Reflections on September 11, 1893

Richard P. Hayes

August 10, 2003*

In the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the number 108 is filled with significance. Among Hindus it is said that there are 108 upanishads, the sacred texts that form the basis for the religious movements known as Vedānta. Buddhists claim that there are 108 basic human flaws that must be eradicated before one can achieve lasting happiness. In both traditions rituals of purification are said to be most effective when performed 108 times, and therefore strings of meditation beads usually have 108 beads. Given the significance of this number, it is an interesting coincidence that the grim reminders of religious fanaticism that visited America on September 11, 2001 happened exactly 108 years after Swami Vivekananda's reflections on fanaticism at his opening address on the first day of the World Parliament of Religions on September 11, 1893. What I would like to do this evening is to invite some further reflections on the theme of Swami Vivekananda's talks at the World Parliament of Religions and in his subsequent talks in various American settings before his untimely death at the age of 39 on July 4, 1902. Before talking about Vivekananda's thoughts on religion, let me say something about his life.

The man who came to be known to the world as Swami Vivekānanda was born on January 12, 1863 into the Datta family, an affluent Bengali family known for its philanthropy and contributions to scholarship. His parents named him Narendranath and called him Narendra or Naren for short. Like most affluent young Bengali men of his generation, Narendra Datta received a well-rounded British-style education in Calcutta. He studied history, science, medicine, English literature, European philosophy and especially Western logic. Early influences on his thinking included John Stuart Mill's reflections on scientific method and on religion and ethics. By the time he had finished college he was an accomplished musician who could sing and play several instruments and was proficient in the Bengali, English, Urdu, Hindi and Persian languages. The principal of his college wrote that Narendranath Datta was clearly a genius and was without any doubt the most intelligent student he had ever had, including all the students he had known in Germany.

During his college years, Narendra's religious thinking was strongly influenced by the Brāhmo Samāj movement, a religious organization founded in India in the early

*Text of talk prepared for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Battleship Mesa, Colorado. The talk is a revision of a sermon prepared for the UU Fellowship of Glenwood Springs on June 9, 2002; the service on that Sunday was cancelled because of a forest fire. At the August 10 service, Judy Hayes read some passages from the writings of Swami Vivekananda; those passages were also distributed in a handout. Those passages have now been woven into the main body of this text in places where in the original version the audience was reminded of what Judy had read.

19th century. The Brāhmo Samāj was strongly critical of religious rituals, image worship, the hierarchy of priests and the caste system, all of which was eschewed in favor of simple worship and adoration of "the Eternal Author and Preserver of the Universe." About this Eternal Author, followers of Brāmo Samāj said very little could be said, except that all religions had been formed by people who had some inkling about this Eternal Creator. Brāhmo Samāj followers were encouraged to study all the scriptural traditions of the major world religions with an open but critical mind, preferably a mind trained in the methods of European rationality. The Brāhmo Samāj celebrated not only the supremacy of reason but also the ideal of the French Revolution, and thus members of this religion campaigned tirelessly for universal education, universal suffrage, and the social equality of all people, including full equality of the sexes. Many of the most influential intellectuals in India during the Victorian period were members of Brāhmo Samāj.

While Narendra fully endorsed the principles of the Brāhmo Samāj, he found that the congregational meetings gave him no feeling of the sacred. In addition to the intellectual rigor he longed for a taste of the love of God that was so commonly talked about in Brāhmo Samāj sermons. And so at the age of 18, Narendra Datta went to visit Devendranath, the leader of the Brāhmo Samāj and asked him "Sir, have you seen God?" Embarrassed by this unexpected question, Devendranath fumbled around for an answer and finally told the young Narendra that he should go practice meditation. Disappointed by this response, Narendra went to other prominent religious leaders of his day and asked them the same question. All of them gave him equally evasive answers. One of them, however, said that if Narendra wished to meet a man who had seen God, he should go to the village of Dakshineshwar and visit Śrī Ramakrishna.

And so it was that in November of 1881, the 18-year old student of Western science and philosophy went to visit the uneducated and childlike village mystic Ramakrishna, a 45-year old man who had established a reputation as a devotee who was constantly in the presence of God and who was celebrated for declaring that the Hindus, the Muslims, the Jews and the Christians were all worshiping the same deity and therefore all these religions were equally valid. The single deity, said Ramakrishna, appeared in many forms to reach people of different temperaments and could be experienced as any one of various gods or goddesses. Some regarded Ramakrishna a great visionary, while others were convinced he was insane and hopelessly out of touch with reality. Narendra Datta himself was not sure what to expect to find in this famous eccentric mystic. The rational and scientific part of his mind was prepared to find biochemical explanations of his religious experiences, but the poetic side of his nature hoped to find someone who really had had a transformative religious experience. When Narendra met Ramakrishna, he asked his usual question: "Sir, have you seen God?" And Ramakrishna replied "Yes, I have seen God. I see him as I see you here, only more clearly." This was the beginning of a remarkable relationship between the highly educated young urban intellectual and the simple rustic lover of God. The relationship continued until Ramakrishna's death of cancer in 1886. Eventually Narendranath Datta took vows of celibacy and took on the religious name Swami Vivekananda, a name that means the bliss of discriminative knowledge.

On September 11, 1893, at the age of 30, Swami Vivekananda entered the spotlight of world celebrity when he attended the Parliament of Religions in Chicago as a

representative of Hinduism. For the next nine years, until his death in 1902, Swami Vivekananda traveled in Europe and Asia, writing, lecturing and meeting with the prominent religious leaders and intellectuals of his day. In his opening speech to the Parliament of Religions, he made this observation:

> Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this conven-tion may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal. (Vivekananda 1998, p. 4)

His second talk at the Parliament Religions was given on September 15 and was entitled "Why We Disagree." That talk began with an old Hindu parable about a frog who lived at the bottom of a deep well. This frog, the story goes, was born in the bottom of the well and lived there his entire life, becoming fat and happy by living on the worms he found there. One day the frog in the well was visited by a frog who lived in the sea. When the sea-frog described his vast and rich home environment to the frog in the small well, the well-frog became angry and accused the sea-frog of telling lies and suffering from delusions of grandeur. Unable to tolerate the sea-frog's lies, the well-frog kicked him out of the well and sent him away. Most of us, said Vivekananda, are like that frog in the well in that we would much rather silence those who try to expand our horizons than listen to them and learn from them.

In his main address to the Parliament on September 19, Swami Vivekananda spoke about Hinduism, the religion that he had been invited to represent. In his address Vivekananda emphasized the point that when religions are understood properly they are found not to be incompatible with one another, and they are also found not to be incompatible with the findings of science. Having said this, Vivekananda had to admit that most religious traditions had failed to live up to their most profound insights but that this failure might be rectified if religious leaders and followers around the world began to listen to and learn from one another. He ended his address by saying that he felt it was no accident that the first significant move toward this reconciliation of all the religions with one another and with science was taken in the United States of America, a land filled with hope and fresh enthusiasm and saturated with the spirit of freedom and tolerance. His final paragraph in that speech was a celebration of America in these words:

> Hail, Columbia, motherland of liberty! It has been given to thee, who never dipped her hand in her neighbour's blood, who never found out that the shortest way of becoming rich was by robbing one's neighbours, it has been given to thee to march at the vanguard of civilisation with the flag of harmony. (Vivekananda 1998, p. 20)

The Parliament of Religions closed on September 27, 1893. In the final paragraph of his closing address, Vivekananda again spoke on the theme of open acceptance:

> If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world, it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: "Help and not Fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension." (Vivekananda 1998, p. 24)

Press reports of the Parliament of Religions show that it was not embraced by enthusiasm in all quarters. Some of the Christian delegates proclaimed that the Parliament had finally proved beyond any shadow of a doubt that Christianity is the only legitimate religion on earth—perhaps they had been asleep during Vivekananda's closing remarks. Despite the triumphalist claims of some of the Christian delegates, there were other Christians who criticized the Christian delegates severely for lowering themselves to the undignified position of appearing on the same platform with dark-skinned and dark-minded heathens, who wore brightly colored robes instead of the drab suits of properly religious people. In other circles, however, the Parliament was hailed as a great step toward more enlightened times. In the minds of the enthusiasts of the Parliament, no one was more worthy of admiration than Swami Vivekananda, who impressed everyone with his intelligence and with his gracious manner and dignified demeanor. And so within the span of just over two weeks, Vivekananda went from being an unknown foreigner to a celebrity who received a constant flow of invitations to speak. He came to be friends with several prominent professors at Harvard, including William James, whose classic *Varieties of Religious Experience,* published in 1901–02, was inspired by a spirit of pluralism like the one that motivated Vivekananda. James was twenty-one years older than Vivekananda and coming to the end of a long and diversified intellectual career by the time they met, and his version of pluralism was different enough from Vivekananda's that James felt it worthwhile to draw attention to their differences in the final pages of *Varieties*. This should not surprise us, for how much sense would it make if there be only one kind of pluralism?

Not surprisingly, a significant number of the invitations from American religious circles came from Unitarians and Universalists in the vicinity of Boston and New York and then in various parts of California. All the texts of his talks that still survive have been published in eight volumes as *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, now in its twenty-second printing. Let me offer just a sample of what he said in some of these later talks.

On January 28, 1900, he was invited to give a talk at the Universalist Church in Pasadena, California. Swami Vivekananda opened that talk by referring to the religious conflicts being experienced around the world. He drew attention to the Boer War then raging in South Africa. About all this religious conflict, in which each religion

claimed to be the sole representative of Truth and the only true people of God, Swami Vivekananda made the following observation:

> … nothing has brought man more blessings than religion, yet at the same time there is nothing that has brought him more horror than religion. Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion. Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between man and man than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, more hospitals for men and even for animals, than religion; nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion. (Vivekananda 1953, p. 378)

His talk ended with this comment:

> Our watchword, then, will be acceptance and not exclusion. Not only toleration; for so-called toleration is often blasphemy and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance. Why should I tolerate? Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. Is it not blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live? I accept all the religions that were in the past and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian church and kneel down before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of everyone. Not only shall I do this, but I shall keep my heart open for all the religions that may come in the future. Is God's book finished? Or is revelation still going on? It is a marvelous book—these spiritual revelations of the world. The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all the other sacred books are but so many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I shall leave my heart open for all of them. (Vivekananda 1953, p. 386)

Three years more than a century after Vivekananda made those observations, it would be difficult to disagree with him. Nothing much has changed, except that he was able to go on and say that all the world's religions were growing in numbers and enjoying unprecedented influence, whereas we might be more inclined to say that the major religions are all in decline, both in authority and in moral integrity. Many people nowadays would probably agree with the remarks of Laurie Goodstein in her essay published last summer in the *New York Times*. Ms Goodstein observes that Christianity finds itself facing one scandal after another and apparently irreconcilable divisions among Roman Catholics, Protestants and Eastern Orthodox. Meanwhile, Judaism is divided into numerous factions over details of observance and the issue of how much pain and suffering is warranted in maintaining the state of Israel. At the same time, Muslims are divided the world over between moderate modernizers and fundamentalist extremists who are convinced that humanity is surely doomed unless it returns to the customs and lifestyle of the first Arab Muslims in the 7th century. Says Ms Goodstein:

> This is a rare moment in history, like a planetary alignment: three world religions simultaneously racked by crisis.
>
> The nature of the trouble for each is different, but adherents of all three feel suddenly embattled and isolated. Atheists say "I told you so" and even some people of faith are asking whether there isn't something in the nature of religion itself that ends in corruption.[1]

In the face of the kinds of religiously motivated turmoil we have continued to face in the world during the past century, it is difficult to think up any new solution that has not already been advocated and even tried. I certainly find myself unable to think of any new approach. The best I can do is to bring up for fresh reconsideration approaches that have already been advocated. Swami Vivekananda, for example, was a strong advocate of an approach that nowadays is called religious pluralism.

The basic observation underlying religious pluralism is that never in the history of the human race has anyone succeeded for long in getting everyone to think exactly the same way. The reason for this, argued Vivekananda, is that it is the very nature of thought to expand and diversify. Diversity of opinion can be seen as the most important vital sign of humanity at its most healthy. Everyone is in agreement only when thinking has died. Therefore, says Vivekananda, a person who loves and values thought will also love and value diversity in opinion, even when opinions are so diametrically opposed as to be apparently irreconcilable.

Like Vivekananda, I find myself attracted to the idea that human vitality lies in the largest possible diversity of views and opinions. I can say with him that I would no more like to live in a world of agreement of thoughts and values than I would like to live in a graveyard. At the same time, I find this enthusiasm for diversity a very difficult position to maintain, especially when I encounter people who value precisely the opposite of intellectual diversity. I find myself responding favorably with the sentiment expressed in a quotation for which I do not know the source: "Certitude conquers doubt, not ignorance. And when doubt is conquered, ignorance is invincible." And so for me the greatest personal challenge is not embracing those Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Jews, atheists and agnostics who share my love of open-minded and open-hearted investigation of all religious and philosophical and secular paths. Rather, for me the greatest challenge is learning how to embrace and accept those whose needs for certitude would close off all further investigation and inquiry. I have yet to learn how to open my heart and mind to those whose hearts and minds are apparently determined to remain closed.

The method of remaining open-minded that Vivekananda recommended was to learn to see all scriptures as mythological allegories that raised beautiful and often unanswerable questions. In one of his essays he wrote:

> Then, if you can, lower your intellect to let any allegory pass through your mind without questioning about the connexion. Develop love of imagery and beautiful poetry and then enjoy all mythologies as poetry. Come not to mythology with ideas of history and reasoning. Let it flow as a current

[1] Lauri Goodstein, "O Ye of Much Faith! A Triple Dose of Trouble" *The New York Times,* Sunday, June 2, 2002, Section 4, page 5.

> through your mind; let it be whirled as a candle before your eyes, without asking who holds the candle, and you will get the circle; the residuum of truth will remain in your mind.
>
> The writers of all mythologies wrote in symbols what they saw and heard; they painted flowing pictures. Do not try to pick out the themes and so destroy the pictures; take them as they are and let them act on you. Judge them only by the effect and get the good out of them.
>
> Your own will is all that answers prayer; only it appears differently, under the guise of different religious conceptions, to each mind. We may call it Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, Jehovah, Allah—but it is only the Self, the "I." (Vivekananda 1953, p. 563)

This prescription for going beyond tolerance to true acceptance and embracing sounds very appealing to me. But it does not answer what for me remains the most nagging question of all: How do I go about embracing those for whom scripture is not allegory but literal truth, not mythology but history, not suggestively symbolic pictures but ironclad prescriptions. How do I go about embracing those who insist that it is not the Self answering prayers in the guise of Krishna or Jesus or Allah, but that it is the Buddha alone correcting the false answers given by Jehovah? Here, I must confess, I fall back baffled.

Twice during the past two years, Judy and I have attended a series of interfaith conferences on the theme of religion and the human potential. Symptomatic of the intransigently difficult questions we set out to think about, the conferences were originally scheduled to take place in Jerusalem but had to be moved to safer locations, such as Arkansas and Durham, England. This final conference is scheduled to take place in Sevilla, Spain in December of this year. Each of us at the small conferences have represented a different religious tradition, and each of us has been asked to reflect on what our religious tradition has to offer people of other religions. Let me give my impression of how the conferences have gone so far—and I'm sure others who were there would probably disagree with me. My impression has been that each of us concluded, in one way or another, that our own personal religion has nothing to offer people of other religions, or to people who choose to have no religion at all. Other religions and philosophical systems already have everything they need, just as every human language already has everything needed to serve as a medium of communication. So what we who have a particular religion need to reflect upon is not what we have to offer others. Rather, what we all need to reflect upon is how to avoid retreating into smugness and complacency and insularity. So, for example, those of us who endorse some kind of religious pluralism and open-minded investigation of a variety of cultures and traditions need to figure out how not to treat those who seek an exclusive certitude as some kind of threatening alien whose presence on the planet threatens the possibility of the good life.

The Buddha once said "The wise have a name for a belief that is held so firmly that one regards others as fools inferior to oneself. Such a belief they call a prison." This dictum is one that constantly inspires me. It also presents me with a *kōan*, a problem whose solution is not at all easy to find. For me the problem is, how do I go about

staying out of prison? How do I learn to hold the value of diversity without holding it so tightly that I consider those who do not value diversity fools?

The question with which Judy introduced her reading from Swami Vivekananda was "How far have we really come in realizing the ideal of openness and acceptance which is the sign of health and vitality in the human race?" The answer, I think, is obvious enough. Not very far. And that answer raises another fundamental question. Why?

While we are reflecting on why we human beings have not made better progress towards openness and acceptance, perhaps we can also reflect on why and how America has failed to lead the way in the ways that Swami Vivekananda expected. Were he alive today, Vivekananda would no longer be able to say that our nation "never dipped her hand in her neighbour's blood, [and] never found out that the shortest way of becoming rich was by robbing one's neighbours." It seems unlikely that in August 2003 he would be able to say to Columbia what he said in September 1893: "it has been given to thee to march at the vanguard of civilisation with the flag of harmony." If we have dropped the flag of harmony that was handed to us, then we need to wonder why.

Works Cited

Vivekananda. *The Yogas and Other Works*. Ed. Swami Nikhilananda. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1953.

Vivekananda. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Mayavati Memorial edition. Twenty-second impression. Volume 1 . Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1998.