“Passage to India” : The Multiple Definitions of Indian Religion in Nineteenth-Century America

Lo soul, the retrospect brought forward,
The old, most populous, wealthiest of earth’s lands 1)

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Abstract

Nineteenth-century American culture displays a remarkable diversity of attitudes toward Indian religion. While many authors and texts reflect the Orientalism posited by Edward Said, others violate the “exteriority” implied in the Orientalist stance. This variety in American treatments of Indian religion invites analysis using a more flexible critical framework such as Fred Dallmayr’s spectrum of modes of cross-cultural encounter. Christian writers, for example, might seem likely to exemplify the Orientalist stance, but they in fact reflect diverse attitudes. Some, like the Rev. Samuel Nott, certainly do paint an ugly caricature of Hinduism. Others, such as the editors of American Missionary, find a point of commonality between the Indian caste system and American slavery, while Lydia Maria Child practices “dialogic engagement” in applying objective criteria to Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian practices. Further, many Hindu and Buddhist texts were available in English translation, and Americans had a chance to hear the living voices of those traditions at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. In the literary sphere as well, authors like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau imaginatively reworked Indian religious doctrines into moral lessons for their American countrymen. While none of these voices can claim to be the “real” India, they do complicate the notion of a monolithic Orientalism and invite a reconsideration of twentieth-century reception of India in America.

Key Words
Orientalism, South Asian Religion, American Culture, American Literature

Contents
○ India, America, and Orientalism
○ Samuel Nott’s (Almost) Demonic Hinduism
○ Hinduism as Mirror: Caste, Slavery, and American Missionary

Recommender: Professor HAYAKAWA Hiroaki, Faculty of Policy Studies, Chuo University

117

DIV.3. Beyond the Missionary Position: Lydia Maria Child
○ More Sources: India Speaks for Itself
○ India Imagined: Emerson and Thoreau
○ Looking Forward

I. India, America, and Orientalism

Americans looking at India face a curious mixture of the familiar and the alien. The multitudinous languages, creeds, and ethnic divisions in India might seem a disorienting chaos to an American observer, yet they simultaneously mir-
ror in grand form America’s own struggle to realize its dream of unity in diversity. India is in this and other ways uniquely connected to America. India was, after all, the goal Columbus sought when sailing west across the Atlantic, and the Lewis and Clark expedition was in some sense a continuation of Columbus’s vision. Figures like Walt Whitman have seized upon that connection in their desire to forge a new “Passage to India” through the devices of literature, metaphysics, and politics. Both India and America have had the experience of being colonial members of the British Empire, a fact which perhaps underlies Mark Twain’s ambivalence about the British imperial presence in India in Following the Equator. While American society nearly tore itself apart over the issue of slavery (an institution that was often defended with Biblical references) and its enduring legacy of racism, India is still coming to terms with its hierarchical social structure, and its government is still wrestling with how equal opportunity may be extended to all. In short, to Americans India is at once something other, and a cousin, or even a lost sibling.

In the area of religion, nineteenth-century Americans’ approach to India was conditioned by several factors. A limited number of Indian texts were available to them in English translation, and these determined which of the many facets of Hindu and Buddhist thought they could become acquainted with. Missionary reports brought a very different view of India to religious writers such as the poet Lydia Howard Huntly Sigourney. Major events in the news helped create generally accepted parameters of what India was and what Indians were like. One of the most prominent examples was the Anglo-Indian War or “Mutiny” of 1857 which ultimately led to the direct rule of India by the British crown and which Americans viewed with mixed emotions. A very different but equally important event was the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago, where Swami Vivekananda and Anagarika Dharmapala emerged as popular figures and spokesmen for Neo-Vedānta and South Asian Buddhism respectively.

American views of India at times fit neatly into Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism, while others are less easy to categorize. In particular the Parliament of Religions provided a venue where Americans could hear the direct, human voices of Indian people, and this sort of direct exchange potentially collapses the externality that Said posits as a defining quality of Orientalist discourse. Further, Americans, thanks to their lack of direct colonial involvement in India, have been relatively free from the colonial paradigms that run throughout British and French approaches to India. Said himself acknowledges this truth, saying that the United States’ limited contact with the Orient prevented the development of a “deeply invested tradition of Orientalism” until after World War II.

We thus need a more flexible theory of cross-cultural encounter to best understand the way Americans have encountered, imagined, and conversed with India. One appealing alternative is Fred Dallmayr’s notion of a spectrum of modes of contact between cultures. Dallmayr considers “Conquest” and “Conversion” as modes of encounter rooted in power difference and the othering of foreign cultures, yet he also acknowledges higher levels such as “Cultural Borrowing” or even “Dialogic Engagement,” in which “the respective cultures must face each other on a more nearly equal or roughly comparable basis.” Dallmayr’s broader vision of cultural interaction helps reveal the complexity with which nineteenth-century Americans regarded the texts, people, and traditions that constitute the Indian religious traditions.
II. Samuel Nott’s (Almost) Demonic Hinduism

Of course, most people in nineteenth-century America had little or no firsthand knowledge of Indian religions. Of the many types of second-hand knowledge about India, missionary reports provided common people a rare chance to learn the details of Indian life and thought. As Dallmayr notes, religion can influence cross-cultural encounter in disparate ways. While it may contain the potential “to transcend prevailing social and political conditions and hence to become a resource for liberation rather than domination,” in the mode of conversion it perniciously insists on a common human nature that “predestines native populations to be willing targets of proselytizing missions.”

Most missions naturally fell into this latter category, looking at India through an extremely thick lens of evangelical Christian ideology, and their reports reflect an incomplete view of Indian religion. The influence of missionaries on popular conceptions of India was strong nonetheless, and any examination of American attitudes toward India must take them into account. Their reports came in myriad forms including books, periodicals, newspaper articles, sermons, and public lectures. There are thus too many examples for a comprehensive survey in this context, but two representative texts give a good sense of their approach.

A work demonstrating the missionary tendency to deny cultural difference is A Sermon on the Idolatry of the Hindoos, delivered by Samuel Nott, Jr., on November 29, 1816, and published with substantial appendices in 1817. Speaking to the annual meeting of the Female Foreign Mission Society of Franklin, Connecticut, Nott took as his text Romans I:20–23, finding in it two points particularly relevant to India:

The Declarations of the Apostle are these;
Ⅰ. That the eternal power and God-head of a Supreme Being, are clearly seen by the heathen; being understood by the things that are made;
Ⅱ. That they have abused their knowledge, and, activated by vain imaginations and a foolish heart, they have fallen into the grossest idolatry.

Nott presents elaborate arguments to support each of these two contentions. He asserts that there are two approaches to the divine in Hinduism: one that worships God as a transcendent being and one which worships divinity as it is present in images. He also cites a religious ceremony in which countless clay idols are decorated and paraded through town, only to be dumped into the water. This practice of causing the molded clay to dissolve back into a featureless mass shows, according to Nott, that Hindus are aware of one God over all creation, and therefore can be held spiritually responsible for their transgression of idolatry.

Nott is clearly aware of Hindu justifications for the use of idols, and even quotes Hindus who have defended the practice to him: “I have heard them say; ‘How can we worship him? How can we conceive of him who is uncreated and eternal? How can we fix our minds on him, who does not inhabit place?’”

Nott is uninterested in how these conceptions of the divine complement each other in the Hindu tradition, and he instead ties them to a normative Christian theology that legitimizes his missionary intent:

In considering the idolatry of the Hindoos, we should keep the cause of it in mind (“at blank atheism, or an absolute neglect of Him . . . the mind, conscious of guilt, starts back with horror; but is soothed and quieted
by the formalities of religious worship”

Nott’s analysis is thus based on a fundamental unwillingness to go past the outer surface of Hinduism: he seeks to understand Indian religion only to show its inadequacy in the light of Christian scripture.

The result is a cluster of views of Hinduism as unintelligible, silly, and sinister. Important Hindu philosophical concepts go by the wayside, and Nott is disinclined to see how they could be true or meaningful to those who hold them. His discussion of the Hindu notion that the world emanates from the transcendent, impersonal Brahman exemplifies this unwillingness to understand Hinduism:

Intending to ascribe to Him perfection, both natural and moral, they represent him, not only as eternal, unchangeable and omnipotent, but as without passions, without sensation, without desires, without happiness.

A description of the divine essence, which, if intelligible, deprives him of the glory which he possesses, as the fountain of love, and infinitely happy in its eternal exercise. . . or, as it is represented by those who would speak more philosophically, maia, or the power which produced a material universe, has enchained the Supreme Spirit. It is no part of my object, to show that these ideas are consistent with any rational views of a Supreme Being, nor any part of my expectation, to render them perfectly intelligible.

Nott earlier dismissed the Hindu conception of the divine with attributes (saguṇa brahman) as a form of idolatry, justifying that claim by pointing to nirguṇa brahman as evidence of a single, transcendent deity in Hinduism. He now, however, explains that the formlessness of nirguṇa brahman is unacceptably impersonal. One wonders whether Nott himself noticed this logical disjunction in his sermon, but in either case he is clearly unwilling or unable to see how Hindu conceptions of the divine could be sensibly expressed. (Mark Twain, we might remember, would later say much the same thing about Nott’s concept of an infinitely powerful, loving God who allows evil to exist in the world.) Because Nott does not seek to understand fundamental principles of Hinduism, its practical manifestations are equally absurd to him. He speaks of the ridiculousness of animal deities like the monkey god Hanumāṇ and holy eagle Garuḍa: he dismisses the cowherd god Kṛṣṇa as “a cunning thief”; and he omits discussing the religious significance of Śiva’s līṅgām since it is “unsuitable to be mentioned in this place, and indeed in any other place.”

His sense of the absurdity of Hindu religious practice is tempered, however, by its possible Satanic origin. He does not make such a claim directly, but rather implies it in the following passage:

Were you told that the cunning adversary to the salvation of men, had made it his special business to contrive a system at variance with the rights of Deity and the dictates of common sense; suited equally to debase the human mind and to please it when it is debased; and, finally, suited to the cultivation of sinful passions, and to encourage the practice of sin, would you not at once exclaim, Behold among the Hindoos the complete accomplishment of his wicked purpose.

Nott thus is unwilling to condemn Indian people overtly as minions of Satan. To do so would be to undermine his missionary purpose: if Indian people were completely evil, there would be no point
in trying to secure their conversion to Christianity.

Nott therefore strives to show how, while their religion might seem Satanic, Indian people are actually just misguided, and how Christians face the duty of bringing them back to the true path. He accordingly ends his sermon by extolling the “happiness of the missionary, who having left his country, and embarked on an enterprise of difficulty and hazard, rejoices that he is cultivating a field grown to waste, and preparing a harvest from a barren ground.” 

Nott’s metaphor makes clear his conception of Hinduism as detritus which must be cleared away through Christian evangelizing.

III. Hinduism as Mirror: Caste, Slavery, and American Missionary

While Nott was concerned with idolatry as the greatest evil in the Indian religious landscape, many American missionaries found themselves drawn to an eerily familiar issue: caste. This was especially true among missionaries who were also abolitionists; to them the caste system in India and America’s own “peculiar institution” were two faces of the same coin. J. H. Payne, president of the American Missionary Association in 1846, grouped American and Indian sins together in a speech at a missionary convention: when they are awakened to the truth of Christianity, he explains, “it may be expected that ‘the slave master’ will be prepared to break the bonds of the slave, the oppressive ruler led to dispense justice to the subject, the proud Brahmin to embrace fraternally the man of low caste.”

Indeed, the pages of American Missionary magazine are filled with references to caste in India (varṇa-dharma) during the years leading up to the American Civil War. One article paints a sensationalistic picture of a man who “lost caste by eating mutton! an indulgence totally forbidden to Brahmans. He was . . . consequently condemned to hold for thirty years, a large flower-pot, filled with earth, in which grows a sacred plant.” Most accounts, though, focused on the way caste made running missionary institutions difficult or reported on progress in overcoming caste barriers. One correspondent complained of the persistence of caste differences in the Girl’s Bazar School in Allahabad: “Of course, we were very much troubled with caste in the school. Our girls would not drink from the same vessel. They would, when angry, pollute each other’s vessels, by touching them, and then they must be thrown away.”

With caste providing a serious obstacle to Protestant notions of equality, it became a focus of special debate. The April 1851 number of American Missionary contained a reprint of the Missionary Herald’s report on “The Madras Missionary Conference on Caste.” This document explains the conference’s findings:

Caste is one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of the gospel in India. It meets and thwarts the missionary, not only in bearing the unsearchable riches of Christ to the unconverted Hindoos, but in building up the native Church in faith and love. This has been painfully felt in Southern India, wherever natives, at their baptism, have been allowed to retain it.

To encourage a more active campaign against caste, the authors point out that caste “is in its nature essentially a religious institution, and not a mere civil distinction” and that, as a heathen religious phenomenon, “caste is directly opposed to the Word of God.” They further recommend that Indian converts be required to renounce caste before taking their first communion or receiving baptism, and that missionaries take pains to ensure that Indian converts are actually willing to cross caste lines in practice.
associated the struggle against caste in India with the Abolition movement at home. The report quoted above is followed by an article entitled “Caste,” which makes the connection explicit: “The American Home Missionary Society had, last year, sixty-three missionaries laboring in the slaveholding States and Territories. Hitherto they have acted in relation to slavery as the missionaries in India did in relation to caste, previous to the year 1848. Why should they not now follow the example of those missionaries, and exclude the persisting slaveholders from the church?” American Missionary’s hard-line abolitionist stance led its editors to look past the enormous religious differences between American and Indian societies and to see a common issue facing them—the problem of equality. While their editorial on “Caste” was no doubt intended to shock an American audience into reconsidering its attitude toward slavery, it also drew India and America into a parallel relationship that helped Americans feel the humanity of Indian people as well as the sinfulness of American slaveholders. Where Nott sees Indian religion only as alien and grotesque, American Missionary sees in it a reflection of America’s own religious and moral controversy.

Perhaps moved by this sense of connection between India and America, American Missionary took a sympathetic stance toward the Indians during the Anglo-Indian War of 1857. An editorial on “India Missions and War” returns to the parallel between slavery and caste, announcing that “British rule commenced, and, for many years, was upheld, by severities and outrages, the memory of which has doubtless festered in the minds of the natives from generation to generation. Like the slaves in this country, the native population has been governed by a few, who have kept the ascendency, because the masses were ignorant of their physical power.” Rather than reporting the atrocities perpetrated by the native soldiers, the article asserts that “the native population, and not the Europeans, were the party that had first suffered injury, oppression, and barbarity,” and goes on to recount the “retaliatory cruelties” of the British upon those in rebellion. The conclusion of the piece is that Americans have a lesson to learn from the revolt in India: “In view of these astounding recitals we are reminded of the Southern States of our own country. Will oppression there be perpetual? Will the oppressed forever hug their chains? Or will the blacks, like the Sepoys, awake, at no distant day, feel their strength, vindicate their rights, and hurl destruction upon their taskmasters?” This statement is remarkable when one considers that many Americans supported British rule over India.

American Missionary, representative of liberal religious thought in nineteenth-century America, thus articulates a strange double position on India. Its editors argue that Indian people deserve independence from British rule, just as American slaves do. They show awareness of the proximate cause of the Anglo-Indian War: the introduction of rifle cartridges smeared with animal fat. The Sepoys were instructed to bite off the tips of these cartridges before loading them, which was religious anathema to virtually all. The use of pig fat alienated the Muslims, while beef fat did the same for the Hindus. While they condemn the British for violating religious scruples, however, American Missionary’s editors set out to do just that by arguing against core features of Hinduism and forbidding their practice in missionary churches. They champion the cause of Indian political liberty but do not entertain the notion of an intellectually and spiritually independent India. While their concern for the fate of the Indian people rings true, the example of India seems to attract them primarily for its utility in the campaign against American
slavery. India is valuable to them as a source of spiritual capital, and it is therefore ironic that they occasionally express this view of India in economic terms. The only positive moral lessons they see in Hindu religious life are extravagant donations to religious causes, which they use to encourage similar outpourings from their Christian audience. 28 Thus, India functions as a reservoir from which souls may be extracted, and this very commodification enables India to teach Christians that the church also needs temporal resources to sustain itself. They approach India much more closely than does Nott, but their identification with the missionary cause necessitates that they overlook the thoughts and feelings of real Indian people. In Dallmayr’s terms, they seem “to cross or transgress traditional cultural boundaries” in turning to India for moral lessons, yet their use of India as a mirror is ultimately the same denial of meaningful difference that informs the missionary enterprise. 29

IV. Beyond the Missionary Position: Lydia Maria Child

The purpose of conversion thus limits the possibilities for intellectual openness and emotional sympathy with Indian religion, but not all Christian writers share that goal. The novelist and social activist Lydia Maria Child (1802 – 1880) stands out as a woman committed to Christianity but interested in achieving a genuine understanding of other religious visions. In addition to her voluminous anti-slavery writings, Child composed a three-volume study entitled The Progress of Religious Ideas Through Successive Ages. This massive work surveys religious thought throughout the world, starting in ancient India and concluding with the post-reformation Catholic Church. In her preface, Child expresses her desire to understand fully the religious experience of others: “I recollect wishing, long ago, that I could become acquainted with some good, intelligent Bramin, or Mohammedan, that I might learn, in some degree, how their religions appeared to them.” Accordingly, her “motive in writing has been . . . to show that theology is not religion; with the hope that I might help to break down partition walls; to ameliorate what the eloquent Bushnell calls ‘baptized hatreds of the human race.’” 30 Where Orientalism relies on externalized depictions of an alien culture, Child seeks direct, personal dialogue, thereby recognizing the agency of those who practice other cultural forms. Child’s self-professed goal is “to present impartially the beauties and the blemishes of each religion,” and she therefore does not accept any one religion as an unqualified good or an unmitigated evil. 31 At the same time, she retains her own Christian perspective, believing in “the power of genuine Christianity to stand on its own internal merits, unaided by concealment.” 32

In her chapter on “Hindostan, or India,” Child describes many aspects of Indian religion, starting with Indian ascetic traditions, Buddhism, the varṇāśrama-dharma which establishes norms for the division of society into castes and the individual life into periods of studentship, family life, forest dwelling, and renunciation. She presents these aspects of Indian religious practice, abhorrent to missionaries, in a strikingly objective manner. In doing so, however, she reflects the racialist discourse of her era, remarking that “some individuals have temperaments more inclined than others to veneration and mysticism; and the remark is equally applicable to nations.” 33 She sees Indian people as historically ignoring practical affairs for meditation and docilely accepting foreign rule, except where it interferes with their religious practice. One need only note the eminently pragmatic political vision of the Arthaśāstra or the fierce challenge of the
Marathas toward the Mughal Empire to see the inadequacy of her generalizations. Nonetheless, her presentation of Indian religion is significant for its openness and unbiased tone; she avoids using the word “heathen” because of its negative connotations.

Child is, like all of us, constrained by her time and place, yet she practices what Dallmayr calls “Dialogical Engagement” in seeking to view religions impartially. Specifically, she seems closest to Habermas’ notion of dialogue, which puts all cultures in an objective (if perhaps Western) comparative framework that “presupposes the observance of universal rules, procedures, and categories.”

Where other Christian writers dismiss Indian religion as heresy or appropriate it as a cultural mirror to expose the wrongs of American slavery, Child puts Hinduism into comparison with other religions, treating them all as human attempts to express a universal religious urge. In her concluding chapter, for instance, she remarks on a historical movement spanning several religious traditions:

Among all people, except the Jews and Mohammedans, an intermediate object of worship, approaching nearer to human sympathies, has gradually superseded the more sublime and awful idea of the Supreme One. Thus Mithras eclipsed Ormuzd, and Krishna supplanted Brahma. The same craving for sympathy and mediation, led men to address prayers more to Christ, than to the Father; and eventually more to the Virgin Mary, than to either.

While Child calls this tendency “somewhat disappointing,” she nonetheless puts several world religions on an equal footing and acknowledges a common human “craving” behind Indian and European religious cultures. In this process, Christianity shifts from inquiring subject to analytic object, and it thereby ceases to be a normative touchstone that demonstrates the falseness of foreign idols. As Dallmayr notes, this sort of cultural comparison involves a commitment to fixed criteria that may distort the object of analysis: “consensus is purchased at the price of a bracketing of such differences to the extent that they exceed discursive rules.” Still, Child’s analysis is a startling instance in which an American writer recognizes the human agency of Indian religious forms, even as she remains committed to a protestant Christian world view.

There were many more secondary sources available to nineteenth-century American readers, but the above examples are representative of major approaches toward Indian religion by Christian writers in America. Nott’s disinclination to understand Hinduism, the abolitionists’ use of India as a moral mirror in their argument against slavery, and Child’s dialogic inclusion demonstrate the diversity of the American approach toward India. In addition to this complexity of Christian response to India, there was another presence in this meeting of cultures, one which grew stronger as the turn of the twentieth century drew near: the voices of Indian people.

V. More Sources: India Speaks for Itself

In the early nineteenth century, virtually the only way India could articulate its religious beliefs to the West was through translations of primary texts. The work of the first generation of Indologists—Sir William Jones (1746–1794), Charles Wilkins (1749–1836), and H. T. Colebrooke (1765–1837)—was indispensable in introducing some aspects of Indian thought to American readers. Many writers, including Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, were familiar with Wilkins’s translation of the Bhagavad Gita, which was published in 1785 and held at the
libraries of Harvard and Yale as well as the New York and Boston Public Libraries. The Gitā was particularly important since it played a crucial role in blending the Brahmanical tradition with the movement toward devotional religion and thereby helped produce Hinduism as we know it today. Other works were produced in a hit-or-miss fashion. Jones’s purpose, for instance, in translating the Laws of Mānū (Mānava-dharma-śāstra) was to gain an understanding of Hindu law to assist his judicial work in India. While Mānū is an important Hindu text, Jones’s 1794 translation caused scholars to cede it a more central place than it really occupies. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, though, a fairly comprehensive set of translations became available in the form of the Sacred Books of the East series, edited by the prominent Sanskritist F. Max Müller. 41)

While much of the immense repository of Hindu scriptures thus gradually became available to American readers during the course of the nineteenth century, Indian people were reinterpreting their own religious tradition for themselves, for other Indians, and for the West during that same time period. The result of one such reconsideration was the fiercely nationalistic Ārya Samāj, a group whose founder, Dayānanda Sarasvati, wrote interpretations of the Vedas asserting that those texts, revealed to the Indian āryans, contain the keys to all knowledge. In this view, even Western technology is ultimately borrowed from a source of primal knowledge which is uniquely Indian. A number of Indian intellectuals, clustered in Bengal, formed a Neo-Hindu movement less hostile to Europe and America by embracing the influence of Western science and religion and by attempting to reformulate Hinduism in a correspondingly monotheistic and universalist vein. In particular, Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) often credited with beginning the “Bengali Renaissance,” founded the Brahmā Samāj (“Society of God”) to promulgate his vision of the essence of Hinduism as embodied by monotheistic teachings of the Upaniṣads. Different offshoots of the Brahmā Samāj were led by figures like Debandranath Tagore (1817–1905), Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884), and P. C. Mazoomdar (1840–1905). These figures varied in the strength of their allegiance to traditional Hindu social structures, but they all advocated to some degree a synthesis of Christian and Hindu thought. Roy, for instance, created a stir with his 1820 book The Precepts of Jesus. This volume extracted the ethical teachings of Christ from their supernatural trappings, which Roy viewed as unnecessary encumbrances. Roy’s pronouncements outraged many Christians who saw him as reducing Christianity to mere deism, but his opposition to trinitarianism endeared him to many Unitarians, as did his conversion to Unitarianism of a Baptist missionary in India. One typically hopeful response to Roy appeared in the North American Review: “Ram Mohun Roy is not a christian, it is true, but the doctrine he inculcates differs very little from the christian doctrine respecting the nature and attributes of the Deity. It is the same in its spirit and objects. If he can introduce it among his countrymen, it will be a great step taken towards advancing the cause of christianity in the East.” Many Americans thus looked favorably upon the Neo-Hindu movement, but were disappointed that Roy and others were not interested in converting India to Christianity but rather in propagating a reformed Hinduism which would eschew questionable practices like the caste system and sati in favor of a simple monotheism grounded in the Upaniṣads. Americans of an ecumenical mindset continued to be intrigued with the Brahmā Samāj. 46)

People of all nations had a remarkable opportu-
nity to speak directly to the American public at the World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago during the World’s Fair of 1893. This event enabled representatives of all religious sects to state their beliefs and learn from others in an American forum whose goals were comparative, even syncretistic, and not missionary. Delegates representing South and East Asian religious groups thus had an almost unprecedented chance to explain their religious views to an American audience without the mediation of foreign translators or analysts. The proceedings, which were open to the public, received widespread publicity in the Chicago Tribune, with many features being reprinted in other major newspapers. On the eve of the Parliament’s opening, the Tribune triumphantly declared its purpose:

To unite all religion against all irreligion; to make the Golden Rule the basis of this union; to present to the world the substantial unity of many religions in the good deeds of the religious life in which their common aims and common grounds of union may be set forth and the marvelous religious progress of the nineteenth century be reviewed, their achievements presented and their work for the future considered.47)

Each group was assigned time during the seventeen days of the Parliament to state its views and concerns as it best saw fit. The only restrictions were that no aspersion could be cast on other groups or individuals. The American and European participants generally obeyed this injunction, with the exception of a few conservative Protestants like the Rev. Joseph Cook, who declared that Christianity was the only true religion and was roundly criticized by other delegates.48)

Delegates from the East, however, at times ventured to offer criticisms of their own, and those equally combative remarks were much better received by both the press and the other delegates. One of the most direct assaults was Swami Vivekānanda’s speech of the 19th of September. Mounting the stage in his “orange robe” and “customary smile,” Vivekānanda unleashed an unflinching attack on Christianity’s involvement in Western imperialism:

We who come from the East have sat here on the platform day after day and have been told in a patronizing way that we ought to accept Christianity because Christian nations are the most prosperous. We look about us and we see England, the most prosperous Christian nation in the world, with her foot on the neck of 250,000,000 of Asiatics. We look back into history and see that the prosperity of Christian Europe began with Spain. Spain’s prosperity began with the invasion of Mexico. Christianity wins its prosperity by cutting the throats of its fellow-men. At such a price the Hindoo will not have prosperity.

I have sat here today and I have heard the height of intolerance. I have heard the creed of the Moslem applauded, when today the Moslem sword is carrying destruction into India. Blood and the sword are not for the Hindu, whose religion is based on the law of love.49)

Vivekānanda had to wait for the applause to cease before he could go on to read his prepared speech. While this reaction may be attributed in part to the Swami’s dynamic personal presence, it also suggests the beginnings of change in the attitude of a nation which had also produced the likes of Samuel Nott, Jr. and a flourishing missionary movement. Richard Hughes Seager, in an insightful analysis of the Parliament, makes the point that there could be no sin-
gle, easily definable outcome of such a diverse group of participants, each with his or her own definition of what the Parliament was and how it could succeed. Still, Seager remarks that “the idea that deep-seated, long-standing distinctions such as Christian and heathen had become obsolete ... must be considered an important result of the Parliament” and goes on to conclude: “The syncretistic visions of the Chicago radicals, the increased popularity of the comparative study of religion, the piety of those people — many of them undoubtedly loyal Christians — who professed a sincere interest in Majumdar, Vivekananda, Dharmapala, and others, all acted as conduits for the infiltration of Asian ideas into the United States.”

Those who attended the Parliament or read the Tribune’s daily reports on the proceedings certainly got an introduction to new systems of thought thanks to the Asian delegates. They heard explanations of Hinduism by G. N. Chakravarti, P. C. Mozoomdar, and Vivekananda, Jainism by Virchand Gandhi, and Buddhism by Anagarika Dharmapala and a number of Japanese delegates. They were able to speak directly to an American audience — the halls were always packed — in a way that had never been available to them before. The Chicago Tribune commented on the crowd’s reaction:

The 4,000 people who have religiously attended at least two sessions daily have most of them for the first time in their lives been able to get a clear idea of Buddhism, Brahmanism, Confucianism, and the other great religions of the East, whose followers vastly outnumbers [sic] those of Christianity. The audiences have shown a willingness to applaud any speaker who spoke with sincerity and eloquence on any subject. They have been quick to recognize the underlying principles which are part alike of all the faiths to which any great number of men are attached.

This celebration of direct, inter-cultural religious dialogue in the American heartland is a notable counterpoint to the isolationism and imperialism that would characterize American foreign policy in the ensuing decades.

Thus, while the Parliament marked a new stage in the rise of a pluralistic religious vision in America, along with a counterbalancing decline in Christian triumphalism, it should not be viewed as a facile “meeting of East and West.” The representatives of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Asian religions did create a bridge to a receptive American public, but they were by no means able to provide an incontestable version of their respective traditions any more than earlier Western interpreters could. They were the educated few, liberal in outlook, and undoubtedly many of their more conservative co-religionists would not have endorsed the universalist spirit of the Parliament. Moreover, while the acceptance of the Asian delegates by the American public was striking, it was not entirely new; we have already seen an open-minded comparative approach four decades earlier in Lydia Maria Child. Conversely, this meeting on the verge of the twentieth century had no power to keep religious prejudice from following it into the new era. Modernist writers like Max Wylie often held as great an antipathy toward India as did early missionaries. These important qualifications aside, it seems no coincidence that in the years following the Parliament writers such as Mark Twain and Ellen Glasgow looked toward Indian religion in an attempt to solve metaphysical questions that Christianity could not answer to their satisfaction. As novelists, it is only natural that they would go on to create works of fiction expressive of their flirtations with Hinduism and Buddhism. While it was not a culmination of a steady move-
ment toward pluralism, the Parliament did indicate a significant broadening of America’s intellectual horizons.

VI . India Imagined: Emerson and Thoreau

The nineteenth-century American view of India both fed and was itself influenced by imaginative literature. While many authors are important in this regard, the two most influential figures are Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817 – 1862). Emerson and Thoreau had knowledge of and interest in Indian religion, and an abundance of studies assess its impact on them. All that is left in the present context is to relate them to the instances of cross-cultural encounter described above, and to assess their position in Dallmayr’s rubric.

Emerson’s ideas parallel many Hindu concepts. His notion of an “Over-Soul” as the source of both nature and the individual resembles the Upaniṣadic dictum that ātman and Brahman are ultimately the same. Emerson also accepts a notion of Nature as an emanation of the Over-Soul very similar to the ontology articulated in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad. Where Indian religions generally postulate the after-effect of actions, or karma, as the power which guides the unfolding of our everyday experience, Emerson’s likewise holds a theory of Compensation. Finally, his sense of illusion as the reason why most people do not perceive their unity with the Over-Soul corresponds with Hindu notions of māyā and avidya.

Parallels like these suggest that Indian religion played a significant but partial role in Emerson’s thinking. He had an acquaintance with primary texts of Hinduism, especially the Bhagavad- Gītā and the Viṣṇu Purāṇa. Studies like Francis’s use his familiarity in this area to suggest that Hindu and Buddhist thought inspired most of his ideas, but we should remember that Emerson was an insatiable reader who immersed himself in philosophic writings of his own and prior ages. Plotinus’s writings and Jakob Boehme’s Aurora, for instance, stand alongside Indian texts as possible influences on Emersonian concepts like the Over-Soul and nature as emanation. Still, Emerson did admire Indian formulations of the same ideas, as his poetry demonstrates. Poems like “Brahma,” “Hamatreya,” and “Maia,” as advocates of the “Indian” Emerson are quick to point out, all issue from his reading of Indian religious texts and are significant as philosophic poems which embrace the Indian-ness of the concepts they convey.

While critics have thus established Emerson’s knowledge of, interest in, and use of Hindu concepts in his thinking and writing, a more difficult question rarely addressed is how we should interpret the phenomenon of Emerson’s Orientalism. Schueller concludes that Emerson’s fascination with Hindu and other philosophies is harmful because his focus on ancient Indian ideas obscures the realities of Britain’s imperial presence in nineteenth-century India:

. . . we cannot ignore how Emerson’s construction of Asia ends up impoverishing the very subject it is intended to valorize. India / Asia is so completely identified with an East that signifies unity that it exists in a historical vacuum, far removed from the realities of colonialism that were preeminently determining its future in the mid-nineteenth century or from any sense of agency.

To Schueller, the imbalance of power between East and West renders any purely “philosophic” use of Indian thought suspect. Emerson’s emphasis on ideals certainly does lead him to ignore political realities. In “Nature,” for instance, he illustrates the “discord between man and nature”
by remarking that “you cannot freely admire a noble landscape if laborers are digging in the field hard by. The poet finds something ridiculous in his delight until he is out of the sight of men.”

Thus, Emerson prefers to look away from economic exploitation rather than endanger his assumed connection with Nature. In the case of India, his exploration of Hindu concepts overlooks the human realities of the society which produced them and, as Schueller claims, illuminates his complicity with contemporary Orientalism.

Although Emerson condones Western imperialism by disdaining to mention it, his fascination with ideals leads him to an implicit criticism of colonial projects of all sorts: some of his “Hindu” poetry challenges the materialism inherent in colonialism. In these works, Hindu thought is specifically applied as a corrective to the overly brash and ambitious attitudes of American subjects. Ironically, a society whose land is largely possessed by Westerners teaches the lesson of non-possession.

“Hamatreya” and its source in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa form a good case in point.

Emerson copied out a passage from Book 4, chapter 24 of this text into his journal, almost word for word. In this selection, Purāṇa narrates to Maitreya the “stanzas that were chanted by the Earth” regarding the folly of kings who think they can possess the land. In brief, the Earth asserts that would-be monarchs are misguided: “Earth laughs, as if smiling with autumnal flowers, to behold her kings unable to effect the subjugation of themselves. But what mighty matter is subjugation of the sea-girt earth to one who can subdue himself.” Foolish human beings fail to recognize the superior value of liberation from embodied existence as opposed to possessing some land for few short years. In “Hamatreya,” Emerson illustrates the same principle of the futility of any attempt to possess the earth but substitutes Concord farmers for Indian monarchs.

As in the source, the Earth is amused by her illusion of ownership:

- Earth laughs in flowers, to see her boastful boys
- Earth-proud, proud of the earth which is not theirs;
- Who steer the plow, but cannot steer their feet
- Clear of the grave.

An ensuing “Earth-song” reiterates the main point of the futility of possession, adding particulars of New England life, such as entailed estates, which direct the song more clearly at the local farmers. The poem could be read as an argument for imperialism “nobody can possess the land, so it does not matter that we take it from you” were it not that the speaker is chastened by the lesson he has received from the Earth:

When I heard the Earth-song
I was no longer brave;
My avarice cooled
Like lust in the chill of the grave.

This ending echoes the conclusion of the passage Emerson transcribed: “These were the verses, Maitreya, which Earth recited, and by listening to which ambition fades away like snow before the sun.”

Emerson’s adaptation of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa to a New England setting reveals no trace in the poem of the “exteriority” which characterizes the Orientalist mindset. Since he reveals his source only through his perhaps intentionally distorted reference to Maitreya in the title, he is obviously not interested in presenting Indian thought as a curiosity to be examined at a safe intellectual distance. Rather, Emerson’s application of a Hindu text in an explicitly New England context shows
how he views its teaching as a universal one that can be useful to Indian raja and New England farmer alike. The utility of Indian thought is not left abstract in the poem, since the concluding lines quoted above depict the speaker (by extension Emerson) as one who is changed by the wisdom of the Visnu Purana and since the reader is invited to change in a similar way. The disparities of political power between East and West are thus complicated by a moral relationship running in the opposite direction: a Western nation may rule India, but India sees the futility of all empires. Far from confirming the East’s subservient role in relation to the West, Emerson’s poem suggests that the American dream of an individualistic, agrarian paradise is superficial, since it is premised on the fallacy of the indestructibility of the individual.

While Emerson does not connect with a “true” Hinduism in “Hamatreya,” he constructs an Americanized version of Hindu teachings based on his internal response to certain realities in Indian texts, and not the measured judgments of Orientalism. This application of Indian thought is an instance of Dallmayr’s Cultural Borrowing, a process of “partial adaptation” in which “the respective cultures must face each other on a more nearly equal or roughly comparable basis.” The limits in of Emerson’s adaptation of Hinduism emerge from something he leaves out of “Hamatreya.” The original text he transcribed asserts that “Emancipation from existence is the fruit of self-control.” Emerson, however, shows no inclination for escaping from embodied existence or for pursuing an active course of self-control. He was willing to accept the wisdom of the Visnu Purana, but not the practical means offered by Hinduism to achieve the ultimate goal of release or mokṣa.

Emerson’s treatment of India is thus curiously mixed, and to look only at poems like “Hamatreya” or only at his avoidance of the details of imperialism does not tell the whole story. As Schueller points out, Emerson accepted prevailing notions about racial hierarchies and stereotypes of Asian fatalism. It is remarkable that, despite his adherence to these ideas, Emerson was willing to accept Hindu thought as valuable for himself and other Americans and to use the Visnu Purana to critique core attributes of American society.

The extent of Thoreau’s interest in Hinduism is much more apparent than Emerson’s, but their use of Hindu ideas is often similar. A quick glance at his major works—Walden and A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers—reveals multiple references to Hindu texts, particularly the Bhagavad-Gītā and the Laws of Manu. Thoreau appears to have first encountered these texts in the year 1840. Like Emerson, he felt that many Hindu principles were universal in application:

That title, “The Laws of Manu with the Gloss of Culluca,” comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the plains of Hindustan, and when my eye rests on yonder birches, or the sun in the water, or the shadows of the trees, it seems to signify the laws of them all. They are the laws of you and me, a fragrance wafted down from those old times, and no more to be refuted than the wind.

Thoreau’s assertion of the relevance of Hindu ideas to an American “you and me” in a specifically New England landscape shows an outlook similar to Emerson’s in “Hamatreya.”

The significant difference between Emerson and Thoreau in this context is that Thoreau felt truth was only meaningful insofar as it was applied in one’s daily life, whereas Emerson was disinclined to forsake the comfort of his Concord circle. Accordingly, Emerson’s writings tend toward the
abstract while Thoreau’s are based on his experiences. Walden is the most famous product of this tendency, but activity in the physical world, whether it be growing beans near his Walden cabin, climbing mount Katahdin, or carefully observing natural phenomena, forms the basis of much of his journals and published writings. It is therefore no surprise that a passage often considered central to Walden depicts art as an ascetic discipline. The “artist in the city of Kouroo” overcomes Time and becomes a creator, not through abstract knowledge of perfection, but through his perfect labor to create a staff. Significantly, Thoreau sets this story in a Hindu context: Brahma sleeps and wakes many times before the artist finishes his labor, and Thoreau states that the time required for the artist’s endless labor was “an illusion, and that no more time had elapsed than is required for a single scintillation from the brain of Brahma to fall on and inflame the tinder of a mortal brain.”  

Thoreau thus accepts Indian notions of ascetic discipline and views the experiences of his life in such a light. It is for these reasons that he is willing to apply the term “yogi” to himself: “to some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogi.” Thoreau did not practice Yoga in a formal sense, but he at times depicts himself as a contemplative:

Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller’s wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works.

The setting of his meditation in the morning is significant, as Thoreau elsewhere remarks that “the Vedas say, ‘All intelligences awake with the morning,’” and concludes his book with the famous line, “There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.” Thoreau thus depicts himself as a meditator undergoing a spiritual awakening which parallels the physical dawn and explicitly connects his experience with the Hindu tradition. The persona in Walden may be a carefully constructed figure, but this in no way under-mines the significance of Thoreau’s willingness to present himself as a “yogi.” In doing so, he shows a more thoroughgoing receptiveness to Indian thought than we see in Emerson.

Like Emerson, Thoreau asserts that some Indian ideas are actually universal, but his greater emphasis on Indian texts and thoughts indicate his sense that they are the best available expressions of those truths. Referring to the , he remarks that “while the commentators and translators are disputing about the meaning of this word or that, I hear only the resounding of the ancient sea and put into it all the meaning I am possessed of, the deepest murmurs I can recall, for I do not the least care where I get my ideas, or what suggests them.” While he thus diminishes the importance of the Indian origin of that text in his journal, his published works abound with direct references to other Hindu writings. As Hodder comments, “Thoreau the yogin ... cannot be dismissed simply as adventitious or rhetorical play-acting.” Hodder concludes that Thoreau used Hindu references as a means of expressing his own experi-
ences of ecstasy. Given the heavily didactic tone of Walden and most of his other writing, however, an equally plausible (and by no means contradictory) conclusion is that he felt Americans could benefit from the teachings of Indian religious scriptures.

Thus, both Thoreau and Emerson accept various reductive views of the East in general and India in particular that were commonly held in their day, but their significance lies in the areas where they varied from Orientalist discourse by embracing Hindu ideas. Though they do not attribute exclusive authority to these texts, they employ them to communicate what they felt were valuable lessons to the American public. While they accept common oversimplifications of the “spiritual” and “passive” East and do not actively oppose the project of Western imperialism in India, their location of Hindu concepts critiquing ambition and materialism in an American context undercuts the motives of imperialism. Their representations of Indian religion necessarily distort and reduce the overwhelming diversity found in the Indian tradition. They thus construct an India which reaches across the ocean to remind Americans that the greatest destiny is found within the individual, not in physical conquest or economic success.

VII. Looking Forward

The many texts, authors, and speakers discussed above reveal the great diversity of American approaches to Indian religion during the nineteenth century. Dallmayr’s mode of “conversion” naturally appears in missionary writings, but those texts themselves vary greatly in their attitude toward Indian people and religion. Some, like Nott’s, verge on a rhetoric of “conquest,” with ideological aims substituted for or appended to imperialistic ones. Others, exemplified by American Missionary, more sympathetically explore the shared human nature prerequisite to any meaningful attempt at “conversion.” Child stands apart from missionary-minded Christians: she recognizes the religions of India as meaningful to those who adhere to them, although she does not condone all of their tenets and practices. Further, her desire for personal dialogue and her application of the same standards to both Indian religion and Christianity bespeak her capacity for “dialogic engagement.” We thus find religious writing encompassing almost the whole of Dallmayr’s spectrum. A similar diversity exists in the literary sphere. While we could identify many instances of the externalized depictions of a corrupt or nonsensical Orient, writers appear to be relatively open to finding personal significance in the religious formulations of other cultures. Emerson and Thoreau exemplify this tendency of the poet to include culturally “other” phenomena within the imaginatively expanded boundaries of his or her personality.

The wide range of approaches reveals a many-sided discussion about India and Indian religion in the decades leading up to America’s political experiments with imperialism and literary experiments with modernism. In the post-Said era we might easily assume that the nineteenth century reflects an unwavering Orientalism, but upon close inspection it becomes startlingly varied. It is therefore facile to generalize any one group of writers, whether transcendentalists or missionaries, as uniformly aligned with the workings of Orientalist discourse. All may have been influenced by Orientalism, but at times they vary from it by acknowledging the humanity of Indian people or the intrinsic worth of Indian texts. Adding to the confusion of different voices was the equally multiple one of India itself, most loudly heard at the 1893 Parliament of Religions in different expres-
sions of Brahmanical, Neo-Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious views. Significantly, the Asian participants’ condemnation of Western imperialism was effusively embraced by their American audience. Out of all the confusion emerged not only the Orientalism critiqued by Said, but many more writers and thinkers who complicate the American approach to Indian religion in the new century to come.

3) Said 290.
4) In terms of Indian influence on American literature, some studies already exist, including many analyses of individual authors. Among works that take a more comprehensive approach is Beongcheon Yu’s The Great Circle: American Writers and the Orient (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1983). Yu, however, does not engage with Said’s notion of Orientalism. A more recent effort is Malini Johar Schueller’s U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature 1790 – 1890 (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998). While her study helpfully demonstrates unique features of American Orientalism, Schueller follows Said in emphasizing power differentials and thus does not address exceptions or cross-currents in Orientalist discourse.
6) Dallmayr 13 – 14; 10.
9) Nott 18.
10) Nott 15.
12) Nott 22.
13) Nott 19.
14) Nott 27.
15) Nott 34.
17) “Remarkable Case of Hindoo Superstition,” American Missionary 1.7 (May 1847) : 54.
21) “Caste,” American Missionary 5.6 (April 1851): 45.
23) “India Missions and War,” American Missionary (Magazine) 1.10 (October 1857): 225.
24) “India Missions and War,” 226.
25) “India Missions and War,” 226.
26) For an expression of that view by a missionary born in India, see Dennis Osborne, India and Its Millions (Philadelphia: Grant & Faires, 1884) 27 – 29.
86; “Begging to Give to an Idol,” American Missionary (Magazine) 4.10 (October 1860): 235.

29) Dallmayr 21.


31) Child 1: viii.

32) Child 1: xi.

33) Child 1: 3.

34) For a brief introduction to the Arthaśāstra, see Wolpert 57–61. On the pugnacious Marathas see Wolpert 159–60.


36) Dallmayr 31.

37) Child 3: 424

38) Dallmayr 32.


40) Rayapati 116.


Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott (New York: Columbia UP, 1932). These are only a few of the most substantial and significant works in a large body of criticism.

55) For an explanation of the Hindu view of the world as Prakṛti see Hopkins 66:67.

56) Robert D. Richardson Jr., Emerson: The Mind on Fire (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995) 204:5; 348. Richardson uses Emerson’s reading as his main interpretive guide in this fascinating biography.

57) Schueller 172.


59) The title seems to be a corruption or modification of the name Maitreya from the Hindu source.


62) Vishnu Purāṇa 392.

63) Dallmayr 18.

64) Vishnu Purāṇa 392.

65) Hodder, “Ex Oriente Lux” 409.


68) Thoreau, Correspondence 251.

69) Thoreau 411.

70) Thoreau 393; 587.

71) Thoreau, Journal 8:135. Emphasis Thoreau’s

72) Hodder, “Ex Oriente Lux” 413.