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Mission, A Cultural Confrontation: Swami Vivekananda and The American Missionary Movement*

The divergent scales of values scream in discordance
They dazzle and daze us
And so that it might not be painful
We steer clear of all other values
And we confidently judge the whole world
According to our own home values

—*Alexander Solzhenitsyn*

In 1893 there occurred a unique event in the history of organized religion. Commemorating the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America, the World-Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago to display the achievements of Western civilization. Since "faith in a Divine Power . . . has been, like the sun, a life-giving and fructifying potency in man's . . . development,[1]" one of the twenty congresses was devoted to religion. When the Parliament convened on September 11, 1893, among the Oriental delegates on the platform were: Proptop Chandra Mazoomdar of Calcutta and B.B. Nagarkar of Bombay, both representing the Brahmo Samaj; Dharmapala of the Ceylon Buddhists; Virchand Gandhi for the Jains; and Chakravarti and Annie Besant of the Theosophical Society. Seated with this illustrious group was a young Hindu, Swami Vivekananda, who "represented no particular sect, but the Universal Religion of the Vedas."[2]

This unknown Swami became one of the most popular speakers at the Parliament. "Sisters and Brothers of America," Vivekananda's

* The author wishes to thank the members and officers of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in the Park, Calcutta, who heard and commented on an early lecture version of this research.

1. Rev. J. H. Barrows, (ed.), *The World's Parliament of Religions* (Chicago: Parliament Pub. Co., 1893), I, 3.
2. Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda, A Biography* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1953), p. 61.

opening words to the convention, were greeted with thunderous applause from the seven thousand people present. In the following days, his popularity was used as a drawing card to spellbind audiences after "long, dry, prosy papers by Christians."[3] Following the conference, Vivekananda made a successful and well-attended lecture tour of the United States which received sympathetic, even generous, news coverage. Much of the press commentary focused on the contrast between existing public impressions of Hinduism and the favourable image of the religion resulting from presentations by Vivekananda.

The largest group directly affected by the enthusiastic response to the Swami's travels was the missionaries and mission supporters. At that time, they were the main people actually involved in India – with spiritual and material investment. Since they were the major source of the public's knowledge of India, it was the validity of their descriptions that Vivekananda challenged. Moreover, the involvement and response of this group was not limited to an isolated minority within American society. A study of attitudes towards proselytizing in the Orient concludes that in the United States in the 19th century "foreign missions were not the venture of a few leaders and devout followers, but generally influenced church people, and through them the national religious interests and attitudes."[4]

On the one hand, Vivekananda and the Hindu perspective he advanced and, on the other, the American missionaries in India and their U.S. supporters both epitomize the trends toward innovation and the forces sustaining tradition within their respective societies. The following essay examines how the historical context of each group shaped the content of their philosophical beliefs and determined the arguments they would exchange in their cultural confrontation.[5]

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3. M. L. Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1958), pp. 56, 58.

4. J. S. Udy, "Attitudes within the Protestant Churches of the Occident Toward the Propagation of Christianity in the Orient." (Ph. D. diss., Boston Univ., 1952).

5. The following types of primary sources have been used to trace this controversy: magazines and newspapers published by and for the mission movement; accounts of missionaries; books printed and circulated in the mission fields themselves; the reports of missionary boards and the minutes of conferences on the subject of missionary endeavours.

The context of confrontation: Historical events and intellectual currents affecting the response of Vivekananda and the Missionary movement

When Swami Vivekananda arrived in the United States, he was thirty years old, and relatively unknown even in India.[6] Born Narendranath Datta, he was the son of an attorney in the High Court of Calcutta. Various biographies of Vivekananda do not agree as to the details of his early life; however, it appears that he first attended the Presidency College at Calcutta, a government institution. A year later, he joined the General Assembly's Institution founded by the Scottish General Missionary Board. His interest in religion led him to become a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Upon the death of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, the favoured student, helped to found a monastery for the master's disciples, then spent several years as a wandering *sannyāsi*. It is not clear whether Vivekananda ceased this life expressly to visit America; but funds were raised for this purpose in Madras and Hyderabad, and he enjoyed the support of the Maharaja of Khetri.

Following the parliament and a lecture tour throughout the Midwest, the Hindu taught followers in New York. After a three-months absence in England, he returned to the United States, where he established the Vedanta Society of New York (February 1896) before departing for India in April. On a second visit to the United States (August 1899-July 1900), he founded the Vedanta Society of Los Angeles and the Vedanta Society of San Francisco. He died in India in 1902.

The overt motive for Vivekananda's visit to America was to collect funds for India and "to combat the slander against her".[7] Indeed, his journey has been described as "a counter-offensive" to "defend his native land from ruthless foreign invasion,"[8] His question "[s]hall we

6. For details on Vivekananda's life, see His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1955); W. Thomas, *Hinduism Invades America* (New York: Beacon Press, 1930); Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography*, op. cit.; Burke, op. cit.; R. C. Majumdar, *Swami Vivekananda: A Historical Review* (Calcutta: General Printers and Publishers, 1965); and H. W. French, *The Swan's Wide Waters: Ramakrishna and Western Culture* (Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974).
7. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 337. See also p. 330.
8. Thomas, p. 72.

stand by while alien hands attempt to destroy the fortress of the Ancient Faith?"[9] indicates his concern that Hinduism threatened by an aggressive Christian missionary movement which sought to take advantage of this time of general religious revival and unrest.

A more subtle but no less direct threat was posed by the mission schools which by 1890 were teaching over 2,50,000 Indian children.[10] Vivekananda stressed the need of his people for education, but noted while visiting a village that although most of the Christians were literate, the Hindus were largely uneducated.[11] The Foreign Missions Conference, representing nineteen different missionary organizations, itself agreed that these educational efforts were subsidiary to the prime purpose of conversion.[12] The *Missionary Herald* told of missionaries requiring a village to let them enter its temples and smash its idols before a teacher would be sent to the village.[13]

Such emphasis on Christian conversion throughout India could not help but affront Vivekananda's faith and strong sense of patriotism. Because of his experiences, he believed he was no longer merely an individual, but rather "a condensed India,"[14] and undertook what he characterized as "My Mission to the West,"[15] directly confronting the missionaries to the East, whose movement could well be considered a condensation of current American ideas.

In the 1890's, the foreign missionary movement in the United States was strong in purpose and broad in range. From the early nineteenth century, a characteristic of American Christianity was the "benevolent empire" in which individual co-operated in voluntary associations for educational, missionary, and reforming activities.

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9. Virajananda, *Life of Swami Vivekananda,* Vol. II, pp. 241-42. Cited in Thomas, p. 72.
10. Rev. E. E. Jeffrey, "Utility of Mission Schools in India," *Missionary Herald,* XCI (November 1893), p. 480.
11. Vivekananda, *Swami Vivekananda on Himself* (Calcutta: Swami Vivekananda Centenary, n. d.), p. 122.
12. Stated in a report by Rev. N. G. Clark on "The Foreign Mission Conference in New York," *Missionary Herald,* LXXXIX (March 1893) p. 101.
13. "Smashing an Idol, "*Missionary Herald,* LXXXIX (August 1893), pp.332-33
14. G. S. Banhatti, *The Quintessence of Vivekananda* (Nagpur and Poona: Suvichar Prakashan Mandal, 1963), p. 30.
15. Title of the lecture given by Vivekananda in Hyderabad prior to his departure. Nikhilananda *op. cit.,* p. 54.

These voluntary agencies drew much of their support from another related feature of nineteenth century religion, revivalism. This dynamic interaction was particularly significant in the decade of the nineties, which experienced a religious revival of immense proportions. Much of the resulting religious energy in the voluntary associations was channelled into evangelical activities abroad. Merle Curti, in his history of American philanthropy abroad, identifies the "evangelical missionary movement" as the major impulse in foreign benevolence in the nineteenth century. He states that this movement was "the only cause to inspire constant, sustained giving for a single purpose and to become world-wide in scope before the end of the century".[16]

India was one of the major areas of attention for this missionary movement. American evangelical activities in India date from 1813, when the first missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (A.B.C.F.M.) obtained permission to maintain a residence in Bombay. During the next decades they were joined by the (Dutch) Reformed, the Presbyterians, the Baptists, the Methodist-Episcopals, the Lutherans, and several later, smaller denominations.[17] By 1893, the extent of U.S. religious involvement in India is evident in the following statistics :[18]

[Missionary] Societies in the field	39
Stations and out-stations	4,223
Ordained missionaries	816
Lay missionaries	69
Wives of missionaries	460
Other women missionaries	243
Communications	2,22,283

On the home front, the mission movement enlisted the support of many sections of the society. There were mission periodicals especially for women (e. g. *Woman's Missionary Friend, Woman's Work for Woman,* and *Helping Hand*) ; for children (e. g., *King's Messengers* and *Children's Missionary Friend*) ; and for foreign language constituents

16. M. Curti, *American Philanthropy Abroad : A History* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1963), p. 138.

17. For the histories of these denominations in India, see K. S. Latourette, *The Great Century in Northern Africa and Asia,* Vol. VI of *The Expansion of Christianity* (New York : Harper and Brothers, 1944).

18. "Work in the Mission Fields," *Missionary Reporter,* XIII (February 1893), p. 226.

(e. g., *Fraven Missions Freund*). A special effort was made by the larger mission magazines to encourage businessmen's participation in the cause. Leading executives and financiers were quoted in favourable testimonies on missions,[19] and the "Reflections of a Business Man" invited personal financial support of individual missionaries : "If I cannot *go*, I can send . . ."[20]

Despite the increasing range of missionary activities, and the extent of the grass roots' organizations dedicated to the support of these efforts, certain factors made the missionary supporters particularly sensitive to censure at the time of Vivekananda's visit. Firstly, the mission boards were experiencing considerable financial trouble in the decade of the nineties. One of the distinctive aspects of the American evangelical movement was its reliance on voluntary giving, much greater than was common in countries with state churches.[21] Such fund raising was through various auxiliaries and through the information medium of a periodical supported by the Central Board. Through most of the century the assets available for missionary endeavour abroad increased with the growing population and economy of the United States.[22]

However, because the missionary movement relied on voluntary gifts, it was vulnerable to sudden fluctuations in the economy. Such a rapid economic change occurred in the 1890s, which included one of the most severe depressions in American history (1893). The record of the American Board indicates the trend : [23]

Receipts in 1890	$ 762,000
,, 1891	824,000
,, 1892	840,000
,, 1893	679,000

For the remainder of the decade, the figure did not again reach even $7,50,000. As William Strong narrates in his history of the

19. "What a Businessman saw in Madura, India," *Missionary Herald*, LXXXIX (April 1893), pp. 140-41.
20. By a Church Member, "Reflections of a Businessman," *Missionary Herald*, LXXXIX (March 1893), pp. 98-99.
21. Curti, *op. cit.*, p. 143.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
23. W. E. Strong, *The Story of the American Board* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1910), p. 483.

A.B.C.F.M., "The burden of debt was either pressing or threatening through all this decade."[24]

Because of the adverse financial circumstances of the nineties, it would not be fair to conclude that Vivekananda was the cause of declining mission contributions, as is implied, for example, by Marie Louise Burke, Vivekananda's biographer. The situation existed before the convening of the Parliament but, obviously, because this problem did exist, the mission supporters feared anything which could have further hindered their programme.

Secondly, the 1890s also witnessed the spreading influence of the "social gospel" and the concomitant conflict between "Fundamentalists" and "Modernists." The Fundamentalists tended to assume the easy course regarding social responsibility and concentrated on an obvious social ill, such as intemperance. However, as historian Henry Steele Commager explains, the "champions of socialized Christianity" went much further and raised questions about the "ultimate responsibility" for society's problems. Their examination of the labour question, predatory wealth, slums, and such related issues brought them "inevitably in conflict with the rich, who built the churches, . . . and subsidized missionary activities overseas." [25]

Thus, this situation potentially endangered the foreign missionary movement (1) by possibly antagonizing the wealthy who provided funds, and (2) by emphasizing American needs to the detriment of any concerns outside the country. Having experienced a wave of anti-missionism in the 1830s, the Midwest, scene of both the Parliament and the Swami's lecture tour, may have been especially receptive to this sort of criticism.

These two factors, financial difficulties and the increasing strain between the differing programmes of the Fundamentalists and Modernists, served to reinforce, consciously or unconsciously, the reaction which Vivekananda aroused from the advocates of foreign missions. These supporters responded in a manner in accord with the attitudes and means which they utilized to gain a following for missions.

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24. *Ibid.*

25. H. S. Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880's* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 170-71.

For instance, the large, widely-distributed magazines supported by the Boards of more liberal denominations, such as the Congregationalist or Episcopal, were usually reasonable and cosmopolitan in approach to their subject-matter.[26] Although not by any means totally free of religious bias, the "information articles" in these magazines tended to combine mission stories with facts, rather than attempt a fictionalized account. Also, their base of appeal was not as narrow as other magazines existing to propound one cause, as for example, the support of the salvation of heathen women. Such magazines would have to fight for their existence if that central cause were assailed. Consequently, these larger magazines were usually not strongly antagonistic to Vivekananda.

This pattern of response can be traced through the *Missionary Herald*. In the months following the Parliament there was no direct mention of Vivekananda and his criticisms. But there was an increasing discussion of the importance and value of medical and educational missions, an increase perhaps designed to emphasize the practical value of mission work in the face of a questioning of the validity of the proselytizing motive.[27] Also in the following year, 1894, for the first time, an aspect of Indian cultural life was presented in a completely laudatory article, when David S. Herrick discussed the projected translations of the hymns of the Tamil poet Mānikavācager. Herrick averred that missionaries would now be able to familiarize themselves "with the best thought of the people among whom they labour, and with the legends which to the Tamil people are as sacred and beautiful as are the Bible stories to us."[28] This was a new tone indeed.

However, such adjustments in approach did not mean that the *Herald* and its readers believed Vivekananda was correct in his charges.

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26. See for example, *World-Wide Missions* (Methodist-Episcopal, with a circulation of 1,00,000) and *Missionary Herald* (Congregationalist, with a circulation of 25,000).

27. See for example, A. Abbot, "The Need of Educational Work in India," *Missionary Herald*, XC (October 1894), pp. 416-18; Rev. R. A. Hume, "Some schools in Ahmednagar, India," *Missionary Herald*, XC (April 1894), pp. 176-80; Rev. E. Chester, "Medical Work in the Madura Mission," *Missionary Herald*, XCI (January 1895), pp. 15-17.

28. D. S. Herrick, "A Translation of Hymns from the Tamil," *Missionary Herald*, XC (September 1894), pp. 376-78.

Whenever the opportunity allowed, the *Herald* did not hesitate to send brief volleys in Swami Vivekananda's direction, especially if such bursts appeared at first glance to have their origin in India itself. For instance, the September 1894 *Missionary Herald* reported the public response in India to the publication of the correspondence between "the Hindu monk, Vivekananda" and the Rev. Robert Hume, a missionary of Ahmednagar. As the *Herald* presented it, the *"common criticism"* of the Swami's account is "that Hindus know nothing of the kind of Hinduism which he represented as orthodox Hinduism; and that he was most unfair in his description of missionaries. Some blame him for going out of his way to attack missionaries at all."[29]

However, among mission supporters, magazines such as the *Missionary Herald* represent the most liberal end of a broad range of attitudes and styles of appeal. At the opposite extreme are the smaller publications of the women's organizations of the Southern and Midwestern Fundamentalist groups.

The women's auxiliaries of the various mission Boards were crucial in determining the success or failure of the group in obtaining widespread moral and financial support. The women's branches also often organized children's mission bands with such "suggestive names" as "Busy Bees," "No Surrender Band," "Soldiers of Jesus," and "The Praire Chickens."[30] The main medium of contact within the auxiliary was the denominational mission magazine for women. Such journals preferred an anecdotal and emotional approach, relying heavily on sentimental, fictionalized stories depicting the plight of women in heathen lands.[31] Some of the magazines offered programmes for presentation by different age groups. These usually dealt with a mission area, beginning with facts, e.g., geography, climate, and then adding a biased interpretation of the society or religion.[32]

Vivekananda's appearance at the Parliament and his lecture tour cut badly into this base of support. By giving a more acceptable ex-

29. "Editorial Paragraph," *Missionary Herald,* XC (September 1894), p. 360. Emphasis added.
30. Mrs. W. F. Brunner, "A Royal Motherhood and a Loyal Sisterhood," *Mission Studies,* XII (January 1894), p. 2.
31. See for example, "Rani 'The Queen'," *Missionary Reporter,* XII (March 1892), pp. 282-83; "Four Little Widows," *Missionary Reporter,* XIII (June 1893), pp. 366-68.
32. See the format of *Mission Studies.*

planation of the status of women in India, and by refuting the most extreme of the tales about his country, Vivekananda obviously struck at the very purpose of the organizations — the "salvation of heathen women." The women's missions publications sought to counter Vivekananda in a manner in keeping with the style of their appeal. They did not attempt any Biblical or philosophical offence. More simplistic, they restated their case more emphatically, with the same plight of child-widow, temple prostitute, etc.[33] In addition, they sought to strengthen their argument by pointing out how various exhibits at the World's Fair revealed a contrast between the women in heathen and Christian lands.[34]

Thus, the different elements of the foreign missions group saw in Vivekananda the potential to weaken their movement and sought to counteract his influence by using methods in keeping with their style of appeal for support.

Conflict of beliefs

As the product of two different cultures, Vivekananda and the missionary movement saw in each other's philosophy a challenge to the existence and integrity of their respective systems. In their confrontation, the missionaries and Vivekananda were both compelled to speak *past* each other to address the audience that was the base of their support — the missions speaking to their contributors reading their periodicals in towns across America and Vivekananda to his followers at home in India. This concern with their audience and the background of the historical and intellectual events discussed earlier determined what beliefs would be most significant in their interaction.

These points of dispute and their relationship to each other have been identified for this essay by preparing a content analysis of Vivekananda's statements using (a) his lectures in the United States in *The Complete Works,* Vol. I; (b) his *Letters;* and (c) *Swami Vivekananda on Himself.*[35] The themes in these works were then tested on a page-by-

33. "Women Under the Ethnic Religions," *Mission Studies,* XI (November 1893), pp. 212-15. See same subject in *Mission Studies,* XII (January 1894), p. 12.

34. Mrs. S. E. Hurlbut, "Contrast between Heathen and Christian Lands as illustrated by the Columbian Exposition" *Mission Studies,* XII (September 1894), p. 181.

35. Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,* Vol. I (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1957); *Letters of Vivekananda* (Almora: Advaita Ashrama, 1944; *Swami Vivekananda on Himself, op. cit.*

page examination of American missionary magazines for the years 1891-1899.[36] By extending the time period before and after Vivekananda's visit, it is possible to see (1) on what thesis the missionaries based their appeals for support; (2) which of the Swami's beliefs they most sought to dispute; and (3) whether any changes were made in the missionaries' arguments after the Indian's visit. In this manner, it was possible to reveal the following four pivotal points of conflict between the two philosophies :

I. **No one religion is superior.** It is significant that Swami Vivekananda began his first address to the World's Parliament of Religions with "Sisters and Brothers of America" and chose as his theme tolerance, for he believed that all religions were but different paths to the same God.[37] Although this belief was taught by his teacher Ramakrishna (who claimed to have achieved salvation through Hinduism, Christianity and Islam in succession in order to realize that "every religion is a path to salvation"),[38] Vivekananda claimed tolerance as a tenet of Hinduism in general :

> I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true.[39]

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36. The majority of the articles are drawn from the following magazines, which represent different denominations geographical areas, and size of publication: *Mission Studies:* Congregationalist; monthly, circulation 10,500; distributed generally; established 1883.

    The Missionary Herald: Congregationalist; monthly, circulation 25,000; distributed worldwide; established 1810.
    The Missionary Reporter: Methodist - Episcopal Church, South; monthly, circulation 6,000; distributed in the South; established 1889.
    The Missionary Review of the World: Undenominational; monthly, circulation 10,000; distributed generally; established 1878. Published by the Funk and Wagnalls Co. New York, New York.
    The Women's Missionary Advocate: Methodist-Episcopal Church, South; monthly, circulation 13,500; distributed in the South, established 1880.
    Circulation data is from G. Batten, *Directory of the Religious Press of the United States* (New York : George Batten, 1892).

37. Vivekananda, *Complete Works, op. cit.*, pp. 3, 4.

38. Majumdar, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

39. Vivekananda, *Complete Works, op. cit.*, p. 3.

Thus, all nations know God, since "... all religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp, and realize the infinite, each determined by the condition of its birth and association." The same God was worshipped by all, and the apparently conflicting doctrines were but the result of "the same truth adapting itself to the varying circumstances of different nations."[40] The only error, the only intolerable, was intolerance itself.[41] Vivekananda condemned the "horrible demons" of sectarianism, bigotry and fanaticism, and pitied those who dreamed of the exclusive survival of their own religion and the destruction of all others.[42]

Clearly, such teachings were not popular with the more orthodox Christian leaders, who had opposed the idea of the Parliament largely because of their opposition to any indication of religious equality. The reasons for their objections were threefold. Firstly, they claimed that "[t]here is but one religion worthy of the name." Characteristic of this view was the Archbishop of Canterbury's refusal to attend :

> [T]he Christian religion is the one religion. I do not understand how that religion can be regarded as a member of a Parliament of Religions without assuming the equality of the other intended members and the parity of their position and claims.[43]

The "false 'religions' "[44] had nothing in common with Christianity but were rather its direct antithesis. This argument was best articulated by Arthur Pierson, editor of the *Missionary Review of the World*, who believed "charity" did not mean "toleration of error." Pierson had his own term for the idea, espoused by the more liberal clergy, that there was a basic truth present in all faiths. He called this belief "confusionism."[45]

Secondly, this group of orthodox spokesmen for Christianity contended that an examination of these other systems, on a practical

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
41. Burke, op. cit., p. 126, citing a report of one of the Swami's lectures in the *Des Moines News*, November 28, 1893.
42. Vivekananda, *Complete Works, op. cit.*, pp. 4, 24.
43. A. D. Pierson, "The Columbian Exposition At Chicago," *The Missionary Review of the World*, n. s. VII (January 1894), p. 6.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
45. *Ibid.*

rather than a theoretical level, proved their inferiority. They were frustrated that the Parliament offered no opportunity to refute "the choice expressions which can be culled from their sacred writings" with descriptions of the religion as actually practised :[46]

> Take, for instance, Hinduism. . . That horrible inequity – caste—is not an excresence upon Hinduism, but of its very substance. What Sir Monier Williams . . . has said about Brahmanism is equally true of other ethnic faiths. 'The characteristics of Brahmanism, 'he affirms,' are poverty, ignorance, and superstition. Whatever profound thought lay about the roots of Hinduism, it held and still holds the 28,00,00,000 of India in the bondage of degradation, cruelty and immorality.'[47]

The third objection to the Universalism of Vivekananda was more immediate and practical. If accepted, it would refute the very basis of the missionary movement; if all religions were valid, it would be presumptious and insulting to assume that the Christian path was the best, indeed the only way. This idea had been seized upon by the advocates of home missions and by opponents of missionism in general to show the uselessness of the overseas effort. The *Missionary Herald* said some visitors to the Parliament were so impressed by the statements of spokesmen for the ethnic religions that they considered it ". . . quite unnecessary for Christians to trouble themselves about converting people so amiable and so religious . . . . [They ask w]hen there is so much to do at home why send to Hindus and Buddhists our Christian religion ?"[48] In an article entitled "Hindrances to Missions Found in the Working Force," the *Woman's Missionary Advocate* detected "a spirit of indifferentism" and apathy toward missionary endeavours, the result of the idea that Hinduism and Christianity were merely different forms of one great universal religion.[49]

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46. "Judging by Their Fruits," *Missionary Herald* LXXXIX (December 1893), p. 515.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 516-17.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 515.
49. "Hindrances to Missions Found in the Working Force," *Woman's Missionary Advocate* XV (November 1894), p. 149.

2. Christianity suffers from hypocrisy, sending missionaries to preach an ideology it does not itself practice

Another of Vivekananda's themes was that the West was in no position to attempt to convert other cultures to its religion until it lived up to Christ's precepts.[50] "You are not Christians. No, as a nation you are not," he said.[51] He cited slums, crime and moral degeneracy as examples of social problems close to home, and criticized the missions for a lack of Christian charity.[52] Vivekananda charged that the Christian nations had filled the world with bloodshed, violence and murder; brought drunkenness and disease to his country; and then added insult to injury by preaching Christianity.[53] But the excesses of the Hindus ". . . were always for punishing their own bodies, and never for cutting the throat of their neighbours. If the Hindu fanatic burns himself on the pyre, he never lights the fire of the Inquisition."[54] Furthermore, the Hindus worshipped God for love's sake, not for what He would give them, unlike the Christians with their begging "shopkeeping religion."[55]

Regarding his claim that Christianity did not practise what it sought to preach in the East, Vivekananda met with vigorous criticism. The greatest hypocrite was said to be the Swami himself; the missionaries claimed that the idealized Hinduism he presented bore little resemblance to the actual practices in India. The Rev. W. R. Boggs, a missionary of fifteen years' experience, claimed the Parliament had been shown:

> . . . an ideal heathen religion that never existed. There ought to have been a fuller exhibition of Hinduism at Chicago. There should have been a Temple of Kali, with a statue of the goddess adorned with a necklace of skulls. There should have been an idol car such as exists in every village of Burma, covered with obscence figures. There should have been 'holy men,' unwashed, filthy, almost naked, and grossly immoral. There should have been dancing

50. Banhatti, *op. cit.*, p. 219
51. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *op. cit.*, p. 318.
52. Burke, op. cit., p. 123, citing an account of one of his lectures in the *Minneapolis Journal*, November 27, 1893.
53. *Detroit Free Press*, March 9, 1894, as cited in Burke, p. 289.
54. Vivekananda, *Complete Works, op. cit.*, p. 18.
55. *Minneapolis Journal*, December 27, 1893, cited in Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 122-23.

girls, by caste and profession and practice prostitutes. These are parts of Hinduism.[56]

In answer to Vivekananda's belief that his religion taught the world tolerance, the *Missionary Herald* noted a decision of the High Court of Mysore, which held that according to Hindu law, a parent loses all rights to the custody of his children on becoming a Christian.[57] The persecution of the small Indian Christian community that traced its origins back to St. Thomas the Apostle was also described.[58]

An able, intelligent and perceptive champion of the missionary position was Rev. Robert A. Hume, who was born in India and spend most of his life there. In an address before the Parliament of Religions he stated that the violence and bloodshed which the Hindu's complained about was not the product of Christianity, but rather of its lack.[59]

3. The men who are deployed to evangelize are inadequate in their understanding of other nations and religions.

An editorial in the *New York Herald* stated that after hearing Vivekananda at the Parliament "we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation."[60] However, the Swami conceded that India needed help for her people and would welcome true followers of Christ. His professed quarrel was with the calibre of the workers sent on this mission :

> The most of the men whom you send us are incompetent. I have never known of a single man who has studied Sanskrit before going to India and yet all our books and literature are printed in it.[61]

Some felt that better education for native, as well as American preachers, would meet the Swami's challenge.[62] When Hume, a liberal,

56. A. D. Pierson, "The Parliament of Religions: A Review," *The Missionary Review of the World,* n. s. VII (December 1894), p. 886.
57. "Editorial Paragraphs," *Missionary Herald,* XCI (June 1895), p. 221.
58. "Earlier Christian Church in India" *Methodist Review,* LXXVI (May-June 1895), p. 441.
59. R. A. Hume, "The Contact of Christian and Hindu Thought : Points of Likeness and of Contrast," *Missionary Herald,* LXXXIX (December 1893), p. 519.
60. Nikhilananda, *op. cit.,* p. 64.
61. *Detroit Tribune,* March 9, 1894, cited in Burke, *op. cit,* p. 288.
62. See *The Second Conference of the Officers and Representatives of Foreign Mission Boards and Societies in the United States and Canada; January 17, 1894* (New York: E. O. Jenkins' Sons, 1894).

humanitarian, and educated missionary, wrote to Vivekananda to challenge his picture of the mission workers in India, the Swami did not bother to defend his statements. Hume stated that the missionaries he knew did speak the language and named four or five missionaries who knew Sanskrit; he then cited a quotation from the Madras daily, *The Hindu*, which praised the humanitarian work of Christian missionaries.[63]

Rather than merely defending themselves, a number of missionaries attacked Vivekananda's own qualifications. They said he was not a genuine Swami, or even a *Sannyāsi*,[64] that he lived lavishly, ate beef, and drank liquor.[65] Since he was a product of a Christian missionary college and had appeared in religious dramas, stories also circulated that he had been educated at Harvard, and was "indebted to Asia only for his colour and his costume," and that he was really an actor on the Calcutta stage.[66] The goal of such statements, of course, was to discredit Vivekananda as a true Hindu monk.

4. Since the West is intellectually inadequate, hypocritical, and not in exclusive possession of God, the East must be acknowledged as the source of spirituality for the world.

Vivekananda introduced himself as a representative of the "mother of religions" and as "a member of the most ancient order of monks in the world."[67] He emphasized the rich spiritual nature of the East, and remarked on his lecture tour :

> You of the West are practical in business, practical in great inventations, but we of the East are practical in religion. You make commerce your business; we make religion our business. If you will come to India and talk to the workman in the fields, you will find he has no opinion on politics . . .

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63. Burke, *op. cit.*, pp. 323, 321.
64. J. Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, trans. by S. H. Moore (London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1908), p. 387.
65. *Swami Vivekananda and his Guru with letters from Prominent Americans on the Alleged Progress of Vedantism in the United States* (London and Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 1897), pp. 2-6.
66. "Sunday Thoughts," *The St. Louis Republic*, October 15, 1893, cited in Burke, op. cit., p. 138; "Vivekananda," *Missionary Review* n. s. VIII (May 1895), p. 381.
67. Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, op. cit., p. 3.

> But you talk to him of religion and the humblest knows about monotheism, deism and all the isms of religion . . . I have talked with your farmers, and I find that in politics they are all posted. . . But you talk to them of religion; they are like the Indian farmer, they don't know, they attend such a church, but they don't know what it believes: . . .[68]

This position would have been unacceptable even to those Christians who did not believe that theirs was the only religion to worship the true God; few believed Hinduism to be spiritual at all, at least in its practical effect.[69] At least three elements of the faith were popularly felt to be gross abuses: idolatry, the caste system, and the treatment of women. Questions concerning these matters were among those most frequently asked the Swami.

The missionary magazines of the day constantly stated that there were three hundred and thirty million idols in India (or, sometimes, three hundred and thirty million *gods*), more than one for each inhabitant. Thus, Vivekananda's claim of a bisic monotheism was often challenged.[70] He explained:

> Idolatry in India does not mean anything horrible. It is not the mother of harlots. On the other hand, it is the attempt of undeveloped minds to grasp high spiritual truths.[71]

He compared idols to the symbols of the West: crosses, churches, words and Catholic saints. Vivekananda concluded that as the mind needed some sort of material image to associate with the mental one, there was no reason to condemn one whose mind needed greater stimuli.[72] To the missionaries who saw these idols dressed, fed, and carried through the streets, this appeared but another rationalization of "the Hindu mind," which Hume said ". . . cares little for any facts except inward, ideal ones. When other facts conflict with such conceptions, the Hindu disposes of them by calling them an illusion."[73]

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68. *Minneapolis Journal*, November 27, 1893, cited in Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
69. See Hume, "How Far is Hinduism Spiritual?" *Missionary Herald* XC (July 1894), pp. 285-86.
70. E.g., "Miscellany," *Woman's Missionary Advocate* XIV (October 1893), p. 124.
71. Vivekananda, *Complete Works, op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.
72. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.
73. Hume, "The Contact of Hindu and Christian Thought" *op. cit.*, p. 516.

Although opposed to the caste system, the Swami saw it as a "crystalized social institution" which had done its service.[74] "With the introduction of modern competition see how caste is disappearing fast! No religion is necessary to kill it."[75] The missionaries saw no such easy end to what both they and Vivekananda regarded as an offence against the brotherhood of man; more significantly, they saw caste as an integral part of Hinduism.[76]

The treatment of women under Hinduism was another matter of concern to the missionary societies and their supporters, especially the female ones.[77] Although the British abolished *sati*, the fact that it had been practised made the Hindus seem savage. Furthermore, the lectures and writings of Pandita Ramabai, an educated widow, emphasized the evils of child marriage and the unfortunate plight of the Hindu widow. She travelled widely in the United States to seek money for her school founded for child widows, and she also established "Ramabai Circles" of American churchwomen to help her with this work.[78]

Vivekananda considered the disability of widows as a social rather than a religious institution.[79] He stated that Hindu women were venerated, not degraded,[80] and that widows enjoyed property rights under Hindu law.[81] This upset the Ramabai Circles: yet, as was often the case, the Swami argued that Hindu custom should be judged by its ideal, not by its lowest manifestation. Thus, according to Vivekananda, none of these three institutions were symptomatic of lack of spirituality, for he pictured idolatry as necessary, even beneficial, and caste and restrictions on women as social, not religious customs.

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74. Vivekananda, *Letters*, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 71
76. "Editorial Paragraphs," *Missionary Herald*, LXXXIX (May 1893), p. 175.
77. E.g., "Woman Under the Ethnic Religions," *Mission Studies* XI (November 1893), pp. 212-14.
78. "Pundita," *Missionary Herald*, LXXXIX (August 1893), p. 314; Burke, *op. cit.*, pp. 495-96.
79. Vivekananda, *Letters*, *op. cit.*, pp. 386-87.
80. *The Standard Union* (Brooklyn, N.Y.), January 21, 1893, cited in Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 495.
81. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 494.

It would appear that if missionaries were sometimes guilty of a narrow vision and occasional exaggeration, Vivekananda, as a Hindu apologist, was frequently afflicted with what he himself termed "the Oriental hyperbole."[82] He presented an idealized view of his nation and religion as true and then berated them for their departure from his ideal portrait.

The Historical impact of this cultural confrontation

The preceding discussion of the responses of the missionary periodicals to Vivekananda's statements of his beliefs demonstrates that the two sides in this dispute were defending what they perceived as challenges to their ideologies. Their replies were not really addressed to each other, but to their respective audiences, as they acted out the pattern Solzhenitsyn describes: "We steer clear of all other values / And we confidently judge the whole world / According to our own home values." However, analysed over a longer time period than the few months of the Parliament of Religions, was there any significant impact from this confrontation? Is there any evidence of change in the condition or activities of the missionary movement? If, as discussed earlier, there were historical and intellectual events, such as the rise of the "Social Gospel," making the foreign missionary movement particularly vulnerable to criticism at this time, were there also historical developments limiting the impact of Vivekananda's attack?

In an attempt to answer these questions and to assess the impact, quantitative data on missions have been examined. In the United States, the contributions to foreign missions and overall church membership are areas that might show the effect of the Swami's visit. As discussed earlier, mission contributions fluctuated during this decade, but a direct effect from Vivekananda can be ruled out because of the more likely effect from the depression of 1893, a major economic upheaval. Moreover, the continual increase in membership of the major Protestant denominations from 1890-1900 does not indicate that the controversy over the merits of exporting Christianity disillusioned potential church membership.[83]

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82. Banhatti, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

83. Data on church membership are recorded in U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1960).

Within India, statistics on mission activities in the decade 1890-1900 can be examined to assess the effect in his native land of the Swami's "Mission to the West." Total combined data for all agencies engaged in India are not available. However, statistics for this period have been compiled and studied from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions for two representative, large, well-established mission stations, one in Maharashtra and one in Madura.[84] If Vivekananda did actually have an effect in turning his countrymen away from the missionaries and Christianity, this rejection should be evident in the local operations of these stations.

However, throughout the 1890's, the number of church members in these two representative Indian missions continues *upward*, with the one in Maharashtra growing from 2306 church members in 1890 to 3935 in 1899, and Madura increasing from 3640 in 1890 to 4885 in 1899. The *rate* of increase does decrease in 1896-97, but it is made up the next year. There is also a slight drop in "preaching adherents" in 1896-98, the only time the figure declines in that decade. However, the loss is recovered the following year. In this same two-year span, the number of children in mission schools shows a sharp drop, although more children are in Sunday School. Slight decreases in some areas of mission activities, such as the number of workers in the field and the number of contact points, did occur during Vivekananda's first year back in India, but these were mostly recouped the subsequent year.

Looking beyond the data mentioned here from two specific missions during this decade, figures for all India for a longer time period are recorded in Latourette's history of the missions. He reports that the number of members who joined the Indian churches in the 25 years before 1914 were four times greater than all those in the preceding 75 years.[85] If statistics are the measure, the Swami cannot be considered to have inspired a decline in mission support in India.

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84. All data discussed in this section were compiled by the author from "Tabular View of the Missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions," the annual statistics in each January or February issue of *Missionary Herald* LXXXVIII-XCVII.

85. Latourette, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

Beyond quantitative measures, in the realm of ideas, it can be noted that Vivekananda did not adversely affect the foreign mission movement in the United States. By the end of the decade, new forces were motivating a mounting evangelical movement in a "period of rising nationalism and national self-consciousness."[86] Thus, as Olmstead affirms :

> The last two decades of the nineteenth century saw an increasing wave of expansionist sentiment which would . . . introduce an era of unequalled enthusiasm for world missions. To the average American Christian the extension of national influence and power and the propagation of the faith were but different sides of the same coin.[87]

In challenging such an attitude, Vivekananda not only found himself pitted against mature church members who supported missions, but also arrayed against a new and active extension of such support in the form of highly organised youth "armies," such as the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour which in 1894 reported 33,000 societies, with over 20,00,000 members.[88]

Besides having to contend with such antagonistic enthusiasm, Vivekananda's message had to strive to assert itself against the force of world events. The Swami's derision of missionary character and intelligence paled beside the reports of missionary courage during the slaughter of the Christian Armenians and in the persecutions in China.[89] Likewise, the favourable impression of an ancient, learned, spiritual India was thrown into sharp contrast with a different India during the disastrous famine of 1897. The pictures of rib-protruding, sunken-eyed, starving men, of pitiful child-mothers reduced to skin and bone, and of children with swollen bodies"[90] seemed to support missionary claims of the inadequacy of Hinduism.

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86. Commager, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
87. C. Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1960), p. 501; see also p. 496.
88. "The Christian Endeavour Movement and Missions," *Missionary Herald* LXXXIX (August 1894), p. 321.
89. See "Western Turkey Mission. The Destruction at Gurun," *Missionary Herald* XCII (May 1896), p. 205; Rev. D. Goddard, "Persecutions of Chinese Christians," *Missionary Herald* XCII (October 1896), pp. 402-05.
90. Curti, *op. cit.*, p. 134. See also the picture in *Missionary Herald* XCIII (January 1897), p. 8.

These events lessened any long-term impact of Vivekananda, especially as foreign missionary enthusiasm reached its height in America between 1898 and 1917.[91] However, a few developments evident in missionary materials do suggest some effects of the Swami's visit—i.e., as that visit was connected with the Parliament of Religions. The one event reinforced the other. Even without Vivekananda, the Parliament would have created much debate since there were religious leaders and mission periodicals who opposed the meeting right from the beginning. Yet, because of the handsome Indian and his challenges, the controversy was heightened and extended. The need of the one for the other is evident in the indifference which greated Vivekananda's second journey to America six years later in 1899. Although he was by then a prominent figure in India, his visit was barely mentioned in the missionary periodicals.

This combination of the Swami and the Parliament can be credited with the following effects specifically within the American missionary movement :

(a) **Increasing the interest in Oriental religion**: After the Parliament, the missionary source materials showed a greater interest in discussing the philosophical bases of the different religions, but still with a bias in their own favour. Significantly, many of the journals, while continuing to call Africans "heathen," began to designate "Brahmanism, Buddhism and Hinduism"[92] as *ethnic* religions. For example, *Mission Studies* began 1893 with an appeal, "The Needs of Heathen Women a Reason for Larger Giving," and ended it, two months after the Parliament, with a programme entitled "Woman Under the Ethnic Religions."[93]

(b) **Encouraging improved education and training for workers in mission fields**: The Swami's accusations regarding the calibre of the missionaries prompted considerable dispute. These charges, as well as the obvious intelligence and subtlety of the other philosophical systems and their exponents, made a deep impression on many of the people in attendance at the Parliament. Among the papers presented in the subsequent Conference of Officers and Representatives of the Foreign Missions Boards were "Means of Securing Missionary

91. Olmstead, *op. cit.*, p, 503.
92. "Woman Under the Ethnic Religions," *Mission Studies* XI (November 1893), pp. 212-15.
93. Mrs. E. G. Goodrich, "The Needs of Heathen Women a Reason for Larger Giving," *Mission Studies* XI (January 1983), pp. 2-3.

Candidates of the Highest Qualifications" and "The Place of Higher Education in Missionary Work." In concluding this second topic, the Rev. F. F. Ellinwood, the Secretary of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., Foreign Missions Board, warned his colleagues :

> If it should turn out in any of the great battlefields of religious thought that Christianity with all its claims to intellectual superiority, had shown itself unable to defend its doctrines or its history against the assailments of skilful Orientals, supposed to be ignorant "heathen," it would be a day of disaster to the cause of truth .... The Parliament of Religions has come to stay. It began long before the Chicago Committee had thought of it. Truth must everywhere be equipped for her final victory over error.[94]

(c) **Increasing the criticism of foreign missions in the general press.** Although it cannot be proved that the Swami had a direct, negative effect on the missionary movement, an examination of the general periodical literature of the decade does indicate a rise in the number of articles critical of missions. This could very well be an extension into print of the confrontation at the Parliament. One of the mission defenders who commented on this increase was the Rev. Judson Smith, Foreign of the A.B.C.F.M. :

> No one can have failed to mark a somewhat sudden and vigorous revival within these past few years of those attacks upon Christianity itself and upon its aggressive mission in the earth which in one form or another have attended its history from the earliest days.[95]

In conclusion, perhaps the Swami is his own most accurate evaluator of the historical impact of his mission to the West and his encounter with the American missionary movement. Vivekananda seemed to sense that the effect of his visit might not be felt at the time, but further in the future—a perspective that gains particular significance because of the current interest of young Americans in Asian religion and culture. When Professor Sundarama Iyer asked the Swami if his mission had achieved any lasting good in America, Vivekananda replied : "Not much. I hope that here and there I have sown a seed which in time may grow and benefit some at least."[96]

94. *The Second Conference of Officers and Representatives...*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
95. Rev. J. Smith, "The Success of Christian Missions," *Missionary Herald* XCIII (November 1897), p. 446.
96. Nikhilananda, *op. cit.*, p. 118.