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METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN DOCUMENTING RELIGIOUS
CHANGE WHEN CHANGE IS DENIED: SVĀMĪ VIVEKĀNANDA'S
EARLY YEARS

When is the historian justified in claiming religious change? When the historian studies a religious group which denies significant religious change not only in that group's development but also in the life and teachings of its founders, what problems are encountered in documenting that change? Or perhaps more abstractly, is the matrix of history with its notions of change, growth, and/or development antithetical to the Hindu saint or those involved in producing hagiographies about the saints?

This maze of theoretical questions can be negotiated by careful attention to at least three methodological concerns as they relate to the problem of documenting religious change. These will be treated successively using as a focus the early period (1863-1885) of Svāmī Vivekānanda in a particular hagiography in comparison with extant historical evidence.¹ The three methodological concerns chosen to illustrate the complexity of documenting religious change are (1) the probability of the historical event (problem of historicity), (2) the probability of psychological or spiritual development (problem of psychological crises), and (3) the

probability of patterns or periods of belief and practice demarcating the topography of religious change. With each of these concerns a specific methodology will be utilized to suggest fresh interpretation of the data.

Terminological difficulties might be avoided by these stipulations. "Religion" will be used as "that which concerns a group or individual ultimately."² It is assumed that a pattern of ultimate concern may change in given periods of time (the clustering of new beliefs and behaviors which suggest historical change.)³ "Hagiography" will be used to suggest a concern with the legend of a saint, especially those studies which place matters of faith and religious need above factualness or historicity.

The contention of this study is that hagiographies of Svāmī Vivekānanda have forced his life into an archetype of the spiritual hero at a severe cost to the human richness of his quest for meaning and purpose in life. Some might suggest that it is a sacrilegious act to call into question the legend of a spiritual hero. (Svāmī Gambhirānanda once asked me: "But do you know his spirituality?") However, it is suggested that the gain from knowing religious change in any life, whether saint or beggar, has potential merit which cannot be assessed before the study. That gain encounters the fullness of history through persons who live in time and space. When, or if, saints transcend the ordinary confines of history, they are still grounded in its realities. One such reality is the public

rather than private nature of events, evidenced in all the ways persons leave their imprint on history. Hagiography responds more to the needs of faith and often transports an individual's life into the realm of archtypes or patterns of holiness which are well known by a culture. Our present concern with the early years of Svāmī Vivekānanda allows us to work with a period in which little direct historical evidence remains. Vivekānanda said practically nothing about his early years, while his hagiographies have a rich account. We will sift through this period addressing the problems of historicity, psychological or spiritual crises, and patterns of religious change.

I. Probability of the Historical Event

Long before we can study the problem of religious change, we encounter the factualness of events allegedly done, words purportedly said. To illustrate this problem, one hagiography of Svāmī Vivekānanda has been chosen, The Life of Swami Vivekananda, by his Eastern and Western Disciples,⁴ and a single historical issue, the adequacy of the account about Vivekānanda's membership in the Brāhmo Samāj. Our chosen hagiography deals with this membership in four pages (27-30) in a 758 page study. The picture that emerges from this account has Narendranath Datta joining the Brāhmo Samāj in college because he had "no sympathy with polytheism and image worship" (28) and because he believed in the "education of the masses, irrespective of caste, creed, or

colour." (28) His personal belief in renunciation of the world set him apart from the Brāhmos and led him to ask Debendranath Tagore, "Sir, have you seen God?"⁵ This section in the hagiography advanced the conclusion that the Brāhmo Samāj period in Vivekānanda's life was directly preparatory for the coming of a gūrū who had seen God and who cared about a suffering world.

Historians long for "primary, contemporaneous documentation," that is, documents from the subject himself, written contemporaneous to the time in question. Erik Erikson has shown us the difficulties with the personal perspective (e. g., Ġandhi) and how it changes from life period to life period.⁶ If documents could be found contemporaneous to the college period of Vivekānanda's life which sustain the hagiography's view of the Brāhmo Samāj, what more could we ask for? However, the thirteen references by Vivekānanda in his extant sayings concerning the Brāhmos come only from a decidedly different time--a time after Rāmakṛṣṇa's influence.⁷ To examine even one of these references will raise pointedly the difficulties of our hagiography's historical reliability.

What permits The Life of Swami Vivekananda to treat membership in the Brāhmo Samāj as relatively unimportant is the fact that Svāmī Vivekānanda never spoke of that membership directly. When he spoke of it at all, he implied that it was unimportant. One of his letters, written 24 May 1894 while he was in America on the first visit, is illustrative. The context of the letter is a little known dispute Svāmī Vivekānanda found himself involved in, which almost destroyed his American work. For the first year in America,

Vivekānanda had allowed himself to be known as a Brāhmin and a monk of the Sankarācharya Order.⁸ When a dispute arose with Mazumdar of the Brāhmo Samāj, as well as some Theosophists and Christian missionaries who knew him from India, these minor discrepancies mushroomed into charges of violation of the cardinal marks of a renunciate--money and women (kāminikānchan).⁹ The text of the letter is long and only a few issues need be addressed.¹⁰ Despite the emotional charges contained in the letter, Vivekānanda's claim is that the "booby religion" of the Brāhmo Samāj had no significant influence on him, nor did Keshab Chandra Sēn. The twelve other references do not change this claim. So our hagiography stands safely with Svāmī Vivekānanda's later recollections about his religious identity as being little influenced by the Brāhmo Samāj.

But what actually happened in an individual life is often not the same as what one wants it to be or says it was. Just a simple reading of M. Gupta's Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna discovers that "M" inadvertently reports Narendra's deeper involvement with the Brāhmos.¹¹ Narandra's brother, Bhupendranath Datta, tells of stronger ties.¹² Calcutta newspaper accounts in 1893 and 1894 discovered the true identity of Svāmī Vivekānanda as their own Narendranath Datta and gave interesting anecdotes about his involvement in the Brāhmo Samāj.¹³ The Bengali diaries of Brāhmo Samājis, studied so materfully by David Kopf, shed new light on the activities of the Brāhmos and their deep religious influence on Vivekānanda.¹⁴

Using sound historical methods, a reliable account can be constructed even in a period of Vivekānanda's life where the legend tends to run counter to the obtainable facts. This procedure allows specific claims and interpretations to be weighed according to their historical probability.

We can return to some solutions obtained concerning Vivekānanda's early years after examining our other methodological concerns. Making judgments about what happened historically may prove a much less complicated procedure than our second problem with psychological or spiritual crises.

II. Probability of Psychological or Spiritual Crises

As Vehicles of Development

What Indian has not heard of the wonderous childhood of "Biley" and his visions of the Divine, his meditations which could not even be disturbed by a cobra, or his boyhood experiences of merging with the Absolute?¹⁵ If the legend is accurate, then Narendranath Datta moved through this wonderously spiritual childhood into three further religious periods: as an exceptional college student who mastered Western thought, experimented with reform groups and found them wanting spiritually; as a disciple of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, specially trained and given his master's spiritual powers; and finally as the warrior-monk who conquered the West with a superior form of spirituality which awakened India. Our hagiography records no real psychological or spiritual crises, except the momentary ones which lead to and were solved by Rāmakṛṣṇa.¹⁶

Yet once again we have reason to doubt the hagiographies of Vivekānanda in this area. At issue is the substance of religious change. In a hagiography there are often episodes which do not fit into the logic or patterns of the legend of the spiritual hero. Even when there is little else with which to work, the historian can learn to detect episodes which have hagiographic dissonance. To illustrate this approach three such episodes have been chosen from The Life of Swami Vivekananda and each suggests either psychological or spiritual crises.

Beginning with the last one chronologically, we find Narendra in Scottish Church College, which would be after he came back from his nervous breakdown (1880) and before he went to Dakshineswar to see Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa for the first time (November, 1881).¹⁷ Professor W. W. Hastie was teaching the poems of Wordsworth in a literature class and as he discussed the poem, "Excursion," Hastie found that "the students did not understand" the allusion to a state of trance. Hastie used Rāmakṛṣṇa as an example of one who could go into trance states. The story is used in our hagiography to record the future Vivekānanda's first hearing about Rāmakṛṣṇa.¹⁸ The dissonance arises when one notes that the hagiographer has unconsciously recorded one event which calls into question another. If Narendranath had had samādhik experiences as a child, and all hagiographies agree on this point, then his amnesia in the classroom needs levels of explanation which range into the theological and the psychological. The

key experience^{of} samādhi described in the hagiographies was the oxcart vision of the Absolute at about age thirteen or fourteen (1876/7) as he travelled with his mother to Raipur.¹⁹ Unless these early experiences of samādhi are discarded, then an amnesia doctrine about his childhood experiences of samādhi is necessary.²⁰

A historian must entertain the question about the extent and seriousness of the nervous breakdown which preceded this possible classroom amnesia. Since Narendra's loss of his childhood spiritual accomplishments does not serve the needs of the hagiographer, its appearance in the account argues for its historicity. If the samādhik experience happened at thirteen or fourteen, then why at age seventeen was there no memory of this "peak experience?"²¹ Either we have slighted the severity of the nervous breakdown and the resultant spiritual amnesia, or hagiographic claims about Narendra's childhood must be doubted.

A second episode of hagiographic dissonance occurred in Narendra's childhood--the "rage" account.²² In 1877 at fourteen when Narendra was at Raipur just after the alleged oxcart vision of the Absolute, his father had taken over his education since there were no proper schools at this remote station. Our hagiography contains a lengthy passage worth quoting in full:

Many noted scholars visited his father. Naren would listen to their discussions, and occasionally joined in them. In those days he sought, nay demanded, intellectual

recognition from everyone. So ambitious was he in this respect that if his mental powers were not given recognition, he would fly into a rage, not sparing even his father's friends and nothing short of an apology would quiet him. Of course, the father could not sanction such outbursts and reprimanded the boy, but, at the same time, in his heart he was proud of the intellectual acumen and keen sense of self-respect of his son.²³

While the hagiography uses this account to show young Narendra's great intellectual ability, the meaning of religious development has been lost. If as a child and then just months before these events of "rage" Narendra had sufficient spiritual accomplishment to become one with the Absolute, then going into a "rage" because he was not recognized as brilliant makes no sense--spiritually or psychologically. The hagiographer has indeed incorporated a historical event into the legend without being able to homologize it into the pattern of the spiritual hero legend.

This second episode is important methodologically in that it illustrates the connection between the problem of historicity and that of psychological and spiritual development.²⁴ The episode adds strength to the assertion that Narendra had no special childhood religious experiences of trance (samādhi); and it forces us to reevaluate the nervous breakdown, the third hagiographic dissonance, when Narendra attended and failed Presidency College in Calcutta (1880).

This third episode leads us closer to asserting that hagiographies are injurious to understanding the spiritual quest and, more practically, make bad history. The Life of Swami Vivekananda mentions the nervous breakdown by connecting it with ascetic practices (prior to 1881):

Naren studies at the Presidency College for a year; but after that time he entered the General Assembly's Institution founded by the Scottish Church College. Hard study on the eve of the Entrance Examination together with ascetic practices had shattered his health, and consequently he had a nervous breakdown. He went to Gaya for a change and returned to Calcutta a few months before the First Arts Examination which he passed in 1881 in the second division.²⁵

It is highly probable that the hagiographer has salvaged over a major psychological crisis and the very heart of Narendra's religious struggle during this period. Narendra left Presidency College without passing his First Arts exam--this is undisputed. One was not moving up educationally by transferring to Scottish Church College. There is obvious dissonance in the account. Narendra's brother corrects the hagiography by stating that Narendra was not permitted to take the First Arts exam at Presidency College because of poor attendance resulting from malaria.²⁶ But he left Presidency, travelled to Gāyā, and spent three months recuperating. Are we on safe ground to trust the more "unsaintly" illness

as the least likely invention and take the more "saintly" illness as a euphemism? In other words, a nervous breakdown is more difficult to accept, both by a hagiographer or by the family historian, than simple malaria and would be the least likely illness to be invented.

But all the discussion about illness and class attendance would miss the relationship of this episode to Narendra's membership changes in the Brāhmo Samāj. Narendra came from Raipur to Calcutta and joined the Sādhāran Brāhmo Samāj in 1878/9 which was led by Śivanath Śāstri and Vijay Kṛṣṇa Goswami. The S. B. S. had an active program of religious and social reform, but its focus on the home made women equal, not just in theory but in practice. Its spirituality entailed marriage. After his return from the nervous breakdown (1880), Narendra changed to Keshab Chandra Sen's faction of the Brāhmos, the Adi Brāhmo Samāj. During this later phase of Sen's life, he not only had begun to incorporate more Hindu devotional and meditative practices into his worship but also had begun to separate spirituality and sexuality in ways not significantly different from traditional sannyāsa doctrines with their renunciation of sexual contact.²⁷ From this time on, Narendra was a staunch celibate (half of the twofold application of Rāmakṛṣṇa's sannyāsa doctrine, kāminikānchan) and would so remain even when marriage would have removed his family from poverty.

The three episodes of spiritual and psychological crises should

tempt us to undertake an even more difficult task for the historian of religions--to suggest periods of religious functioning in which change and development occur.

III. Probability of Periods of Belief and Practice ✓

The early period of Svāmī Vivekānanda's life (1863-1885) is portrayed in our hagiography as one of spirited preparation of a brilliant intellectual for Rāmakṛṣṇa whose teachings and devotional practices would perfectly balance his spirituality. But if the hagiographic dissonances of "rage," "spiritual amnesia" and "nervous breakdown" represent more the substance of history, then Narendra's life prior to his acceptance of Kālī as the Mother of the Universe²⁸ was not one of gradual preparation but one marked by major religious change and turmoil. The story of "sweetness and brilliance" would be replaced with an account of crises, doubts, changes--and perhaps something heroic in historical dimensions rather than mythological ones.

Since two previous studies have substantiated this thesis, I will merely summarize some major features of the early years of Vivekānanda.

Childhood (1863-1878). Although the legends about "Biley" are closely related to ones of Kṛṣṇa and Buddha, they point to a world molded by his mother's deep and traditional piety, peopled by sādhus and san-nyāsis, and enriched by spiritual and psychic experience. The experiential content of a Hinduized childhood would suggest a traditional Hindu devotionism.

This maternal influence was challenged in 1877 when the family moved to Raipur for two years. There he seems to have been first influenced by his father's rational, critical, and progressive ideas. The dissonant episodes of the boy "flying into a rage" during the discussions between his father and other progressive civil and religious leaders bears the unmistakable marks of his first identity crisis which would fully explode in 1880. But by the time the family returned to Calcutta in 1879, his father's encouragement motivated him to begin study towards a law degree, to join the most radical branch of the Brāhmo Samāj, to attend the Freemasons and eat meat there, and to consider further study in England, as well as consider marriage.

Had the maternal world been operative when he joined the Hindu reform movement, he would have lost case (been "out-casted") as did most other college students who joined.²⁹ Yet his mother's more traditional influence would account for his attraction to the more devotional aspects of the Hindu tradition and sannyāsa. This conflict between a loyalty to devotional Hinduism and the rational religion of the Brahmos would contribute to a nervous breakdown.

College and Legal Studies (1878/9-June, 1885). In 1878/9 Narendra passed the entrance exam and began Presidency College at sixteen. He seemed to be following his father's wishes as he joined the radical Sādhāran Brāhmo Samāj, attended meetings at the Freemasons, and planned on joining his father's law firm. His father

thought that Narendra would marry. But after the nervous breakdown much had changed. He switched allegiance in the Brāhmo Samāj to Keshab's branch, which would soon put him in contact with Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa because Keshab looked to Ramakṛṣṇa for spiritual guidance in his last years.

But anyone who thinks Narendra was easily drawn to Rāmakṛṣṇa has spent little time with the extant encounters. On the first meeting Rāmakṛṣṇa induced an altered state of consciousness in Narendra by placing a foot on Narendra's chest.³⁰ Although he began to experience a simple out-of-body (OBE) experience, he cried out in fear, hardly the reaction of one skilled in samādhik experience.³¹ Over the next three years Rāmakṛṣṇa pursued Narendra, who was both attracted and repelled by this extraordinary master of hypnogogic and hypnotic states. Narendra at no time allowed his vow as a Brāhmo to be compromised--he would not commit idolatry.³² All this time he performed as a Brāhmo actor and singer, usually avoiding Rāmakṛṣṇa who often came into Calcutta trying to see him. Narendra was preparing to become a Brāhmo missionary, like Keshab.³³ But when the double existential crises of Keshab's death and his own father's death changed his prospects for leadership and success as a Brāhmo lawyer, he sought Rāmakṛṣṇa. But again the actual order of events suggests pain, doubt and religious turmoil. Rāmakṛṣṇa insisted that Narendra could not solve his problems until he worshipped Kālī. This meant that Narendra had to break a sacred vow as a Brāhmo and kneel

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before the basalt image at Dakshineswar. He broke his Brāhmo vow in March, 1885 but did not find religious peace.³⁴ What happened instead was that he came to doubt everything, including the existence of God.³⁵ He described this three month period later as his "atheism" period.³⁶ But finally he was drawn back to Dakshineswar and to the person of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa. In June, 1885 he experienced the Absolute as he prayed before Kālī. He was no longer a Brāhmo or an atheist, but there would be several more significant religious changes before Narendra would become recognizable as the Svāmī Vivekānanda whose mature teachings have overshadowed all the earlier doubt and change.

Often the most interesting individuals in a particular culture are those perceived by many in that culture as saints. This paper has approached one so perceived, Svāmī Vivekānanda, from the viewpoint of an historian interested in studying religious change. In so doing, the usual historical concerns presented themselves, except that they were exacerbated by the official legend of the saint, transformed from an oral tradition into literature by the hagiographer.

At times, because of the scarcity of more reliable evidence, the historian may choose to study hagiographies for clues to data which are of historical value. This paper has suggested several methods which can be utilized to document the process of religious change where real crises, struggles, doubts, fears, and decisions were enacted by real human beings.

References

1. One of the most highly prized hagiographies of Svami Vivekananda has been chosen as representative: The Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples, 4th ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965, seventh impression), Pp. 758.
2. BAIRD, ROBERT D. (1971) Category Formation and the History of Religions (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 1-16.
3. WILLIAMS, GEORGE M. (1974) The Quest for Meaning of Svāmī Vivekānanda: A Study of Religious Change (Chico, California: New Horizons Press, 1974), pp. 1-9 and WILLIAMS, GEORGE M. (1970) "Understanding as the Goal of Some Historians of Religions," The Journal of Religious Thought (Autumn-Winter 1970), pp. 50-61.
4. Hereafter in the references our representative hagiography will be referred to as The Life of VK (1965), op. cit.
5. The Life of VK (1965), p. 30. This is a most surprising question for a Brāhmo Samāji to be asking who has professed belief in a God of spirit and truth, a God without form.
6. ERIKSON, ERIK H. Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence (New York: Norton, 1969).
7. The later references by Vivekānanda concerning the Brāhmo Samāj are found in SWAMI VIVEKANANDA, The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 6th ed., 1964), Vols. IV, 280, 416-7, 417, 411, 462; VI, 263, VII, 16, 466-7; VIII, 311, 373-4, for principle references.

8. For a more extensive treatment see WILLIAMS, GEORGE M. (1981) "Svāmī Vivekānanda: Archetypal Hero or Doubting Saint?" in BAIRD, ROBERT D. (1981) Religion in Modern India (forthcoming 1981), and BURKE, MARIE L. (1966) Swami Vivekananda in America: cites some of the times Vivekānanda identified himself as a "Brahmin monk." (pp. 69f.) Burke defends this as being "due to expediency" and thus "a careless but forgivable error." (p. 69) There are a number of histories of the World's Parliament of Religions: see HOUGHTON, WALTER R. (ed.) Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions and Religious Congresses at the World's Columbian Exposition (Chicago: F.T. Neely, 1893); BARROWS, JOHN. H. (ed.) The World's Parliament of Religions, 2 Vols. (Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893); HANSON, J.W. (ed.) The World's Congress of Religions (Chicago: International Publishing Co., 1894).

9. VIVEKANANDA (1964), Complete Works, op. cit., IV, 280, 417; VII, 16, 466-7, BURKE (1966), op. cit., p. 70f.

10. VIVEKANANDA (1964), op. cit., VII, 466-7.

11. GUPTA, M. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, translated by Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1969).

12. DATTA, B. (1954). Svami Vivekananda: Patriot-Prophet (Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1954).

13. BASU, S.B. and GHOSH, S.B. (eds.) Vivekananda in Indian Newspapers, 1893-1902 (Calcutta: Dineshchandra Basu Bhattacharyya and

Company, 1969).

14. KOPF, DAVID. The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

15. The Life of VK (1965), op. cit., pp. 9 ff. There are many children's books and comics which share Vivekānanda's early years with the masses. See for example, The Story of Vivekananda: Illustrated (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1970), a book in English for young Indians.

16. The Life of VK (1965), op. cit., 24, 76-85, 85-98.

17. The Life of VK (1965), op. cit. 24.

18. Ibid.

19. The Life of VK (1965), op. cit., 20-21.

20. The theological difficulty with samādhik amnesia is that it can be used to account for periods of spiritual immaturity reappearing in the development of an individual after such a one has attained great spiritual heights. Also, it could mean that almost anyone could be a saint in a state of amnesia.

21. Compare The Life of VK (1965), op. cit., 20-21 and 24.

22. The Life of VK (1965), op. cit., 22.

23. Ibid.

24. The hagiographer has some commitment to truth and that entails an authentic story of the saint. But the pattern of holiness recognizable to a particular culture, which the hagiographer must harmonize with the actual life of the perceived saint, may give way to highly valued events (and some will have the quality of "hagiographic dissonance"), which are "unsaintly."

25. The Life of VK (1965), op. cit., 24.
26. DATTA, B. (1954), op. cit., 153.
27. See SEN, K. C. Spiritual Progress: Sayings and Writings (Calcutta: Navavidhan Publication Committee, c.1934). pp. 6, 7, 25.
KOPF, D. (1979), op. cit. places Sen's religious development into the wider picture of the Brāhmo movement.
28. The Life of VK (1965), op. cit., 94-96.
29. Narendra was spared any of the hardships other young Brāhmos withstood simply because of the progressive stance of his father. KOPF, D. (1979), op. cit., pp. 98 ff., sheds new light on the hardships of those coming from more traditional homes.
30. GUPTA, M. Gospel of RK, op. cit., 841; Live of VK (1965), op. cit., 65; for accounts stating that Rāmakṛṣṇa used a "hand" instead of his "foot", GUPTA, M. Gospel, op. cit., 231, 717, 770.
31. GUPTA, M. Gospel of RK, op. cit., 770: "Oh, why did you do that to me? I have a father! I have a mother!"
32. Rāmakṛṣṇa was very skilled in helping Brāhmos break their vows of image worship, as evidenced in his winning a leader of the Sādhāran Brāhmo Samāj, Vijay Kṛṣṇa Goswami, back to traditional worship. GUPTA, M. Gospel of RK, op. cit., 538ff, 581.
33. DATTA, B. (1954), op. cit., 154.
34. For a extended treatment of this event, see my The Quest (1974), op. cit., 10-30.