to Vivekananda’s story and the success of his global mission. Harris explores the flock of fascinating Western and Indian women whose life he touched and vice versa. On the Indian side there was above all Ramakrishna’s widow Sarada Devi, without whose blessing he would never have undertaken anything as audacious as crossing the seas to speak at the World’s Parliament of Religions uninvited. Sister Nivedita (1867-1911), an Irish woman born Margaret Noble, is his best-known Western disciple. Harris dedicates the final chapters of the book to her, but also explores his lesser-known American devotees and patrons like Sara Bull and Sarah Farmer, who gave Vivekananda a platform in America that allowed him to deepen his discourses on Indian religion begun at the Parliament. Vivekananda has a reputation for “man-making” and for making Hinduism muscular. Yet Harris shows, in delicious contrast, that Vivekananda embraced the self-effeminising of his guru Ramakrishna. He, Vivekananda, the attractive yet sexually closed off monk, became “‘a woman amongst women” in his American spiritual retreat.[[13]](#endnote-13) Men turned themselves into women to find God; a woman like Nivedita dropped her femininity as a ‘“disguise”’[[14]](#endnote-14) and inhabited masculinity to chart a path for nationalism – and herself – in India. This gender fluidity that is ingrained in Indian spirituality – Muslim as well as Hindu – is a cornerstone of the book.

Next to men and women, femininity and masculinity, there is the figure of the baby. “*His Majesty the Baby*,” Freud called it.[[15]](#endnote-15) But Harris’s story is not about the narcissistic aspect of the baby. It is about the baby’s ability, in its utter helplessness, to extract complete devotion from its mother. Through baby worship, Krishna *bhakti* drew on the potency of private emotion in a way that Vivekananda could make Christians understand, who, after all, had a history of adoring the Christ Child. Ramakrishna became baby Krishna on a devotee’s lap; Vivekananda’s American female acolytes were his “Babies;”[[16]](#endnote-16) Vivekananda, too, channelled childlike innocence, delighted in sweets and mischievous humour, and was babied. *Guru to the World*, Harris writes in the introduction, is above all a book about love. This was not sensual, sexual love, which was a form of “attachment” that Vivekananda asked his disciples to transcend. Indeed, Vivekananda’s celibacy was what enabled the close relationship between the charismatic brown guru and white women. The ideal of love in this story is the mother’s love for her baby.

When we love someone and they die, we want to keep their memory alive. Some of the most haunting passages in the book are those about Ramakrishna and the love he inspired. Is it unreasonable to think that Vivekananda and his brother-disciples may have wanted to globally disseminate Ramakrishna’s message – out of love? The Ramakrishna Math (Order) that a grief-stricken Vivekananda and his guru-brothers set up after their master’s death, and the Vedanta Societies that Vivekananda founded while in the United States, have done more than anything to keep Ramakrishna’s teachings and his myth alive. Harris convincingly shows the continuity between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, extending the guru-*shishya* (teacher-student) transmission also to Vivekananda’s great Western disciple, Sister Nivedita, who, after her teacher’s death, would sign her public statements as “‘Nivedita of Ramakrishna Vivekananda.’”[[17]](#endnote-17) The book is therefore misunderstood where it figures only as a biography of Vivekananda. The timeline at the end of the book curiously and tellingly intertwines the lives of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Nivedita: three that are one. Each is a node in the age-old guru-*shishya* tradition, yet each took the message they received further than their teacher ever anticipated. Vivekananda both modernised and internationalised Ramakrishna’s religion. Nivedita bent Vivekananda’s religion to the service of Indian nationalism. In doing so, both exploited latent possibilities in their masters’ teachings but added something that is entirely and irreducibly their own.

Finally, there are obvious parallels between Vivekananda and Gandhi that haunt this book. Both emphasised spirituality, moral courage and femininity while possessing a power over their followers (and especially women) that we today may not consider psychologically safe. Both affronted orthodox, casteist Hindu society but refused to side with caste abolition or women’s emancipation movements. Both Gandhi and Vivekananda made their mark out in the world (Gandhi, of course, did so in South Africa) and were feted upon their return to India. The Indian problem, it seems, needed internationalising. Did Indians need to become gurus to the world? While everyone knows Gandhi, Harris’s book seeks to redress Vivekananda’s relative obscurity in the West that persists despite his huge impact on New Age spirituality and the global yoga craze. The book also invites us to reflect on the competition of Fathers in contemporary Hindu majoritarian India, where Vivekananda is lionised, while Gandhi is increasingly marginalised. Whose legacy is more relevant today?

The final question, and one that *Guru to the World* does not answer, is *why* contemporary Hindu nationalism looks so much like Vivekananda’s Hindu Universalism, as Harris calls it in unvarying capitalisation. Vivekananda, we are told, insisted that his message was apolitical. The message of Hindu Universalism liberated Hindus from the assumption of British supremacy in an unequal colonial playing field. It also showed Hindus the way to power. A claim to universalism rarely escapes some form of supremacism and even slippage into imperialism: a “guru to the world,” no less. Thus, India was envisioned as a *vishwa guru* (a world teacher) from Rabindranath Tagore to Narendra Modi. But the issue at stake is not the purported world-conquest of Hindu religion. It is the relation of Hinduism and Hindus to Muslims and Islam in India. Here, the problem that I see is the Vedantic impulse to simulate tolerance by subsuming difference, by swallowing it up, rather than accepting it in its apartness – a value that Gandhi, by contrast, upheld as “friendship” and “neighbourliness.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Maybe the problem with Hinduism in contemporary India is the inability to accept an “other” that it cannot subsume. If this is so, then Gandhi, rather than Vivekananda, can show a way out.

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1. See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or: How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Michael Bergunder, “‘Östliche’ Religionen und Gewalt,” in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt: Kongressband des XII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie 18.–22. September 2005 in Berlin*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 144-5; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and “the Mystic East”* (London: Routledge, 1999), 118-42. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For two sides of the debate, see, for example, Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); David N. Lorenzen, “Who Invented Hinduism?,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 4 (1999): 630-59. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Bergunder, “‘Östliche’ Religionen und Gewalt.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See especially Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006); and Sharma, *A Restatement of Religion: Swami Vivekananda and the Making of Hindu Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, William Radice, ed., *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Shamita Basu, *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ruth Harris, *Guru to the World: The Life and Legacy of Vivekananda* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2022), 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Might of Man in the Social Philosophy of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math., 1945), 22; Sarkar, *The Aesthetics of Young India* (Calcutta: Kar, Majumder, 1922), quote at 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Brian Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism, or the Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourses from Early Colonial Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), for a different account of how Vedanta was made this-worldly in nineteenth-century India. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Harris, *Guru to the World*, 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 8. Harris attributes the coinage of this term to the late Chris Bayly. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Harris, *Guru to the World*, 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 365. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Sigmund Freud, *Zur Einführung des Narzißmus* (Leipzig, Vienna, Zurich: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1924 [1914]), 22, in English and italicised in the original. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Harris, *Guru to the World*, 244. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 364. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 67-92. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)