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Religious Experience, Hindu Pluralism, and Hope: *Anubhava* in the Tradition of Sri Ramakrishna

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Abstract: The pluralistic turn in modern Hindu thought corresponds with the rise of an emphasis on direct experience of divine realities in this tradition. Both pluralism and a focus on experience have precedents in premodern Hindu traditions, but have become especially prominent in modern Hinduism. The paradigmatic example in the modern period of a religious subject embarking upon a pluralistic quest for direct experience of ultimate reality as mediated through multiple religious traditions is the nineteenth century Bengali sage, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886), whose most famous disciple, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) played a prominent role in the promotion of the idea of Hinduism as largely defined by a religious pluralism paired with an emphasis on direct experience. The focus in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda on Brahman as a universal reality available, at least in principle, to being experienced by anyone, and interpreted using the categories of the experiencing subject's religion or culture, gives rise to a corresponding pluralism: a move towards seeing many religions and philosophies as conducive to the experience of a shared ultimate reality. This paper will analyze the theme of experience in the thought of these two figures, and other figures who are representative of this broad trend in modern Hindu thought, as well as in conversation with recent academic philosophers and theorists of religious experience, John Hick and William Alston. It will also argue that aspects of Hinduism, such as pluralism and an emphasis on direct experience, that are often termed as 'Neo-Vedantic' or 'Neo-Hindu' are not simply modern constructs, as these terms seem to suggest, but are reflective of much older trends in Hindu thought that become central themes in the thought of key Hindu figures in the modern period. Finally, it shall be argued that a pluralistic approach to the diversity of religions, and of worldviews more generally, is to be commended as an approach more conducive to human survival than the current global proliferation of ethno-nationalisms.

Keywords: Hinduism; religious experience; Ramakrishna; Vedanta; pluralism

1. Introduction

Two features of at least one major current of modern Hindu thought are this current's emphasis upon pluralism and the centrality of direct experience of the divine as definitive of the ultimate goal of religious practice. The prominence of pluralism in modern Hinduism is illustrated by the fact that it is a central theme in the writings and teachings of major Hindu thinkers of the modern period, including, although not limited to, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and most of the well-known gurus who traveled to the Western world in this period, developing considerable followings. These teachers include, but again, are by no means limited to, Paramahansa Yogananda, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (who is popular known as Amma), and Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev.

The presence of pluralism in modern Hinduism is also illustrated on the popular level by such readily observable and well-attested phenomena as the sharing of sacred spaces by Hindus and the members of other religious communities, the patronage by Hindus of non-Hindu sacred spaces, like

mosques, gurdwaras, and Jain temples, and the celebration by Hindus of the holidays of other religious traditions.[1]

Despite the rise of Hindu nationalism in recent years, and the tendency of some authors to identify Hindu pluralism, paradoxically, with a kind of Hindu triumphalism, the connection between these two is not a necessary or logical one, and is one which many Hindus would reject. As Elaine Fisher has written of Hindu pluralism of the kind under discussion here:

> ... Hindu pluralism, in contrast to the endemic communalism of post-independence India, itself has genuine roots in the subcontinent's precolonial heritage ... [T]he genuine theological work done by Vivekananda and his contemporaries in constructing a viable pluralistic worldview ... holds meaning for practitioners past and present. Inclusivist pluralism, for many, is a sincerely held theological commitment and can viably be promoted as a genuine emic Hindu pluralism.[2]

The extent to which scholars have tended to dismiss Hindu pluralism as an appendage of Hindu nationalism—a way for Hindus to pat themselves on the back for being inclusive even while not being so in practice—is shown by the fact that Fisher feels the need to make an argument for what would otherwise be seen as a fairly obvious point: that pluralism is a widely held Hindu position. Indeed, not only can pluralism of the kind promoted by many modern Hindu thinkers be "a sincerely held theological commitment," as Fisher affirms; but it could arguably serve to help counteract the spread of nationalism and communalism, not only in India, but globally. It would of course be naïve to argue that simply affirming a pluralistic worldview could alone serve to counteract the rise of widespread, deep-running currents of inter-religious, inter-ethnic, and international antagonism. Why, a critic might ask, has Hindu pluralism not already won the argument in India against Hindu nationalism, which is also a prominent current of modern Hindu thought? It would be cynical, though, to give up on the project of developing and promoting an alternative to ethno-nationalism: an alternative with considerably more promise to aid in the cultivation of a sustainable human civilization. Although beliefs and worldviews can certainly be overridden by other forces—socio-political, economic, and so on—beliefs do matter, and can affect reality profoundly.

The central thesis of this paper is that the co-occurrence of the themes of pluralism and direct experience in modern Hindu thought is not simply coincidental, but that pluralism and an emphasis upon direct experience are logically interlinked. This linkage can be discerned in the thought of two major contributors to modern Hindu thought in particular—namely, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda, building upon the work of earlier Hindu thinkers in the Brahmo Samaj movement of nineteenth century Bengal. In the teachings of both of these figures, pluralism and a direct experience of ultimate reality are central themes.

The logical connection between pluralism and an emphasis on direct experience is that the more traditional emphasis on a particular scriptural text as the final authority on religious matters tends to issue in the conclusion that one tradition alone is the true source of saving knowledge, whereas an emphasis on direct experience as one's final authority opens up the possibility that many traditions can lead to such experience. This can be seen as analogous to science, which is also rooted in reflection on experience. It does not matter whether the scientist is Indian, American, British, or Brazilian. There is no Indian, American, British, or Brazilian physics. There is just physics. Similarly, so the thought

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[1]　There are abundant examples that could be cited in regard to this practice of what could be called 'popular pluralism' among Hindus and members of other religious communities in South Asia. To mention just a few, there are the shared Hindu-Jain celebrations of Dīvālī, or Dīpāvalī, and the shared Hindu-Jain worship of the deities Gaṇeśa, Lakṣmī, and Sarasvatī (Long 2009, p. 26). There is the Hindu employment of Muslim healers in popular village Hinduism in India, as well as Hindu worship at the tombs of Sufi saints (Flueckiger 2015, p. 194). And there are many other examples of Hindu-Muslim religious interactions in a pluralistic mode (Gottschalk 2000).

[2]　(Fisher 2017, p. 191).

process runs, divinity or ultimate reality is just as universally present as physical reality is, and just as universally available.

The possibility that many traditions can lead to an experience of the divine is tested in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, who will be the central focus of this study. Of course, there are also scriptural texts which enjoin, or which can easily be interpreted as enjoining, pluralism. And the lives of persons who have experiences of this kind also, themselves, can become the subject matter of texts later regarded by a tradition as scriptural (as the sources on the life of Ramakrishna have become for the tradition that is rooted in his life and teachings). One might thus believe in pluralism because this is what one's scripture teaches. The suggestion is not of a tight, logical, 'if-then' connection between scriptural authority and exclusivism, on the one hand, and between experience and pluralism, on the other, but of an affinity between the latter two. Scriptural authority tends to tie one to a particular tradition and to a particular, textually conditioned mode of experience, while experience as such is available, in principle, to anyone: just as, again, the observation of the physical world is similarly available. To be sure, discerning spiritual realities does require one to cultivate certain epistemic qualities. To say that spiritual realities are universally available does not mean that everyone experiences them to the same degree or with the same intensity. Again, though, the analogy holds with physical reality, that a certain training is also required in order to see the night sky as an astronomer sees it. But the night sky is there for all to perceive.

Beyond the discernment of these two themes in the thought of Ramakrishna, a suggestion will be made about why a strong emphasis upon a universally available religious experience might be attractive, and why it is increasingly popular among many contemporary spiritual practitioners in the Western world, particularly among the growing numbers of practitioners who define themselves as 'spiritual but not religious,' or who find themselves drawn to Asian religions precisely for their perceived openness to eclecticism and pluralism.

2. Defining Our Terms: Pluralism, Direct Experience, and Modern Hinduism

First, what do we mean when we speak of *pluralism* as a major theme of modern Hindu thought? *Pluralism*, in theological terms, refers to the idea that attainment of what one takes to be the ultimate goal of practice is not limited to members of one's own religious tradition or community, but is something which can be achieved by practitioners outside these limited boundaries. This term has both sociological and theological usages, referring descriptively to the very fact of religious diversity, as well as to the theological stance just described here, which takes religious diversity to be a positive thing, and to see access to the divine as being itself plural in nature, and not limited to any single tradition, community, text, or institutional authority.[3]

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[3]   A very well-known, and more sociological understanding of pluralism, though one which certainly has theological implications, is formulated by Diana Eck as follows:

"First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the *energetic engagement with diversity*. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettoes with little traffic between or among them. Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies.

Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but the *active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.

Third, pluralism is not relativism, but the *encounter of commitments*. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another.Fourth, pluralism is *based on dialogue*. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the "table" will agree with one another. Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table—with one's commitments." (Eck 2006).

Our central focus here is on pluralism as a theological stance—as a type of theology of religions, also referred to be Paul F. Knitter as the 'mutuality model.'[4] The two usages of this term, though, are not entirely separable, given that a common argument for a pluralistic theology of religions involves the claim that such a theology, if its implications are followed logically, should issue in a more accepting and peaceful society, where religious diversity is celebrated, and not feared. Pluralism of the theological variety is thus seen as sustaining of pluralism of the sociological variety. This is the position taken in this paper as well.

On a critical note, pluralism, as a type of theology of religions, can sometimes be said, as Francis X. Clooney explains, to "reflect . . . from the perspective of one's own religion on the meaning of other religions, often considered merely in general terms."[5] Pluralism, in other words, can be a stance at which one arrives for reasons purely internal to the logic of one's own tradition, such as on the basis of a belief in a deity who loves and who desires the salvation of all living beings. This can be affirmed without any engagement whatsoever with the actual teachings or practitioners of other religions.

Pluralism can also arise, though, on the basis of an emphasis on a direct experience of ultimate reality as the final basis of religious authority, rather than a specific text or tradition. Ramakrishna's approach to divinity through an engagement with many traditions would be a particularly dramatic example of such an experientially based pluralism.

There are various types of pluralism, some of which emphasize the presence of truth in a variety of religious traditions and philosophies, and some of which emphasize the salvific efficacy of many religious paths. The Jain pluralism found in the works of such thinkers as Haribhadrasūri (c. 8th century CE) and Yaśovijaya (1624–1688), and well expressed in the *anekānta*, *naya*, and *syāt* doctrines of this tradition, is of this kind, emphasizing that aspects of truth are captured in the teachings of many systems of thought and practice.[6] Salvifically, though, these thinkers tend to view Jain practice as being essential to the attainment of the ultimate goal of mokṣa, as the Jain tradition conceives of it (though Haribhadrasūri seems to allow that non-Jain paths might also help take one to liberation).

The pluralism of the philosopher of religion John Hick (1922–2012), however, and, as we shall also see, that of Sri Ramakrishna, tends to emphasize the salvific efficacy of many paths, their ability to lead to the same ultimate salvific goal, rather than their ability to capture truth. Hick, for example, relegates religious truth claims to a realm of things that cannot be known, at least prior to death, asserting that claims of this kind will require "eschatological verification."[7] On Hick's view, one cannot really know, for example, prior to death, if the afterlife consists of an eternal paradise, or a purgatory, or rebirth in another form, and so on. For Sri Ramakrishna, who held a definite Hindu worldview, religions could vary in the degree to which they expressed the truth, but this did not inhibit them from being effective paths to the experience of ultimate reality.[8] Ultimately, all religions, according to Sri Ramakrishna, express sufficient truth to enable the personal quest for the direct experience of divinity to be successful. It is in this sense that Sri Ramakrishna claims that, "All religions are true."[9] 'True' here means 'true enough to be salvifically efficacious; not so flawed as to prevent the direct experience of ultimate reality through an embodied practice'.

Finally, there are religious pluralists who argue that there are many true and salvifically effective religions, but that salvific efficacy need not imply a singular goal that is shared by all. Thus Christians, in other words, may attain salvation as this is defined by their tradition, while Theravāda Buddhists may also attain nirvāṇa, but this does not mean that Christian salvation and Buddhist nirvāṇa coincide in some third, higher reality that includes them both, or that one of these salvations can be reduced to

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4 (Knitter 2010, pp. 109–24).
5 (Clooney 2010, p. 14).
6 See (Matilal 1981; Chapple 2003).
7 (Tooley 1976, pp. 177–99).
8 (Maharaj 2018, pp. 101–9).
9 (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 1).

the other. This is the view of, for example, David Ray Griffin and John Cobb.[10] According to the view of these thinkers, informed by the thought of Alfred North Whitehead, reality includes a dimension that corresponds to the idea of a personal deity found in theistic religions and an impersonal cosmic principle found in traditions such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Daoism.

In the tradition of Sri Ramakrishna, the term that most typically refers to the pluralism this tradition affirms, on the basis of Ramakrishna's life and teachings, is *dharmasamanvaya*, which is generally translated in the tradition as "harmony of religions". By this, it is not meant that the world's religions are simply identical, nor that their differences are completely insignificant, but that, like different musical instruments playing different parts of a piece of music, they can be seen as forming a harmony, as pieces of a larger truth toward which each points beyond itself. This tradition, in the words of one representative, is as follows:

> The world's spiritual traditions are like different pieces in a giant jigsaw puzzle: each piece is different and each piece is essential to complete the whole picture. Each piece is to be honored and respected while holding firm to our own particular piece of the puzzle. We can deepen our own spirituality and learn about our own tradition by studying other faiths. Just as importantly, by studying our own tradition well, we are better able to appreciate the truth in other traditions.[11]

Another analogy used in the tradition to illustrate this concept is the famous and popular Indian folk tale of the Blind Men and the Elephant:

> Once some blind men chanced to come near an animal that someone told them was an elephant. They were asked what the elephant was like. The blind men began to feel its body. One of them said the elephant was like a pillar; he had touched only its leg. Another said it was like a winnowing-fan; he had touched only its ear. In this way the others, having touched its tail or belly, gave their different versions of the elephant. Just so, a man who has seen only one aspect of God limits God to that alone. It is his conviction that God cannot be anything else.[12]

Secondly, what do we mean when we speak of *direct experience* as an important theme of modern Hindu thought? Direct experience, or *anubhava*, is contrasted with indirect, or mediated experience: such as experience that occurs through sensory perception. In Indian philosophy, the means by which knowledge is attained are known as *pramāṇa*-s.

A pramāṇa, at its most basic, is that which justifies one in believing that one has a true belief about a given topic. In the words of B.K. Matilal, "A Pramāṇa, as the etymology of the word indicates, is a *Pramā-karaṇa*, i.e., the instrumental cause of what is known as *Pramā*."[13] *Pramā* is knowledge, and is closely related to the concept of *jñāna*, which is also often translated as 'knowledge,' but which often refers specifically to saving knowledge, the knowledge of the true nature of reality that leads to–or, in Advaita Vedānta, that constitutes–liberation.[14]

In modern Hindu thought, the strongest basis for having a belief about the nature of divinity is for one to have had a direct experience of divinity for oneself, rather than believing in divinity on the basis of other pramāṇas, such as the authoritative testimony of others, as found in the Vedic scriptures. The Vedic scriptures are authoritative because they are the records of the direct experiences of the sages to whom they were revealed, rather than on the basis of some intrinsic authority, axiomatically held to be the case. This is, again, a major theme of modern Hinduism. Swami Vivekananda, for example, claims that the scriptures of all of the world's religions are based on a universally available direct experience:

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[10] See (Griffin 2005).
[11] (Vrajaprana 1999, pp. 56–57).
[12] (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 191).
[13] (Matilal 1985, p. 372).
[14] (Chatterjea 2002, p. 29).

Thus it is clear that all the religions of the world have been built upon that one universal and adamantine foundation of all our knowledge–direct experience. They teachers all saw God; they all saw their own souls, they saw their future, they saw their eternity, and what they saw they preached.[15]

In traditional Indian philosophy, the least controversial of the pramāṇa-s is *pratyakṣa*, or sensory experience. One is typically justified in believing something about the sensory world because one has perceived it to be so. I know there is a glass of water on my desk because I can see it. It is important to note, though, that pratyakṣa is distinct from anubhava, or direct experience, inasmuch as it is mediated through the sensory organs, and thus indirect. There is thus a potential for it to be flawed, such as if my eyesight is poor, or the lighting in the room is less than ideal. In other words, there is no *direct* contact between my center of awareness and the objects of my senses. Unless there is some such flaw, though, that can be checked against the sensory experiences of others, or with further sense experiences of my own (such as after I have turned the light on), pratyakṣa is generally viewed as a reliable guide to knowledge about those kinds of things which are susceptible to being perceived by the senses.

The Lokāyata, or Cārvāka system of Indian philosophy, which affirms a materialist view of reality, denies the validity of any pramāṇa other than sensory perception. This amounts to the claim that there are no entities beyond those which are susceptible to being perceived by the senses. The remaining systems of Indian philosophy, though, also affirm the validity of *anumāna*, or inferential reasoning. The most famous example of anumāna used in the Indian tradition is the example of fire on a mountain. I can know that there is fire on a mountain, even if I have not seen the fire myself, based on reasoning from other things that I *have* perceived, such as smoke rising from the mountaintop. I know that smoke is caused by fire. I have seen other occasions where fire and smoke have been present together. Therefore, if I see smoke rising from the mountaintop, I can infer that there is fire on the mountain.

Like sensory perception, inferential reasoning has the potential to be wrong. If the sense data on which it is based has been misinterpreted or misperceived, for example, the inference can lead to a wrong conclusion. Maybe what I think is smoke on the mountain is fog or haze, and not smoke caused by a fire. Also, perhaps the conjunction between fire and smoke has exceptions of which I am not aware, or which I am not considering. Maybe things other than fire can cause smoke, so my inference is invalid.

Probably the most controversial of the traditional Indian pramāṇa-s is *śabda*, or the word of an authoritative person. It is not controversial within Hindu schools of thought, which affirm it almost universally; but, as we shall see in a moment, it becomes controversial when these schools of thought come into conversation with non-Vedic traditions. Traditions like Jainism and Buddhism accept idea of a śabda pramāṇa, or authoritative word, but do not take the Vedas to constitute this authoritative word, but rather their own scriptural texts.

The idea of the śabda pramāṇa is that another valid basis for knowledge is the word of someone who can be trusted to communicate reliable information. Perhaps a good, trustworthy friend of mine, with good eyesight, has been to the mountain and seen that there is fire there, and he informs me that this is the case. Then, even if I have not seen the fire for myself, and even if I have not even seen any smoke rising from the mountaintop (perhaps because the mountain is too far away for me to see it), I can still be said to know, on the word of my trustworthy friend, that there is fire on the mountain.

The śabda pramāṇa is controversial because, of course, it is possible to disagree, as Indian philosophers traditionally have, about what finally constitutes a trustworthy authority. Is the best authority the words of the Vedas? The words of the Buddha? The words of the Jinas? And if we extend the conversation more broadly, beyond the traditional Indian religions, is it the words of the Bible? The words of the *Qur'an*?

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[15]   (Vivekananda 1979, p. 126).

The affirmation of the word of an authoritative person as a pramāṇa, particularly regarding issues related to ultimate reality, thus raises, immediately, the issue of religious diversity. Is there any possible neutral ground on the basis of which one can adjudicate the claims of all these higher authorities—the Vedas, the canonical scriptures of Buddhism and Jainism, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Bible, the *Qur'an*, the *Daodejing*, the *Analects* of Confucius, and so on?

The strand of modern Hindu thought represented by Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda affirms that there is, indeed, a basis on which to evaluate the various authorities proposed by the world's religions as foundations for valid knowledge about ultimate reality. The way to adjudicate these claims is to experience the ultimate reality directly for oneself—as, so it is claimed by Vivekananda, the great authorities did themselves.

The category of anubhava, or direct experience, as deployed by modern Hindu thinkers, is a reference to experience of a different order either from sensory experience, from reasoning based on sensory experience, or faith in a trustworthy or authoritative source. It refers to a direct contact between one's center of consciousness and ultimate reality, or any reality which one is perceiving in a direct fashion. It is defined as perception, direct presentation, knowledge, and experience.[16]

Anubhava, as a category, though, is far from being limited to modern Hindu thought. It is a central theological category of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, for example, as Archana Venkatesan notes:

> The word *anubhava* means experience, enjoyment or relish, and for Śrīvaiṣṇavas this enjoyment is special, for it is directed to Viṣṇu, his consorts and his most exemplary devotees, such as the *āḻvār* poets. *Anubhava* is activated on three major levels: poetic, narrative, and ritual, and each of these enable the devotee to access an ecstatic experience of the divine. It is a means to understand god's unfathomable nature, to enter into his world of play, and to make manifest the divine presence on the terrestrial realms.[17]

For one familiar with the life of Ramakrishna, Venkatesan's account of anubhava has resonance; for one can see a clear continuity between anubhava as understood and deployed in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition and many Ramakrishna's samādhi experiences, which were often evoked by his listening to religious songs or discourses.

No less a premodern Hindu authority than the *Mundaka Upaniṣad* teaches: *sa yo haiva tatparamaṃ brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati*—"One who knows Brahman becomes Brahman."[18] Brahman itself is of the nature of experience: namely, the experience of consciousness (*prajñānaṃ brahma*).[19] One who has experienced consciousness as one's own true nature has realized one's identity with Brahman, on an Advaitic understanding of Vedānta.

The concept of direct experience clearly has many precedents in premodern Indian thought, and is arguably presupposed even in systems where it is not mentioned explicitly. In the classical Yoga tradition, for example, as it is expressed in the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali, the eighth and final 'limb' or stage of the practice is defined as *samādhi*, a state in which one's consciousness becomes completely absorbed in the object of contemplation. In the case of Patañjala Yoga, this object, the ultimate reality in this worldview, is the *puruṣa*, or true self, which is utterly distinct from the realm of nature, *prakṛti*, which, prior to samādhi, forms the object of one's awareness.

Sri Ramakrishna, too, and the Vedānta tradition that has developed on the basis of his teachings, deploys the concept of samādhi to refer to a state of complete absorption in ultimate reality. In the tradition of Sri Ramakrishna, the concept of religious pluralism, or universalism, or the harmony of religions, as this teaching is variously known, is rooted in the accounts of Ramakrishna's life, in which

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[16]　(Grimes 1996, p. 40).
[17]　(Venkatesan 2013, p. 220).
[18]　*Mundaka Upaniṣad* 3.2:9.
[19]　*Aitareya Upaniṣad* 3.3.

it is said that he attained samādhi through the practice of numerous spiritual paths, both Hindu and non-Hindu. This is the experiential basis of the Ramakrishna tradition's universalism:

> 'I have practiced,' said he, 'all religions–Hinduism, Islām, Christianity–and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths . . . The substance is One under different names, and everyone is seeking the same substance; only climate, temperament, and name create differences. Let each man follow his own path. If he sincerely and ardently wishes to know God, peace be unto him! He will surely realize Him.'[20]

Thirdly, what do we mean by *modern Hinduism*, when we are speaking of a current of Hindu thought that is characterized by pluralism and direct experience as its central points of emphasis?

By modern Hinduism, we are referring to a current of Hindu thought with its historical roots in the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century, beginning with Rāmmohan Roy (1772–1833). Widely known as "the father of modern India,"[21] Roy was the first of a series of Hindu reformers who responded to criticisms of Hinduism on the part of both rationalists and Christian missionaries, not by renouncing Hinduism, but by affirming that the elements of this tradition which its critics had targeted were not, in fact, reflective of the original teaching of Hinduism—which he identified with the Vedānta of the Upaniṣads—but were later corruptions of what was originally a monotheistic, and ultimately monistic, doctrine teaching the inherent divinity and dignity of all beings.

For Roy, the reform of Hinduism was not only a matter of principle, but also a matter of practicality. In a letter dated 18 January, 1828, Roy writes to a friend that:

I agree with you that in point of vices the Hindus are not worse than the generality of Christians in Europe and America; but I regret to say that the present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interest. The distinction of castes, introducing innumerable divisions and sub-divisions among them, has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling, and the multitude of religious rites and ceremonies and the laws of purification have totally disqualified them from undertaking any difficult enterprise . . . It is, I think, necessary that some changes should take place in their religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort.[22]

Given the connection, in Roy's mind, between the reform of Hinduism and the need for political unity and 'patriotic feeling' among Hindus, it is clear that there is some linkage between the current of Hindu thought that Roy initiated and the later phenomena of Indian and Hindu nationalism. Roy's approach is not, however, characterized by the antagonism toward non-Hindu schools of thought that one finds in Hindu nationalist writings. Indeed, Roy believed that the original teachings of Vedānta, later corrupted by Hindu ritualism and casteism, and the original teachings of Christ, later corrupted by Christian trinitarianism and the doctrine of Christ as a divine incarnation, were one and the same: that Jesus was, in effect, a great teacher of Vedānta. The very next line in the letter by Roy just cited is, "I fully agree with you that there is nothing so sublime as the precepts taught by Christ, and that there is nothing equal to the simple doctrine he inculcated."[23]

In fact, Roy, much like Thomas Jefferson, published a version of the Christian gospels, with all references to miracles and Christ's divine paternity removed, titled *The Precepts of Jesus*.

Roy's lasting legacy is largely due to the fact that, in addition to his prodigious work in promulgating his ideas through books and pamphlets, as well as his activism in bringing about the banning of the practice of widow immolation—*sati* or 'suttee'—he also established an organization to promote the ideal of a 'purified' Hinduism based on the teachings of the Upaniṣads. This organization—the *Brahmo Samāj*, or 'Community of Brahman'—attracted a large number of male

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[20] (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 35).
[21] (Richards 1985, p. 1).
[22] Rāmmohan Roy, cited in (Richards 1985, pp. 8–9).
[23] Rāmmohan Roy, cited in (Richards 1985, p. 9).

followers from amongst the emerging English-educated middle class of Bengal, many of whom went on to become influential teachers in their own right. The first president of the Brahmo Samāj, after Roy, was Devendranath Tagore (1817–1905), who was known, among other things, for being the father of the famed Nobel laureate, playwright, songwriter, poet, essayist, and all-around Bengali cultural hero, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). The long-lived elder Tagore presided over the Brahmo Samāj for the better part of the nineteenth century. He was thus in a position to exert a major influence on the current of Hindu thought that Roy had initiated before him. A man of deeply spiritual inclinations, the direct experience of divinity was a major theme of his life and his writings. His moving, frank, and painfully honest reflections upon his experiences are very well represented by the following quote:

> Then I went out and sat underneath an ashvattha tree and according to the teaching of the saints began meditating on the Spirit of God dwelling in my soul. My mind was flooded with emotion, my eyes were filled with tears. All at once I saw the shining vision of Brahma in the lotus core of my heart. A thrill passed through my whole body, I felt a joy beyond all measure. But the next moment I could see Him no more. On losing sight of that beatific vision which destroys all sorrow, I suddenly rose from the ground. A great sadness came over my spirit. Then I tried to see Him again by force of contemplation, and found Him not. I became as one stricken with disease, and would not be comforted. Meanwhile I suddenly heard a voice in the air, 'In this life thou shalt see Me no more. Those whose hearts have not been purified, who have not attained the highest Yoga, cannot see Me. It was only to stimulate thy love that I once appeared before thee.[24]

Another prominent leader of the Brahmo Samāj who was a contemporary of Tagore, Sri Ramakrishna, and Swami Vivekananda, was Keshub Chunder Sen. Sen plays a major role in the history of the pluralistic and experientially based current of modern Hindu thought as an intermediary between the Brahmo Samāj tradition and what would emerge by the end of the nineteenth century as the Vedānta tradition of Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Sen (1838–1884) emphasized even more than Roy had what he perceived as the harmonies and affinities between Hinduism and Christianity. He envisioned a 'New Dispensation,' or *Nava Vidhān*, which he described in the following terms:

> It is the harmony of all scriptures and prophets and dispensations. It is not an isolated creed, but the science which binds and explains and harmonizes all religions. It gives history a meaning, to the action of Providence a consistency, to quarrelling churches a common bond, and to successive dispensations a continuity. It shows marvelous synthesis how the different rainbow colours are one in the light of heaven. The New Dispensation is the sweet music of diverse instruments. [An echo of this image can be discerned in the modern Vedāntic teaching of 'harmony of religions,' mentioned earlier, that has clearly drawn inspiration from Sen's teaching.] It is the precious necklace in which are strung together the rubies and pearls of all ages and climes. [This echoes *Bhagavad Gītā* 7:7, in which Krishna says, "All beings are strung upon me like pearls upon a thread."] It is the celestial court where around enthroned Divinity shine the lights of all heavenly saints and prophets. [This is a pluralist take on the traditional Christian image of God as a divine sovereign enthroned in heaven.] It is the wonderful solvent, which fuses all dispensations into a new chemical compound. [Here we see Sen also bringing in scientific imagery, another characteristic of modern Hindu thought.] It is the mighty absorbent, which absorbs all that is true and good and beautiful in the objective world. Before the flag of the New Dispensation bow ye nations, and proclaim the Brotherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man.[25]

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[24] Devendranath Tagore, cited in (Richards 1985, p. 27).
[25] Keshub Chunder Sen, cited in (Richards 1985, pp. 43–44).

These words of Sen, describing a new 'universal religion' drawing upon all that is good, beautiful, and true in all faiths would not be out of place in the *Complete Works* of Swami Vivekananda. The historical link between Sen, Ramakrishna, and Vivekananda is very clear, for it is found in the original source material on the life of Sri Ramakrishna, which has become akin to a scripture in the Ramakrishna movement. According to *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Ramakrishna was a frequent visitor to Sen's home, and the two were close conversation partners. In fact, one of the three photographs taken of Ramakrishna during his lifetime was taken in Sen's house, during a Brahmo Samāj gathering which Ramakrishna attended. In the photograph, Ramakrishna is seen standing in one of his famous samādhi trances, being kept from falling by one of his disciples who is standing nearby. It is highly likely that there was mutual influence between Sen and Ramakrishna. Indeed, this is well attested. Similarly, the young Narendranath Datta, later to take the monastic name Swami Vivekananda, was also a frequent attendee of Brahmo Samāj gatherings at Sen's house. It was at Sen's house that Datta and Ramakrishna first crossed paths, with Ramakrishna hearing the young Datta sing hymns. It was later, with Sen's passing, that Ramakrishna would take on the role of Datta's guru. The religious thought of both Sen and Sri Ramakrishna can be discerned in the teachings of Swami Vivekananda.

It has become customary among scholars to refer to the current of thought represented by all of these figures as 'Neo-Hinduism' or 'Neo-Vedānta.' This convention, though, has come under recent scrutiny, as it has been shown to convey a pejorative sense that this branch of the tradition is somehow inauthentic.[26] Any tradition of sufficient age and complexity certainly exhibits both continuity and change over time. There are core themes of Vedānta which persist from this tradition's foundational texts—the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma Sūtras*, and *Bhagavad Gītā*—to its current iterations, including the thought of Ramakrishna. And there are discontinuities amongst the various systems of Vedānta that have developed through the centuries: Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Madhva's Dvaita Vedānta, Nimbārka's Bhedābheda Vedānta, Caitanya's Acintya Bhedābheda Vedānta, and so on. Each of these systems would have been 'neo' at the time of its first expression.

The term 'Neo-Vedānta' was coined by Indologist Paul Hacker. Hacker, as James Madaio has argued, "influentially argued that Neo-Vedānta was a nationalistic movement dependent upon the 'assimilation' of Western ideals. The term 'Neo-Vedānta' thus entered mainstream academic discourse as a pejorative term–indiscriminately used in reference to a number of different Hindu thinkers who held variant theological views–and connoting a sense of inauthenticity because 'continuity with the past has been broken.'"[27] Hacker's dichotomy of 'Neo' and 'genuine' Vedānta depends upon a reification of Śaṅkara's Vedānta as definitive of authentic Vedānta, rendering all other versions of this philosophy inauthentic. If a scholar were to make an analogous move with regard to Hacker's own tradition, it would render all Roman Catholic thought coming after Thomas Aquinas as 'Neo-Catholicism'. Major Catholic thinkers of the modern period, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner, not mention Hacker himself, would thus become 'Neo-Catholic'. As Madaio argues, this artificial bifurcation of Hindu tradition into authentic Śaṅkaran Advaita and inauthentic 'Neo' Vedānta depends on an ignorance of post-Śaṅkara Vedāntic developments.

Two of the main features which differentiate modern Vedānta and modern Hindu thought generally from the premodern forms of Hinduism are those which are under consideration in this paper: the pluralism and the emphasis on direct experience of ultimate reality that are central themes in the teachings of modern Hindu teachers like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, and many other modern Hindu teachers as well, including Sri Aurobindo and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and many of the gurus with followings in the Western world, starting with Vivekananda himself. The prominence of universalism and direct experience as major themes of modern Hindu discourse, though, while

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26　(Maharaj 2018, pp. 45–50).
27　((Madaio 2017, p. 3).

certainly differentiating this discourse from premodern forms of Hindu thought, should not be taken to imply that modern Hindu thought marks a massive or unbridgeable rupture with the earlier tradition, as the terms 'Neo-Vedānta' and 'Neo-Hindu' might suggest. The themes of universalism and direct experience both have antecedents in premodern Hindu sources.

In regard to pluralism, particularly famous sources often cited in support of this view include the *Ṛg Veda* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, respectively:

> Reality is one, though the wise speak of it in various ways.[28]

> In whatever way living beings approach me, thus do I receive them. All paths, Arjuna, lead to me.[29]

There is also the entire medieval Indian tradition of Hindu and Muslim figures, such as Kabīr, and the first Sikh Guru, Nānak, speaking in syncretic and universalistic ways, crossing the boundaries of Hindu and Islamic traditions in order to affirm the oneness of divinity, beyond sectarian divides.

In regard to the primacy of direct experience of sources such as book learning (the śabda pramāṇa), there is, in addition to the *Yoga Sūtras*, mentioned earlier, this verse from the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

> As useful as a water tank when there is flooding in all directions, that is how useful all of the Vedas are for a Brahmin who has true insight.[30]

The distinction between modern and premodern thought, while certainly real, can be, and often has been, overstated, and typically involves the invocation of Hacker's term, 'Neo-Vedānta.' Such overstatement typically stems, again, from comparing the thought of a modern Hindu thinker, such as Vivekananda, with the thought of the eighth to ninth century giant of Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkara, while ignoring the intermediate developments that have occurred in the Vedānta tradition in the centuries between Śaṅkara's period and the present.[31]

3. The Logical Connection between Pluralism and an Emphasis on Direct Experience

The logical connection between pluralism and an emphasis on direct experience in the thought of modern Hindu figures such as Ramakrishna and Vivekananda is not simply an effect of the idea, mentioned previously, that Ramakrishna is understood to have pursued and achieved the state of samādhi, or of absorption of his consciousness in ultimate reality, through diverse practices rooted in a variety of religious paths. This could be seen, rather, as validation of a deeper axiom that makes possible a set of experiences of the kind that the Ramakrishna tradition claims him to have had: the axiom that direct experience, *anubhava*, is the most reliable guide to the nature of ultimate reality, and the further claim that what such direct experience reveals is that there is truth in all religions.

The logical connection between pluralism and direct experience is as follows. In what might be called a conventional constructivist account of religious experience, religious experience is a result of the cultivation of mental states which operate on the basis of certain assumptions and practices given to the experiencing subject by her cultural and religious environment. A Christian mystic, to put it at its simplest, might therefore engage in a series of practices that issue in a vision of Christ. They will not typically issue in a vision of Krishna or the Buddha. Similarly, a Vaiṣṇava Hindu mystic will engage in practices that issue in a vision of Krishna, not of Christ or the Buddha, and a Buddhist will engage in practices that issue in a formless nirvāṇa: the aim, precisely, for the sake of which the practice is cultivated

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28 *Ṛg Veda* 1.164: 46c.
29 *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:11.
30 *Bhagavad Gītā* 2:46.
31 The work of scholars like Andrew Nicholson, Ayon Maharaj, and James Madaio has begun to help in rectifying this situation, particularly Madaio (2017) article, cited earlier; though the terms 'Neo-Vedānta' and 'Neo-Hindu' still seem to have considerably currency amongst scholars of religion. There is, in particular, a tendency to link 'Neo-Vedānta' with Hindu nationalism, which is at odds with the pluralism central to Ramakrishna's and Vivekananda's thought.

This is somewhat at odds, however, with what religious practitioners take themselves to be engaged in, very often, in the world's religious traditions. The constructivist account of religious experience need not entail, but is quite compatible with, the assumption that religious experiences are ultimately delusory; and this often does seem to be an assumption underlying constructivist accounts of religious experience. Such accounts are often reductive in nature, amounting to the claim that religious experiences can be accounted for, not merely in certain aspects, or in the forms that they take, but *in their totality*, through recourse to cultural, economic, political, psychological, and other, ultimately material, factors. According to this understanding, Christians and Vaiṣṇavas and Buddhists do not have their experiences of Jesus or Krishna or nirvāṇa because there is really a Jesus or a Krishna or a nirvāṇa that is, in some sense, really *there*, but due to the fact that, if one manipulates one's mind in a particular way, conditioned by a particular set of shared religious and cultural assumptions, then one will have experiences of this kind. However, for the Christian or the Vaiṣṇava, Christ and Krishna can be perceived because they are really real, and are bestowing this particular grace upon those of their devotees who have cultivated the proper state of mind to be receptive to this divine gift; and for the Buddhist, nirvāṇa can be experienced because it is the true nature of reality, which spontaneously becomes evident to one who has cleared away all of the mental obstructions to its true perception.

This is not to say that constructivism is a wholly incorrect or inappropriate conceptual tool for understanding religious experience, even if one is committed to a realist religious worldview of the kind that I have sketched here as characterizing the worldview of the religious practitioner. Indeed, there are many religious traditions which also emphasize the constructed nature of experience, and the fact that certain realities which are not evident to the senses are available for perception only to practitioners who have cultivated the requisite mental and moral disciplines. Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism both come readily to mind, though there are many other examples as well. 'Constructed' need not mean 'false,' though it is, again, compatible with, and can certainly lend itself to, a view of religious experience as a fundamentally delusory experiential modality. To take a side on this question, as a reductionistic skeptic or as a religiously realist believer, requires the importation of some additional philosophical assumptions.

In regard to Vedānta, a traditional or premodern conception of how the process of reaching the experience of Brahman occurs fits extremely well with a constructivist model. As Rambachan and others have shown, in the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara, an essential component of cultivating the true knowledge, or *jñāna*, that issues in—and is indeed constitutive of—*mokṣa*, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth is learning about Brahman from the Vedic texts, which form the śabda pramāṇa:

> How is it possible for the words of the Upanisads to function as a direct and valid source of knowledge? Words can provide valid knowledge when the object of knowledge is readily and immediately available, not separate from the knower by a gap of time or space, and does not have to be created or brought into existence . . . In the case of the story of the tenth person [in which a group of ten friends who have swum across a river fear they may be missing someone, and the leader keeps coming up with nine when doing a head count, and then realizes, when someone points it out to him, that he has been failing to count himself] . . . the words 'You are the tenth person' fulfill their intention and purpose when rightly comprehended because the tenth person is immediately available and lost only in ignorance. The words in the wisdom section of the Vedas (the Upaniṣads) function like the words addressed to the tenth person.[32]

Brahman is not the kind of entity that can be perceived through the senses, so it cannot be known through sensory perception (pratyakṣa). The certain existence of Brahman also cannot be inferred through logical reasoning (anumāṇa). Brahman is a unique entity that can only be known through

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[32] (Rambachan 2015, p. 44).

the words and revelations of the Vedas, directly informing one 'You are That.' The śabda pramāṇa is essential.[33]

It is not that the knowledge of Brahman is a result of simply hearing the Vedic texts. As Rambachan says, the words of these texts must be "rightly comprehended." Hearing (*śravaṇam*) is merely the essential first step in the process of, ultimately, experiencing the reality of Brahman. Hearing is followed by reflection on the meaning of the text, in order to comprehend it correctly and thoroughly, typically with the guidance of a knowledgeable, competent teacher. Rational reflection (*mananam*) is thus an important part of the process as well. The process finally culminates in *nidhidhyāsana*, or meditative reflection, which issues, at last, in the direct experience (*anubhava*) of Brahman. For Śaṅkara, anubhava is a pramāṇa, but one which is dependent, for its occurrence, upon the prior acts of hearing, reflecting, and contemplating just outlined. It does not arise independently of these, and it is not contemplated that it might arise through engagement with the teachings and practices of another tradition, like Buddhism.

This model fits well with constructivism because there is no question of, say, a Buddhist, much less a Roman Catholic from medieval France or a Sunni Muslim from the Arabian peninsula of Śaṅkara's time, experiencing Brahman. *Brahman* refers to a specific concept knowable only in the context of the Vedic literature in which it appears. A Buddhist, a Catholic, or a Muslim will not have an experience of Brahman any more than a Christian will have a vision of Krishna or a Vaisnava will experience nirvāṇa as understood in Theravāda Buddhism.

This model is compatible with a constructivism of the skeptical sort because all of these putative objects of religious experience are capable of being seen as cultural constructs of the literary, ritual, and other religious settings where they arise—and nothing more.[34]

The multi-religious practices of Sri Ramakrishna, though, would seem to sidestep the epistemic process that is described in traditional Advaita Vedānta. Ramakrishna, by most accounts and studies of his life, was not an educated person, at least in a traditional sense. He had a prodigious memory and spent a good deal of time listening to religious and philosophical texts being read to him. But he was, for the most part, not focused upon uninspired 'book learning,' uninformed by spiritual practice. Indeed, he compared such learning to the actions of carrion birds who fly in the sky of knowledge but have their attention fixed on rotting corpses on the ground.[35]

Ramakrishna was focused on cultivating experience of the divine reality. The accounts of his practices in our sources on his life describe not so much an intellectual process as an emotional one, characterized mostly by deep and intense longing. His injunctions in regard to how one can "see God" consistently emphasize the importance of desiring the divine vision above all things:

> One should cry for God that way, like a child. That is what it means to be restless for God. One doesn't enjoy play or food any longer. After one's experiences of the world are over, one feels this restlessness and weeps for God.[36]

How is it possible to experience Brahman without first cultivating the kind of knowledge that is prescribed by Śaṅkara: or, for that matter, to experience Christ without first being baptized and taking instruction in the traditional Christian fashion, or to encounter the Prophet Muhammad in a vision after only three days of practicing as a Muslim? These are precisely the achievements attributed to Sri Ramakrishna in the extant works on his life.[37]

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[33] See (Rambachan 1994).

[34] June McDaniel notes that if mystics "do experience figures outside of the particular constructivist meditation, it will be understood as madness. But such experiences are not impossible. Most religions have concepts of religious madness (or heresy), including contacting the wrong deity." Personal communication.

[35] (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 101).

[36] (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 1011)

[37] The *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta*, translated and already cited here as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, translated by Swami Nikhilananda, and the *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlaprasaṅga*, translated by Swami Chetanananda as *Sri Ramakrishna's Divine Play* (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis).

One response to the question, clearly, is the skeptical response: that Ramakrishna actually did none of these things, but that he suffered from a sequence of delusory experiences brought on by a combination of his own, idiosyncratic mental makeup and whatever spiritual practices he had been engaged in. Another possibility, however, suggests itself in the very textual sources that the Advaita tradition utilizes in cultivating the saving knowledge that is its goal. This is the religiously realist possibility that Ramakrishna was able to have the experiences that he did because Brahman is real, and can be experienced in the great variety of forms that Ramakrishna experienced.

The *Upaniṣads* do not teach that Brahman is a mere conceptual construct. Brahman is rather, according to these texts, the foundational reality that is at the basis of all existence. *Sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahman*, claims one of the 'great sentences,' or *mahāvākya*-s, which Śaṅkara takes to convey true knowledge of Brahman. "All of this, indeed, is Brahman."[38]

If Brahman is, indeed, the universal reality—or, for that matter, if Christ is the divine Word (*logos*) through whom all things were made, or if nirvāṇa is the true nature of reality, revealed to one's consciousness after all obstructions have been removed—then it is reasonable to expect that this universal reality has been experienced by persons in other cultures and traditions, albeit using the categories available to them. If Brahman is the universal reality, might it not be possible to experience Brahman in the form of the ultimate realities posited by many traditions: as the various deities, as Christ, and so on? I would argue that it was on this assumption of religious realism, the assumption of a universal reality behind all veridical experience, that Sri Ramakrishna pursued his multi-religious practices and found them validated in his various experiences of samādhi.

Of course, a skeptic could at this point argue that a pluralistic set of religious experiences is no less constructed than those pursued through the medium of a singular tradition. So, just as a devout Christian experiences Christ, a Vaisnava Hindu experiences Krishna, and so on, a pluralist like Ramakrishna experiences all of these things. According to the constructivist thesis, whatever it is that we ultimately expect of our spiritual practices, if we pursue these practices with sufficient diligence to the point where our mental make-up is transformed by them, we get just that thing. We get precisely what we expect.

It seems that there is really no way to adjudicate this issue, as it is based on whatever prior ontological commitments one brings to the discussion. But an alternative narrative to the skeptical one is possible, in which it is not that the experiences of a mystic like Ramakrishna are *solely* the constructs of the mystic's mind, composed of the elements from the mystic's cultural environment. The alternative narrative is that there is, indeed, a higher reality that is experienced by religious practitioners who cultivate the required sensitivity to have such experiences, but that this is a reality that lends itself to being experienced in multiple ways: as Christ, as Krishna, and so on.

This, famously, is the route pursued by philosopher of religion John Hick in the developing his Pluralistic Hypothesis, according to which the various realities that are experienced by religious persons of varied traditions are all grounded in a common ultimate reality to which he refers as 'the Real'.[39] Hick builds upon the work of William Alston, who develops the concept of belief-forming, or 'doxastic' practices: practices which predispose us to perceive reality in a particular way, based on the beliefs on which these practices are based and which they, in turn, support.

This sounds like constructivism—and is, to some extent. It acknowledges the role played by culture and the categories practitioners draw from their traditions in the construction of their putative experiences of divinity. But Alston is not skeptic. He is a Christian apologist. In fact, his central thesis is that Christians are justified in trusting the experiences that they have on the basis of their doxastic practices, given that such practices are not of a fundamentally different type from doxastic practices that form common beliefs about the material world based on sensory perception. As he points out,

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[38]   *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14:1.
[39]   See (Hick 1989).

the charge of circularity that can be leveled at Christians who believe based upon the experiences that they have which are cultivated, in part, by those very same beliefs, can be leveled just as well at belief in the reliability of sensory perception. If there is no non-circular way to validate Christian mystical experiences, there is similarly no non-circular way to validate sensory perceptions; for if we doubt a particular sensory perception, the way we typically test it is through recourse to other sensory perceptions. Sensory perception as such, as a modality of knowledge, is not, itself, questioned, at least in our everyday experience, but also in higher-level secular doxastic practices, such as in the practice of modern science.[40]

While Hick utilizes Alston's work to argue for the validity of mystical experience as a way to attain knowledge of transcendental realities, Alston returns the favor by citing Hick in response to one possible objection to his theory: namely, that it is not only Christians, but people of many different religions who can, using his model, claim validity for their religious experiences. Alston responds to this objection by raising, at least as a possibility, the idea that Hick's claim of a shared ultimate reality underlying all religious experience is true. If the ultimate reality is not something that can be contained in any single concept—if it is, to cite the *Upaniṣads*, 'not this, not that,' *neti neti*–then it lends itself to being experienced in ways cultivated by diverse doxastic practices.

4. Conclusions: The Appeal of the Universalist Experientialist Approach

Why is a modern Hindu approach to religion, which combines universalism with a strong emphasis on direct experience of ultimate reality, appealing to so many contemporary spiritual practitioners, particularly amongst those who define themselves as 'spiritual but not religious,' or who are drawn to Asian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism?

To answer this question properly would require a book-length study. No doubt the answer would have to include discussion of the growth of individualism and the concurrent disintegration of traditional religious identities in late modernity, the rise of multiculturalism, globalization, perceived ethical lapses, materialism, and hypocrisy among religious practitioners and institutions, and so on.

Briefly, though, it seems fair to say that many today recoil from the violence of a growing trend toward ethno-nationalism, often couched in religious terms, with its attendant hostility to the religious or cultural other. No religious tradition, it seems, has been exempt from this trend in the early years of the twenty-first century. Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish versions of it can be found. Even a critic of the claim that Ramakrishna experienced ultimate reality under the guise of a variety of forms and modalities, points out the following:

> It goes without saying . . . that Ramakrishna's claim of practical God-realisation through different religions is accepted as genuine by his followers. Having such a belief can definitively infuse in them a tolerant attitude towards different religions. To that extent Ramakrishna's religious experiences can certainly be a source for peaceful coexistence and interreligious harmony.[41]

In a world of, it seems, ever-growing interreligious hostility, Ramakrishna and his multireligious experiences are an inspiration to those who wish to cultivate a more peaceful, harmonious world, while at the same time not giving up on religion altogether.

One option, clearly, for those who wish to go beyond a world of inter-religious hatred is to set aside religion as such. And yet religious narratives, for many, provide essential comfort in the face of the sufferings of life: death, disease, and loss of all kinds. Rather than opt for the idea of 'one true religion' in the face of these sufferings, and then run the risk of conflict with those who make a different choice, it is far more appealing to opt for the idea of many true religions, many effective

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40 See (Alston 1993).
41 (Akram 2017, p. 52).

paths to salvation. We thus each make our own choices without having to clash with our neighbors over religion.

Even beyond this kind of theological rationalization, Sri Ramakrishna's experiential approach invites others to pursue their own direct experiences as well. It is thus not only that Ramakrishna's pluralism is an attractive theological stance for those seeking a *religious* alternative to religious tribalism. It is also that this approach invites and sustains an openness, not only conceptually, but experientially, to the religious other. We are thus enabled, even while adhering to whatever particular religious identity we regard as our own, to explore the practices of others, and to experience ultimate reality in the ways that others do. One can see Thomas Merton, for example, as one such pluralistic pioneer of experience, delving deeply, even while remaining a committed Catholic, into the Hindu yogic and Buddhist Zen traditions. Religious experiences do not merely differentiate. There also are powerful experiences of universal compassion, or divine love for all beings, that can sustain a life commitment to peace, social justice, and human dignity.

Those figures who have committed themselves to these dimensions of practice command multi-religious followings, beyond their home religious communities—figures such as Gandhi, King, and the Dalai Lama have universal appeal. The logical connections between religious pluralism, or universalism, and the quest for a direct experience of ultimate reality, are not only of an intellectual nature. They can run through the heart as well.

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