Article

Swami Vivekananda, Hindu Dharma and 'Social Ethics' in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

In nineteenth-century colonial India, Hindu Dharma was attacked by colonial machinery and Christian missionaries for lacking social ethics and morality, with an understanding that Christianity had an 'inherent and timeless' social ethic and was concerned with the social upliftment of the poor. This paradigm to criticise Hinduism was also extended to criticise those Hindu intellectuals, especially Swami Vivekananda, who were deliberating over the question of ethics and morality, intending to make Hindu Dharma an agent of social change. These developments in Hindu Dharma were criticised as an outcome of or reaction to Christian social ethics and thereby were declared inauthentic in both colonial and post-colonial periods. By historicising and contextualising the concept of Christian social ethics and morality, this paper debunks the propaganda that concern for the poor and the marginalised was an 'inherent and timeless' feature of Christianity.

The question of ethics or rather lack of ethics[1] was one of the central themes through which the British colonial machinery and Christian missionaries critiqued Hinduism throughout the nineteenth century. As Prathama Banerjee notes: "the dominant colonial and missionary critique of Indian religions was not just that they were superstitious

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and idolatrous, but that they were inferior precisely because they failed to generate a social ethic like that of Christian charity and therefore fundamentally disabled public action."[2] This deeply held stereotypical image of Hinduism as a world-denying, passive religion among the colonial officials and Christian missionaries denied the possibility that Hinduism could generate ideals of social ethics and engagement.[3] In continuation of this line of argument, the missionaries, as well as a host of academics based in Western institutions, created the labels like 'neo-Hinduism', 'neo-Vedanta', 'modern Hinduism', etc., to denote various religious organisations (e.g., Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Ramakrishna Math and Mission, etc.) that emerged in the nineteenth century with the objective of social transformation of Indian society.

These labels are often used in a derogatory fashion with an implicit judgemental tone towards two interrelated ends, that is: a) to emphasise that what is called 'neo-Hinduism' is something that was born out of Christian and Western influence in the colonial period, and therefore, b) it is inauthentic as it represents a decisive break with what has been labelled as 'traditional' Hinduism.[4] Paul Hacker, a German Indologist in the third quarter of the twentieth century, was most influential in pushing this idea. But even before Hacker, missionaries like Joel Nicholas Farquhar, a contemporary of Swami Vivekananda, was a forerunner of this propaganda. In his survey of reform movements in colonial India, he categorically wrote that "Indian social reform movement is a direct outcome of Christian missions and Western influence."[5]

In the context of colonial and missionary critique of Hinduism for lacking morality and ethics and responses to this question from newly emerging Hindu intelligentsia, Halbfass rightly observes that the 'role of ethics is central for the self-understanding and self-articulation of modern Hindu thought.'[6] Hindu intellectuals like Ram Mohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, among others, rearticulated the concept of Dharma (as a code of conduct and engagement with the social world) in the long nineteenth century[7] in light of those critiques. The question of ethics in Hinduism became so pressing by the end of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth century that there emerged a range of manuals especially dedicated to the subject of Hindu ethics.[8]

Among the wide range of personalities associated with the label of 'neo-Hinduism', 'neo-Vedanta', and 'modern Hinduism', etc., it is especially Swami Vivekananda who is marked out for analysis and criticism for his interpretations of ethics. The reason for

these criticisms is not surprising because among all Hindu intellectuals of the 19th century (and continuing centuries) he had, and continues to have, the most profound impact on Western society as he sharply and unapologetically critiqued the Christian and colonial propaganda against Hinduism. In the year 1897, Swami Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna Math and Mission named after his Guru Ramkrishna Paramhamsa with the objective of social transformation of Hindu society. Since then, this development has been regularly criticised by academics as well as missionaries. Criticising Vivekananda for making 'service to humanity' a central motif of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Joel Nicol Farquhar in 1915 wrote, 'the truth is that ancient Hinduism does not teach the duty of service at all.'[9] Half a century later, Paul Hacker vehemently criticised Vivekananda's practical Vedanta based on the Vedantic theological concept of 'Tat Tvam Asi' (the basis of his 'service to humanity' project) as a "logical impossibility"[10] and therefore, inauthentic, born out of the colonial situation, derived from European (Schopenhauerian) interpretation and apologetic in tone.[11] Most recently, writing about Swami Vivekananda, Torkel Brekke in

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his survey of modern Hindu thinkers says: 'Vivekananda struggled to fuse two mutually exclusive ideals: the ideal of renunciation and the ideal of charitable work.'[12] While acknowledging that both Western and Christian ideas did influence the Hindu intellectuals of the nineteenth century, this article argues that the early criticisms of Hinduism for the lack of ethics and morality by colonial officials and Christian missionaries and later criticism of Swami Vivekananda for his concept of 'practical Vedanta' are an outcome of ignorance and propaganda. This propaganda informs modern-day (in a temporal sense) critics of Swami Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Math and Mission for their concept and practice of 'service to humanity'.

Propaganda, as a form of communication to influence the beliefs, thoughts, and practices of people through a system of symbols, architecture, speech, words, etc., has existed since the beginning of civilisation. Interestingly, in the context of this paper it may be useful to refer to the etymological origin of the word propaganda itself. The online dictionary traces the origin to the Latin word meaning to propagate or "set forward, extend, spread, increase."[13] The dictionary also informs that this word was

part of the name of a committee (Congregation de Propaganda Fide, or "congregation for propagating the faith") formed by Pope Gregory XV in the year 1622 to propagate Catholicism in foreign lands and to counter the Protestant reformation in the Christendom.

The very origin of the word propaganda in the Catholic context shows that it was based on twin agendas of a) converting those whom they called "heathens", to "save their soul" and b) countering Protestant critiques. This understanding of 'propaganda' has two inherent components a) undermining and demeaning the other, and b) self-eulogisation. In general, propaganda is used to demean and undermine the beliefs of the target audience with the aim to convert them to their ideology or to deplete their morale. In the context of nineteenth-century colonial India, the Christian missionary attacks on Hinduism were motivated by twin interrelated concerns of converting Hindus to their faith and perpetuating colonial rule. Propaganda is either based on partial or total falsehood and develops a paradigm or a framework through which attacks are made on the 'other'— in this case, Hinduism. This paper shows that the paradigm developed by Christian missionaries and sustained and promoted by colonial machinery was based not only on a dishonest understanding of Hinduism but also on their own tradition.

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The paradigm that informed colonial and missionary propaganda against Hinduism had two negative components about Hinduism, namely a) it is 'otherworldly', b) it lacks morality and ethics, while Christianity is 'this-worldly', ethical and has moral dimensions. These feathers of Christianity were presented as 'inherent and timeless', i.e., always existing. Further, this paradigm operated within two broader frameworks a) the superiority of Christianity, and b) the justificatory ideology of colonialism best expressed in the phrase 'white man's burden'. Both these frameworks worked in tandem (like a feedback loop) with each other with the single objective of maintaining colonial rule.

This paper challenges this paradigm by historicising the supposedly 'inherent and timeless' features of Christianity that were propagated in nineteenth-century colonial

India. In this context, it looks at one of the accusations labelled against Hinduism that is also relevant in the context of Swami Vivekananda's concept of 'service to humanity' and the Ramakrishna Math and Mission's practice of it. It has long been argued that ancient Hinduism lacked any social concern and that the institution of Hindu renunciation is incompatible with social engagement. Let us see where this allegation and criticism that Hinduism is strictly 'other-worldly' and, therefore, incompatible with social engagement stands in the light of historical evidence.

Kenneth G. Zysk in his study of medical tradition in ancient India mentions the existence of Hindu Maths in Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu that by the tenth century had integrated the study of medicine into their religious life and had established places to care for the sick and destitute where people were treated and fed irrespective of caste.[14] Similarly, Hartmut Scharfe while describing the role of Math in education and production and preservation of knowledge in ancient India provides an example of Kodiya Math located in present-day Karnataka which had provision for providing medical aid and food for local people as well as pilgrims.[15] A stone inscription from the 12th century about the Kodiya Math reads, "There is the Kodiyamatha… a place for the provision of food to the poor, the helpless, the crippled, the blind, the deaf, story-tellers, singers… a place for the medical treatment of the diseases of the many helpless and sick; a place for offering protection to all living beings…".[16] Similarly, the Golkai Math in present-day Andhra Pradesh had the provision for providing food to everyone "from the Brahmanas to Chandalas."[17] The Sringeri Math associated with Vedanta also had the provision to provide food for the needy.[18] Apart from these, the sanyasis, especially of the Dasanami tradition, have also acted as warriors and moneylenders at different points in history in the context of external challenges and pressure.[19]

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Thus, the role and nature of Hindu monastic organisations have changed and evolved throughout history. Nalini Rao capturing the trajectory of the historical evolution, function, and role of Math, defines it as "…an organized integral system of

education, worship, feeding, and lodging, consisting of a community of disciples who adhere to a set of beliefs affiliated to the founder and headed by an ascetic guru…a maṭha is an educational and ascetic institution, headed by a Guru."[20] In light of this brief but evidence-based discussion, it can be asserted that both temples and maths, apart from being centres of education and religious devotion also had a philanthropic role; social service was an integral part of their everyday life in ancient as well as medieval India.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part presents, in brief, the context in which 'morality' and 'ethics' emerged as autonomous concepts throughout the 18th century, and how those factors combining with others led to the formulation of 'Christian social ethics' in the 19th century. The second part discusses the intervention and contribution of Swami Vivekananda in the debate over the question of the relationship between religion and ethics in the 19th century while debunking Hacker's claim.

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Religion, Morality, and Ethics in 18-19th Century Europe

Has the practice of social service or caring for the poor, destitute, and the marginalised been an institutionalised and central practice of Christianity throughout its history of two millennia? Or, did these features become important in the Christian tradition at a particular juncture in history? One of the first and most comprehensive answers to this question was provided by the liberal Protestant theologian, historian, and pioneer of the social gospel movement, Ernest Troeltsch in his seminal work '*The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*' (published in 1912; English translation in 1931). In regards to the question of 'social ethics' in early Christianity, Troeltsch writes:

> "…in the whole range of the Early Christian literature-missionary and devotional-both within and without the New Testament, there is no hint of any formulation of the 'Social' question; the central problem is always purely religion, dealing with such questions as the salvation of the soul, monotheism, life after death, purity of worship, the right kind of congregational organization, the application of Christian ideas to daily life, and the need for

severe self-discipline in the interests of personal holiness…It is worthy of special note with Early Christian apologetics contains no arguments dealing either with hopes of improving the existing social situation or with any attempt to heal social ills…".[21]

According to Troeltsch, early Christianity had accepted the ancient social order as fixed, incapable of being reformed; the prevailing social ills and misery were understood as sinful corruption. Coming to the middle ages, when the Church became all-powerful and provided legitimacy to political order, the prevailing social order was regarded as 'natural' and 'logical' and therefore, the question of social transformation was seen as superfluous.[22] This pessimistic attitude only began to change in the 16th century when the power and prestige once enjoyed by the Church gradually began to erode because of various factors.

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Crisis of Christianity in the Nineteenth Century and Responses

With the Protestant reformation of the sixteenth century began the gradual displacement of the Catholic Church from the public sphere of human life in Europe. The Reformation not only challenged the Church but also Christianity as a religion since many of the theological ideas associated with medieval Christianity were critiqued and new interpretations of them were presented by the reformers. This crisis only aggravated with the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the very category of Religion was challenged and critiqued in light of reason. However, the most significant challenge that Religion (in this context Christianity) faced in the eighteenth century, which continued throughout the nineteenth, came from scientific, industrial, and political revolutions.

The French Revolution had, for once and all, pushed back the Church and the theological basis of temporal rule to the background. However, the most detrimental challenge that Christianity faced in the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century came from the scientific revolution. Though tension between science and Christianity had begun in the seventeenth and continued throughout the eighteenth

century, it took broader proportions in the nineteenth century due to multiple reasons. Before the nineteenth century, the attacks on Christianity were primarily philosophical and rationalistic in nature and did not question the fundamental truth or value of religion. The rationalist and philosophical critiques of Christianity represented by philosophers like Spinoza, Voltaire, Kant, and Hume and from movements such as Socinianism, deism, and neologism remained internal to religious thought.[23] They were mainly concerned with and revolved around, what Harvey calls, 'old-age issues' like the possibility of miracles, the existence of evil, and the cogency of the arguments for the existence of God.[24]

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In the nineteenth century, the situation changed dramatically. The rationalistic and philosophical critiques of religion got combined with discoveries in the field of geology and biology and the historicity of the Bible.[25] The challenge to Christianity was further compounded by attacks from political revolutionaries, liberal reformers, utilitarian moralists, positivistic social theorists, and agnostics.[26] The emergence of a professionalised form of knowledge production in the fields of anthropology, psychology, and sociology only aggravated the crisis for Christianity, and the challenge became more radical. In light of these developments, as Eisen says, science and religion— more precisely science and theology— were deemed to be 'in conflict'[27], and the relationship between them deteriorated.[28] There was growing scepticism about religion as a genuine human phenomenon; there was a crisis of faith. Max Weber called this displacement of the Christian worldview by the scientific worldview as 'disenchantment.'

This growing scepticism or 'crisis of faith' did not go unchallenged. The advent of science and the scientific method and the ensuing crisis of religion in the nineteenth century led to multiple attempts at the reinterpretation of religion (specifically, Christianity) in light of challenges presented by science and rationalist thought. Throughout the nineteenth century, there were attempts by philosophers and theologians to interpret Christianity in the light of modern knowledge and their own particular philosophies.[29] Hedley and Ryan observe that "the predominant position of nineteenth-century philosophy of religion was conciliatory. Its main figures set out to confront,

absorb and pass beyond the radical Enlightenment's critical assault on Europe's religious and metaphysical tradition by developing philosophical synthesis that, to a great extent, assimilated the main lines and presuppositions of these critiques, while simultaneously preserving the most important features of Europe's religious inheritance."[30]

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One product of this engagement was the development of deism or natural theology, as a "method of using scientific data to demonstrate the existence and attributes of God"[31] which gained popularity in the early modern period and continued till the nineteenth century. Another response was the application of scientific methods to the study of religious phenomena on a cross-cultural basis[32], which came to be known as the science of religion or *Religionwissenchaft.* This remained largely a movement in academia and got institutionalised in universities and found its profound expression in the works of Max Muller, the German Indologist.

There were three other forms of responses to the crisis of religion in the nineteenth century aimed at defending Christianity. The first can be called a speculative revision of religion aimed at the defence of religion as a generic aspect of human life. Stephen Crites divides the speculative approach— which he defines as 'reflexivity confirming thought and sensibility to what is divine'[33] — into three broader types, namely a) Immanuel Kant's formulation of religion as morality (religion as the need for inspiration of moral conduct), b) that of Friedrich Schleiermacher's emphasis on the essence of religion based on an analysis of religious experience, which he defined as the sense of absolute dependence on God through 'positive theology'[34] and lastly, c) transcendentalism, which developed in the United States in the writings of various poets and essayist and philosophers and argued against the existence of dualisms like faith-reason, subjectivity-objectivity, spirit-matter.[35]

The second response can be described as a conservative approach that tried to maintain allegiance to a historical religious tradition by putting the modern critical philosophy in the service of Christian apologia. According to Livingstone, "this particular response was concerned to defend a positive (i.e., historical) revelation and religious

tradition. At the same time, they often sought to develop traditional forms of belief to show their continuing meaning and relevance, as well as their compatibility with developments in philosophy, science, and historical research."[36] This type of response specifically insisted on the divine origin of language arguing that symbolic expression was a gift of God, just like self-consciousness and reason. It also emphasised the positive contribution of Christianity to the historical development of society which was under attack from more radical critics of 'tradition'. This line of thinking was concerned with defending the Bible from critical assaults on its claimed historical truth, historical continuity and unity of Christianity despite its multifarious developments over time.[37] The third type of response was also conservative in nature as it tried to defend biblical inerrancy and infallibility and sought to revive or restore a religious tradition to what was judged to be its original pristine or classic form.[38] This type of response generally came from strictly religious (read Christian) institutions.

It was in the backdrop of these challenges leading to the crisis of faith in the nineteenth century and attempts to mitigate them — to maintain the relevance of Christianity as a social force— that the concept of 'Christian Social ethics' began to be developed and articulated in the long nineteenth century. Two factors played an important role in this development. First was the Kantian reduction of Religion to morality, and the second were the side effects of the industrial revolution.

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The Genesis of 'Christian Social Ethics'

As already mentioned above, in light of the crisis of Christianity, there were several attempts to reinterpret religion aka Christianity. One response, apart from interpreting religion in relation to science and reason was to reduce religion to an abstract concept of 'morality' or 'ethics' which had a universalising effect. This approach found its towering expression in the works of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant who reduced religion to morality.[39] Kant's formulation of 'ethics' by separating it from religion (especially Christianity) and solely founding it on the grounds of 'reason' made it an

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abstract and universalistic category that had a tremendous impact on the subject of religion as well as Christianity. As Hauerwas and Wells say, the idea of 'universalistic ethics', an 'ethics' that can be acknowledged by anyone was 'invented' in the modern period.[40] In simplistic terms before Kant, 'ethics' and 'morality' as a separate category did not exist in the European world.[41] As Moran writes:

> "The word 'ethical' had disappeared in Latin and Western languages until the late Middle Ages. There were no treatises on ethics in the Christian medieval period. There is some logic, therefore, in the fact that histories of ethics often jump from ancient Greece to the seventeenth century with little discussion of the centuries in between. Henry Sidgwick's 1892 *Outlines of the History of Ethics* has one chapter on 'Christianity and Medieval Ethics' in which the term 'ethics' hardly appears. John Dewey's history of ethics has three pages to cover the period from the Romans to the Renaissance. Alasdair McIntyre's 1966 book, *A Short History of Ethics,* has one ten-page chapter entitled 'Christianity.' Historians looking in the Middle Ages for ethics do not find it and they may dismiss medieval morality as being a part of theology."

Kant's concept of morality is essentially altruistic and opposes hedonism, as he argued that the morality of an act is not derived from its end or goal but from its motivation. The only thing that can be said to be morally good is goodwill. For Kant, as Wogaman says, moral life is above all life based on duty.[42] This interpretation of morality was followed by his interpretation of an important Christian theological concept of the Kingdom of God as an "ethical commonwealth" (which he also called the 'Kingdom of virtue') based on divine law where each person affirms the law by exercising his or her moral autonomy and responsibility.[43] In Kant's conception, the Kingdom of God was to be built by humans themselves and they must proceed as if everything depended upon them.[44] This interpretation of the Kingdom of God as an ethical commonwealth opened up the possibility of human intervention to shape social conditions in which the highest good could be realised through moral action.[45]

The powerful conception of morality and the Kingdom of God as an 'ethical commonwealth' by Kant inspired a range of Christian theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, that played an important role in the development of Christian social ethics.[46] As Long says, "If there is a continuous thread in Protestant social ethics it is the kingdom of God as its goal."[47] The engagement with Kantian ideas had an important impact on

Christian efforts to affect culture and society[48] as it gave birth not only to a range of social reform movements like the Social Gospel movement in the United States, religious organisations like Salvation Army in the United Kingdom, and Christian Socialism in continental Europe but also to the British colonial ideology of "bearing the white man's burden"[49] — each of them in one way or another aiming to establish the Kingdom of God on earth and maintain the relevance of Christianity by presenting it as a force of social good.

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Apart from the 'science', 'reason' and Biblical criticism, the other motive force that led to both formulation of Christian social ethics and its application to social problems were the side effects of Industrial capitalism, which generated problems of mass poverty, alcoholism, child labour, inequality and breaking of family, etc. Even though the Kantian notion of the Kingdom of God had existed for almost half a century, it was only by the second half of the 19th century that Christians of various denominations became increasingly concerned with the acute social problems of their time[50] and shared a common drive towards compassion and social amelioration[51], leading to several programmes of social upliftment which necessarily required a reinterpretation of traditional Christian theology in the new context. Noting this development in the context of England by the mid-nineteenth century Rebecca Styler writes,

> "Religion became regarded as being far more integrated with the social and material sphere, and less an otherworldly compensation for it. This greater identification of the spiritual and sacred became more united in people's thoughts and practices. The theology prevalent in the early nineteenth century tended to separate conceptually the spiritual realm from temporal realities…. All of these expressions of a rather escapist spirituality can be seen as an intensification of the philosophical tendency which many theologians argue has prevailed in Western Christianity for centuries, based on the Hellenic 'dualistic thought', which separates spirit from matter. Material life is to be overcome, or transcended, rather than to be itself redeemed…. This

theology of divine distance was much modified in the latter part of the [nineteenth]century, as the human and divine came to be seen as sharing more continuities than earlier doctrine had emphazised...Doctrine generally became less punitive in tone, and instead prioritized reform and education, recognizing the influence of the environment on moral character. Human agency was granted greater value in the redemption project, and deeds came to be as vital as dogma (and in some schools of thought, more so). Notions of salvation thus broadened to incorporate the reform of conditions in this world, as well as hope for the next. Redemption was conceived 'less in terms of abstract doctrine and more in terms of the redeeming participation of the divine in the human', and qualities shared by divine and human natures were affirmed."[52]

Similarly, following Ernst Troeltsch, Edward Shils argues that the humanitarian potential of Christianity was kept at the margins of the Christian tradition before the nineteenth century; caring for the ill, the orphaned, the aged, the widow, the mad, etc., only formed a supplementary activity in everyday life of Christians and were often neglected and were largely an individual matter. The social ethic of Christianity only came to acquire prominence by the second half of the nineteenth century. As Shils says,

"[The] increased prominence of the 'social message' of Christianity in the Christian tradition, in which it had resided for so long in a recessive position, was not a result of a perception of internal contradictions, insufficient precision, or empirical inadequacy. It was the result of heightened awareness of this element of the Christian tradition; it might have been aroused perhaps by the sight of the misery in the large cities of Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was a great awareness of misery, hitherto justified or left unjustified, which made some sensitive and observant Christians more aware of the implications of an element of their tradition that they had accepted but had not acted on. In consequence of this coincidence of perception of external events and greater attention to a certain element already resident in the tradition, they changed their interpretation of Christianity...".[53]

Thus, it can be rightly summarised that Christian social ethics emerged in the nineteenth century in response to the social problems created by emerging economic dislocations, class conflict, and urban poverty in the context of industrialisation,[54] or as

Hauerwas and Wells have aptly pointed out, that the concept of Christian ethics was a result of the "compromise that Christian theology made with modernity" to stay relevant in the modern period. This is not to say that there was no concept of 'ethics' or 'morality' in Christian scriptures before the modern period, but to point out that they were otherworldly in nature.[55] This compromise was arrived at through several interpretations of important theological concepts.

Reinterpretations of Theological

One essential concept that underwent transformation was the concept of 'poverty'. In both ancient and medieval Christianity, poverty was considered a virtue; it was meant to indicate a lack of concern for the values of this world and a concentration on the life to come,[56] i.e., poverty was sanctified and spiritualised. With the Protestant reformation, this theological understanding of poverty as resulting from sin, wickedness, and sloth changed.[57] Poverty was desanctified and despiritualised. In the social gospel movement and Christian socialism, the concept of poverty again underwent a transformation as it was interpreted not only as an outcome of personal sin but also from systematic inequity. Poverty was thereby given a secular cloak.[58]

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Similarly, another concept that underwent transformation was the theological concept of the 'Kingdom of God'. In early Christianity 'Kingdom of God' was understood as the culmination of human history and full manifestation of God's divine reign of peace and justice on earth[59] that was to be established by Christ alone; it was primarily a spiritual concept.[60] During the Protestant Reformation, the 'Kingdom of God' often became synonymous with various understandings of the second coming of Christ[61] and was often located in the inner realm. In the 19th century, Christian social reformers interpreted (following the Kantian lead discussed above) the 'Kingdom of God' as something to be achieved here and now through active human intervention. For the German theologian Albert Ritschl, whose writings had an important impact on Christian

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social reformers, the Kingdom of God was "a social idea to be realised in the love for God and neighbour."[62] These interpretations are also present in the works of Christian socialist Frederick D. Maurice and William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, and represented a trend in the nineteenth century. As Lee says,

> "In the 19th century…the Kingdom became separated from the atoning death of Christ and was more concerned with the establishment of a moral human society. Social change was to be an instrument for advancing the kingdom. Jesus was reduced to the role of teacher and exemplar. Human beings take the central place in the establishment and function of the kingdom…The Gospel became reinterpreted in terms of improving social conditions. The development of socialism was equated by some as the advance of the kingdom of God…".[63]

Associated with the reinterpretation of the Kingdom of God came the reinterpretation of the maxim 'love thy neighbour' as the theological basis for solidarity and extension of the concept of sin and salvation. Washington Gladden, one of the early pioneers of the social gospel movement, emphasised that "the law of the kingdom requires us to love the Lord with all our hearts, and our neighbours as ourselves…".[64] Walter Rauschenbusch, another theologian of the movement, wrote, "we love and serve God when we love and serve our fellows, whom he loves and in whom he lives. We rebel against God and repudiate his will when we set our profit and ambition above the welfare of our fellows and above the Kingdom of God which binds them together."[65] Rauschenbusch also broadened the traditional individualist understanding of sin and salvation to include the social, i.e., social sin and social salvation, making collective action important. Summing up, we can say that in the discourses of the social gospel movement, Jesus's teaching of 'love the neighbour', and the theological concepts of sin, salvation, and the Kingdom of God were interpreted in the context of an ethical mandate to transform unjust social relationships[66] which gave birth to concepts like practical Christianity, applied Christianity and social Christianity.

If these developments or shifts that took place in Christianity from the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century are taken into consideration, then we can see that Swami Vivekananda too was a part of the same milieu; both critiquing and contributing to it. The above context also vindicates Swami Vivekananda, as well as other Hindu reformers of the nineteenth century, who faced attacks by Western

Indologists and missionaries on grounds that Hinduism lacked any 'social ethic'. If the very concept of ethics developed in the late eighteenth century while the concept of 'Christian ethics' and its application in society with concomitant theological revision took place in the nineteenth century, how can similar developments in Hindu religious traditions be called illegitimate or inauthentic? In this context, Beckerlegge has pointed out that both Indian intellectuals and their Western counterparts, while conceptualising their versions of 'service to humanity', were responding to similar situations, albeit arising from different reasons. While the Western reformers were confronted with the ills of industrialisation, Indian reformers were confronted with the total disruption of local systems that had acted as welfare networks till the advent of colonialism.[67] It was in these contexts that the idea of religious charity, which had existed in both Hinduism (the concept of *dana* and *seva)* and Christianity gave expression to an organised form of social service, both in the West and in India.

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Before closing this section, another point that must be mentioned here is that what constitutes ethics and what should be its source were the subject of intense debate in the nineteenth century, and the matter was far from settled. There were several competing theories of both 'morality' and 'ethics' proposed by philosophers like Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Spencer, and others, and from schools of thought like positivism, evolutionary ethics, utilitarianism and Marxism; engaging, borrowing, and critiquing each other.[68] What is interesting to note here is the fact that while both Christian and utilitarian thought were opposed to each other in Britain,[69] both had joined their forces in the critique of Hindu society, betraying their shared colonial agenda.[70]

In light of the above discussion, let us now move to discuss Swami Vivekananda's conception of ethics.

Swami Vivekananda on Ethics and Religion

In the most recent scholarship on the question of ethics and Swami Vivekananda, Paul Hacker's (1995) thesis that Vivekananda derived the 'tat tvam asi' ethic from German Indologist Paul Deussen, who in turn derived it from the German philosopher

Arthur Schopenhauer, has become an important vantage point on the debate over the subject of ethics and social service in the Ramakrishna Movement and broader Hindu traditions. This Hackerian thesis has been critiqued as well as accepted with qualification by several scholars. In recent times, this thesis has been criticised by Beckerlegge with detailed discussions on arguments by various scholars on the subject.

Beckerlegge, while criticising[71] Hacker and pointing out the shortcomings of qualified acceptance of his thesis by William Halbfass and Vivienne Baumfield,[72] says that even though Vivekananda did not use the 'tat tvam asi' ethic before his lecture titled 'Practical Vedanta' which Vivekananda delivered after he met with Paul Deussen in 1896, the Advaitic theme of 'Thou Art That' was frequently evoked by Vivekananda while he pushed for social service. Beckerlegge quotes from Vivekananda's letter to Alasingha Perumal, written in August 1893, where Swamiji asks Perumal to recognise that 'every being is only your own self multiplied', as the rationale for programmes of social reform.[73] Further, Beckerlegge also cites Vivekananda's work 'Karma Yoga', published at the beginning of 1896. About the significance of karma yoga in the context of Hackerian thesis, he says; "there is a far more explicit relationship in the arguments of karma yoga than there is between service to humanity and Practical Vedanta in the lecture of that name."[74] Beckerlegge also points out that Vivekananda as well as his brother monk Swami Akhandananda might have been influenced by the Swaminarayan movement, which emerged and was institutionalised in the early decades of the nineteenth century, in the matter of social service.[75]

> **While both Christian and utilitarian thought were opposed to each other in Britain, both had joined their forces in the critique of Hindu society, betraying their shared colonial agenda.**

In complete agreement with Beckerlegge, however, I would like to add another point to this debate that Beckerlegge misses despite his detailed discussion on the topic. The period in which Beckerlegge locates Vivekananda's direct or indirect reference to Vedantic ethics is from August 1893 to the early month of the year 1896 (till the publication of Karma Yoga), i.e., during his stay in the West. If we stretch this a bit back, we find two references on the subject of ethics in the works of Vivekananda from an Advaitian perspective. Just before embarking on his journey to the United States, Vivekananda prepared notes for his lectures. Published in Vol. 6 of his collected works

under the title '*Notes taken down in Madras, 1892-93*', spanning over twenty pages we can see the framework of his speeches delivered at the World Parliament of Religions. These notes taken by him before journeying to the West formed the framework of his later lectures and letters as well. In the notes, at one place Vivekananda writes,

> "There is a difference between the love taught by Christianity and that taught by Hinduism: Christianity teaches us to love our neighbours as we should wish them to love us; Hinduism asks us to love them as ourselves, in fact, see ourselves in them."[76]

In another place he writes,

> "According to Advaitism love every man as your own Self and not as your brother as in Christianity. Brotherhood should be superseded by universal Selfhood. Not universal brotherhood but universal Selfhood is our motto. Advaitism may include the 'greatest happiness' theory."[77]

Both these notes show that Vivekananda approached the question of ethics through the prism of Advaita Vedanta before he set on his journey to the West. However, as far as the application of Advaita Vedanta to the social plane was concerned Vivekananda did have his doubts regarding its direct application. He expresses this doubt in a paragraph following the second quote: "The highest Advaitism cannot be brought down to practical life. Advaitism made practical works from the place of Vishishtadvaitism."[78] This doubt, as Beckerlegge argues, only got resolved with time. The presence of these two important quotes where Vivekananda sees the ethical potential of Advaita Vedanta completely falsifies Hacker's thesis that Vivekananda only found out the ethical potential of Advaita after it was conveyed to him through Paul Deussen.

Vivekananda approached the question of ethics through the prism of Advaita Vedanta before he set out on his journey to the West.

What is more important, particularly from the perspective of propaganda in Hacker's thesis, is that while formulating it he does refer to and even quotes from the notes jotted down by Swami Vivekananda in Chennai and deliberately overlooks the above two quotes. In a clear case of selective picking of data, Hacker only quotes the passage that helps push his thesis about neo-Hindu thinkers deriving their ideas from the West and Christianity.[79] In the above two quotes, we can also see two themes that

later found more refined and repeated expression in his discussion of the subject of ethics. In his works, Vivekananda frequently critiqued the foundation of both Christian and utilitarian ethics, and at the same time provided his theory as the basis of ethics. In this way, Vivekananda was not only responding to colonial and missionary critique of Hinduism but actively engaging in the debate over ethics and morality that was going on in the nineteenth century.

> **Vivekananda frequently critiqued the foundation of both Christian and utilitarian ethics, and at the same time provided his theory as the basis of ethics.**

Vivekananda criticises any system of ethics based on the idea of a personal God or dualism. In his view, there are two problems with dualist thought on ethics. First, it does not explain the reasons for moral maxims. As he asks:

"Though all religions have taught ethical precepts, such as, 'Do not kill, do not injure; love your neighbour as yourself,' etc., yet none of these has given the reason. Why should I not injure my neighbour?"[80] and "Why is it that everyone says, Do good to others? Where is the explanation?"[81] and, "why should there be mercy, justice, or fellow feeling?"[82]

Before Swami Vivekananda, this question was posed by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee too. This absence of reason, according to Vivekananda, lies in the wrong base or total absence of base upon which all ethical theories have been constructed. Both utilitarian philosophy and dualistic religions based on the idea of a Personal God fall short of providing reasonable answers to these questions. According to Vivekananda, utilitarianism completely fails to answer questions like "Why should we be ethical? Why should I do good to other men, and not injure them? If happiness is the goal of mankind, why should I not make myself happy and others unhappy. What prevents me?" [83] The reasons, according to Vivekananda for the failure of the utilitarian foundation of ethics are a) utility cannot be the basis of ethics because there is no way of knowing what is good or bad or what is wrong and right inherent in it[84], and b) utilitarianism believes that society is eternal and it derives laws from society. Utilitarian philosophy, according to Vivekananda, is derived from the temporal dimension, and therefore it cannot be the basis of eternal laws like ethics. Therefore, the utilitarian logic might be true for the present condition but has no value beyond it.[85]

Similarly, Vivekananda criticises any system of ethics that is based on dualistic religions as they are based on the will of some particular being or beings[86], founders or personage.[87] In all dualistic religions, Vivekananda argues, if the historicity of the personage or founder is questioned the entire system of the religions breaks down.[88] The problems, here again, are the eternal-ness of the system of ethics. Further, Vivekananda also points out another qualitative difference between dualistic system of ethics and the monistic system of ethics. The former, according to Vivekananda, only talks about "love human beings as yourself", while the latter talks about "love all beings as yourself."[89]

> **Vivekananda also points out another qualitative difference between dualistic system of ethics and the monistic system of ethics. The former only talks about "love human beings as yourself", while the latter talks about "love all beings as yourself."**

For Swami Vivekananda, any solid foundation of ethics can only be based on something that is 'eternal', unlike both dualism and utilitarianism which are based on temporal principles.[90] Ethics, according to Vivekananda requires a "supernatural sanction"[91] or "perception of the superconscious", which is not the case with utilitarianism; while dualist religions are limited and subject to the historicity and legitimacy of their founders. He argues that "true ethics can only come from monistic principle"[92] and the real basis of any morality can only be self-abnegation of the highest order[93] which means the abnegation of the idea of "me and mine."[94] Vivekananda locates the idea of ethics and morality as the absence of selfishness[95] and, therefore, the only basis of ethics can be renunciation.[96]

> **Vivekananda locates the idea of ethics and morality as the absence of selfishness and, therefore, the only basis of ethics can be renunciation.**

Answers to questions like, why should one not injure his/her neighbour, according to Vivekananda, can only be provided by the Advaitic idea of oneness, because once the idea that "I am the One Existence of the Universe"[97], is realised, only then will all jealousy and bad feelings disappear. Once someone realises that; "that you are part of me, and I of You; the recognition that in hurting you, I hurt myself, and in helping you I help myself", then alone will true ethics be realised.[98] This idea can only come from

the Vedantic philosophy, according to Vivekananda, because of a) its ideas of spiritual solidarity of humans[99] and b) because Vedanta does not believe in a personal God and is eternal in nature, it provides a firm ground for ethical thought. Vedantic ethics have an eternal sanction[100] as it does not depend for an explanation on any external being or force; its foundations are located in the 'internal' realm of human beings.

But Vivekananda does not merely stop at providing a reasonable base of ethics and morality in his understanding. He takes a step forward and makes ethics subservient to Dharma. For him, "ethics is not an end in itself but the means to the end."[101] What is this aim? Vivekananda answers, "The one aim of ethics is unity and sameness of all human beings"[102] or "the struggle to find oneness is morality and ethics."[103] Thus, Vivekananda gives a secondary position to ethics in relation to Dharma or what is known as Religion, and by doing so criticises the utilitarian logic.

By grounding ethics in religion, Swami Vivekananda was not only intervening in the debate about religion and ethics in the nineteenth century but was also positively contributing to it, as this question had troubled a lot of contemporary Christian European thinkers. The marginalisation of religion from overall social life had created a climate where the established role of Christianity as the basis of ethics was the subject of serious doubt.[104] Morality, as Chadwick rightly says, except for a few men 'never had been separated from religion in the entire history of human race.'[105] But the situation changed dramatically by the second half of the nineteenth century especially with the advent of Darwinism, as rival theories of morality and ethics began to challenge Christianity, creating a 'crisis of morality' because the very base upon which both had existed was challenged.

James A. Colaiaco illustrates this crisis with a description of a public symposium that took place over the question of religion and morality under the title, 'The Influence on Morality of a Decline in Religion Belief' and was published in the journal *Nineteenth Century* in 1877. In this debate, secularists like W.K Clifford and T.H. Huxley were confident that morality had a basis independent of religion and would be virtually unaffected by the erosion of Christianity. Positivists were of the view that Comte's Religion of Humanity could easily supplant supernatural religion, while theists were convinced that, because morality was dependent upon religion, the fall of Christianity would be accompanied by a precipitous decline in the standards of conduct.[106]

'Religion was in crisis' was an accepted fact in the nineteenth century and so was the belief that because of it there might be a moral crisis. Those who believed that religion was necessary for morality attempted to reinterpret Christianity or took a turn toward comparative religion to find an appropriate theological ground on which to base morality. Paul Deussen and Max Muller, as Thomas Green suggests, turned towards Vedanta to assess its capacity to sustain moral life.[107] Swami Vivekananda, as already discussed above, had his own thoughts — though in rudimentary forms before taking his journey to the West— about the potentiality of Vedanta to become the base upon which ethics and morality grounded in religion could be justified. He was not borrowing nor reacting, but engaging and contributing to the 'crisis of morality' that had perturbed a lot of Christian thinkers of his period.

Conclusion

A large part of this paper has been dedicated to the discussion of the context in which Christian social ethics emerged in nineteenth-century Europe and America. The purpose here was to problematise the paradigm or the lens through which colonial machinery and Christian missionaries saw ancient Hinduism as well as analysed contemporary developments in Hinduism. I discussed how in light of challenges and crises, Christianity was interpreted in various ways by theologians of the faith that necessarily required reworking some important theological concepts. What was and continues to be understood as the 'inherent and timeless' potential of Christianity towards social amelioration was actually "discovered" only in the course of the long nineteenth century as Christian leaders struggled to keep Christianity relevant in modern and secular society.

In regards to Hinduism, the article has discussed in brief, the practice of institutionalised charity in ancient as well as medieval periods, largely embodied in Hindu Maths, to prove that the colonial-missionary paradigm was and is wrong. Coming to the nineteenth century, we see Hindu intellectuals deliberating over the relationship between religion, morality, and ethics. To say (like Christian missionaries and Western Indologists do) that these were merely a reaction to Christian thought is wrong on two counts. First, as the discussion above shows, the relationship between religion, morality, and ethics that occupied Hindu intellectuals, had also occupied several Christian thinkers of the period. Secondly, by using labels like 'neo' or 'modern' to refer to the developments that took place in Hinduism in the 19th century to imply that they were 'inauthentic'

because they gave new meaning to certain Hindu theological concepts, this tradition of scholarship completely overlooks similar such developments (i.e., new meanings were given to Christian theological concepts in the same period) in Christianity as well.

It must be understood that all religions, since they are concerned with and product of actual human society, change in light of changing socio-economic and political conditions. The inheritors of the colonial and Christian missionary understanding of Hinduism see it as a fixed entity, completely ignoring changes that Hinduism has gone through in the last three thousand years. The very existence of multiple sampradayas (religious traditions like Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, etc.) and sub-sampradayas, various schools of philosophy, and the plurality of religious texts and commentaries are testimony to the dynamic nature of Hinduism.

> The inheritors of the colonial and Christian missionary understanding of Hinduism see it as a fixed entity, completely ignoring changes that Hinduism has gone through in the last three thousand years.

Following the above discussion, it is my argument that while analysing modern developments in Hinduism and contrasting it with Christianity or any other religion, 'modernity and science' should be understood as independent variables, inter-reacting with different religious traditions. Only by doing so we can have an honest comparative analysis of religions, thereby demolishing the arguments of the propagandist trying to undermine one religion vis-a-vis the other; in this case Hinduism against Christianity.

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