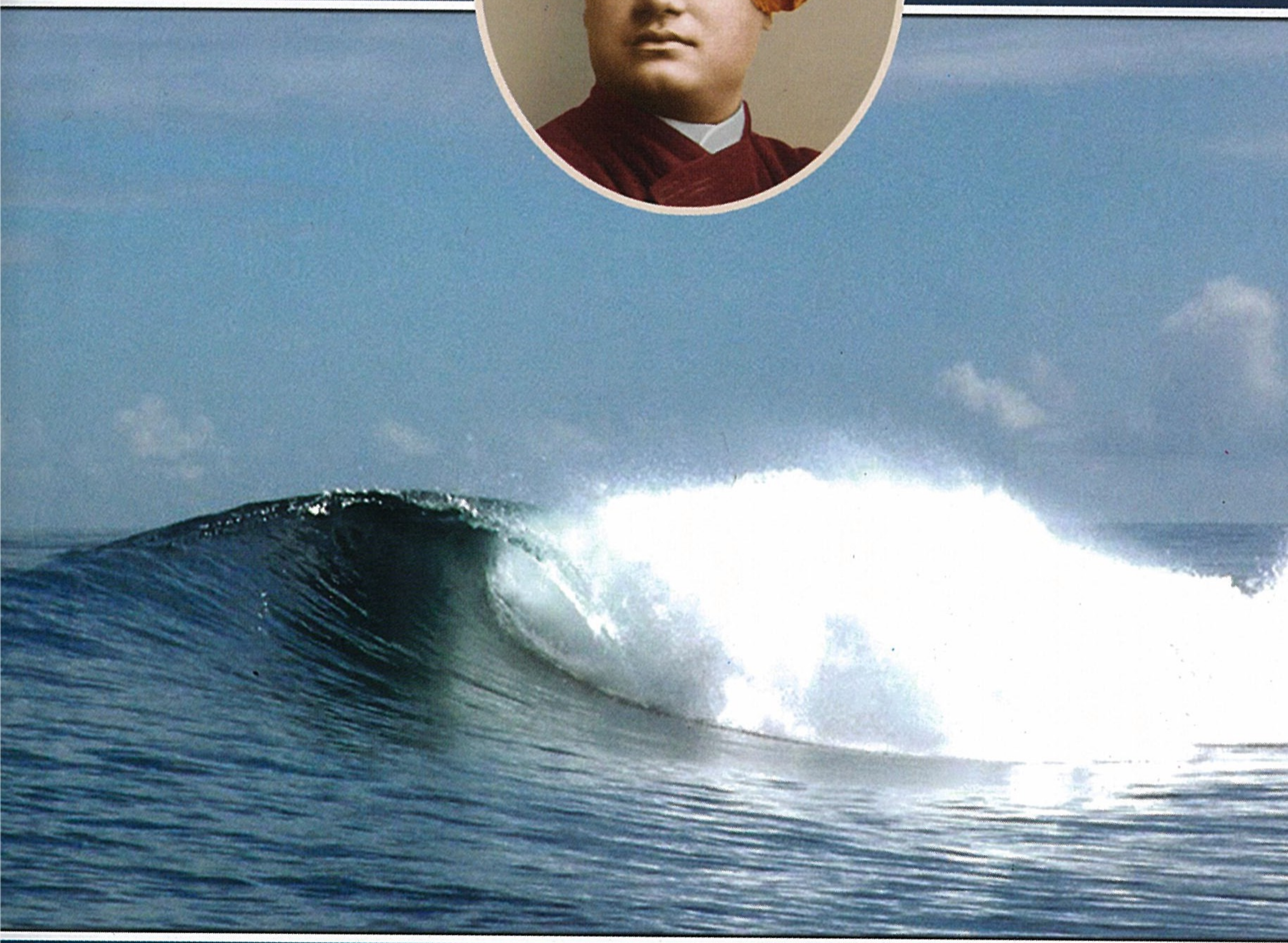


VIVEKANANDA  
AS THE  
TURNING POINT

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*The Rise of a New Spiritual Wave*





VIVEKANANDA

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THE RISE OF A  
NEW SPIRITUAL WAVE

Edited by  
SWAMI SHUDDHIDANANDA

*Swami Vivekananda's 150th Birth Anniversary Publication*



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# VIVEKANANDA'S IDEAS AND THE TWO REVOLUTIONS IN WESTERN THOUGHT

RAJIV MALHOTRA\*

*"No rational man can possibly quarrel with these evolutionists. But we have to learn one thing more. We have to go one step further, and what is that? That every evolution is preceded by an involution."*<sup>1</sup>

Swami Vivekananda's impact on Western intellectuals was revolutionary, transforming such diverse fields as religion, psychology, philosophy, literature and popular culture. For decades after Swamiji's death, his influence snowballed. Each successive generation of Western thinkers internalised his ideas, reframed them to fit occidental vocabulary, and applied them to ever-increasing domains of human activity. The objective of this paper is to critically evaluate this phenomenon and present to the readers the influence of Vivekananda's ideas on Western thought.

## CLASSIFICATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF VIVEKANANDA'S IDEAS

Swamiji's contributions to Western thought can be divided into two broad movements. Of these, the first is reasonably well-appreciated, at least among those familiar with his work today. The second has had an even deeper impact; yet, seldom is Swamiji cited or mentioned in relation to the ideas it engendered. These two movements, which we may call Swamiji's Western thought revolutions, are:

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\* The author thanks Kartik Mohan for his help in editing this article.



1) A First Revolution that includes the immediate impact of Swamiji's ideas during his lifetime, as well as their subsequent dissemination after his death, via three channels: a) Monks of the Ramakrishna Mission and its affiliates; b) Western disciples and followers; and c) Westerners who, though influenced by Swamiji, have remained formally unaffiliated with his movements.

2) A Second Revolution, currently under way, which consists of his ideas as transmitted through multiple generations of thinkers. At each stage, these ideas have been reformulated into new guises and propagated by the intermediaries as "original" concepts. While some intermediaries have acknowledged their debt to Swamiji, others style themselves as "pioneers", developing new vocabularies to conceal the Indian origins of what they purvey. This not only precludes an accurate historical account of how these ideas were transmitted into what is seen as "Western thought", but it often causes distortion or dilution of the original ideas themselves, and hence limits their usefulness.

One particular idea of Swamiji which triggered this second revolution is that of "involution". This idea challenges Darwin's theory of evolution and Judeo-Christian axioms of creation equally, by encompassing both science and religion within a single harmonious framework.

Involution is mentioned and explained repeatedly in Swamiji's collected works. In *Prabuddha Bharata*, spanning a century of later writings by his disciples and admirers, the term occurs 157 times. Yet its migration into recent Western thought is hardly ever credited to Swamiji.

Most recently, the American author Ken Wilber has appropriated involution to formulate what he has trademarked as "Integral Theory", while avoiding any mention of Swami Vivekananda. Later in this article we shall see how Swamiji introduced the concept of involution into modern discourse; how it took root in the West; how it was adopted by Swamiji's ardent follower and admirer Sri Aurobindo, among others; and how, through a variety of new Western intermediaries, it has become a cornerstone of 21st-century Western thought. I will set the stage by summarising the First Revolution Swamiji engendered.



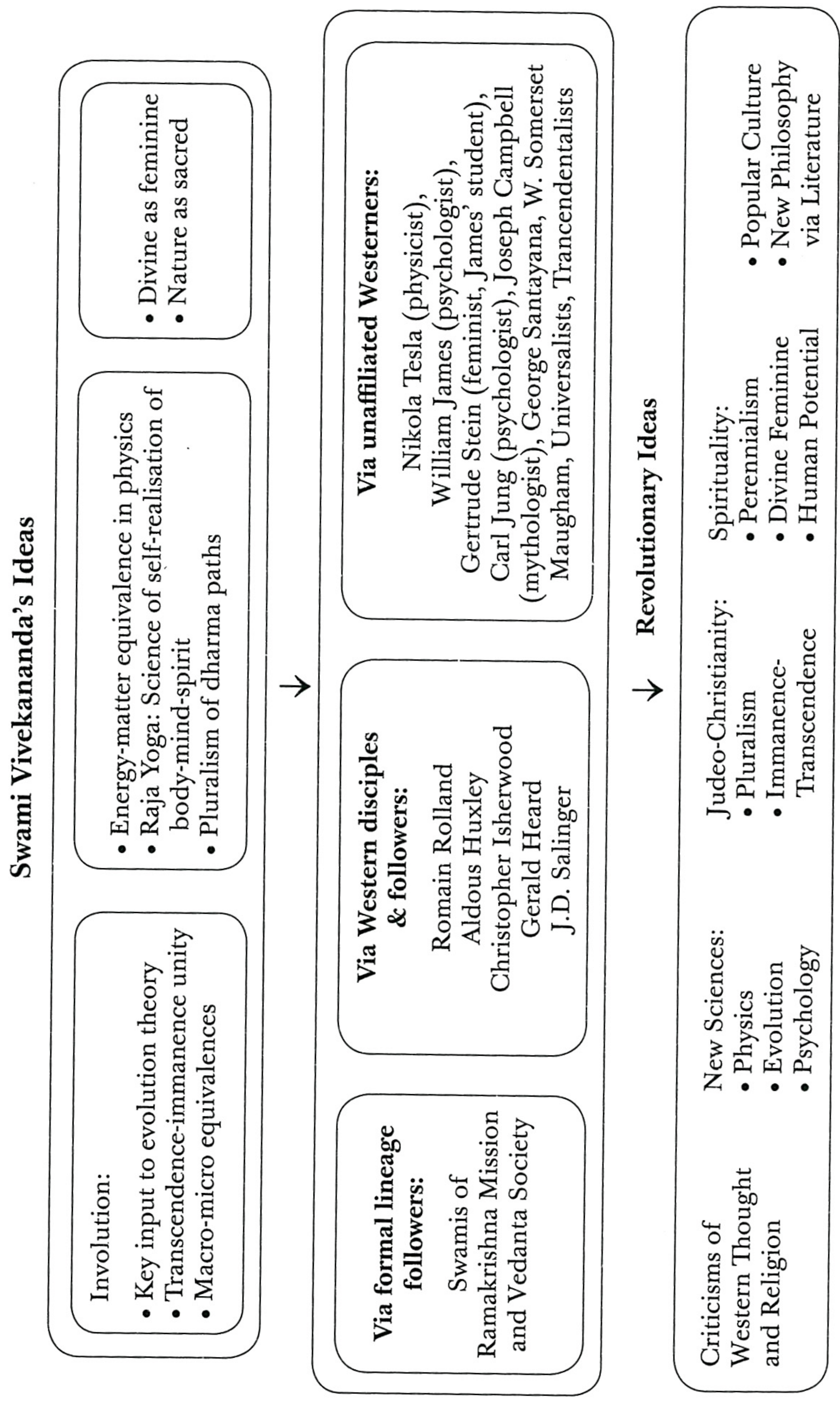


Fig 1: Swami Vivekananda's Ideas and the First Revolution in Western Thought



### SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S IDEAS AND THE FIRST REVOLUTION IN 20TH-CENTURY WESTERN THOUGHT

Figure 1 (in the previous page) shows the wide dissemination of Swami Vivekananda's influences through followers in his own lineage, Western followers who were not necessarily in his formal lineage, and prominent 20th-century Westerners in assorted of disciplines.

At a time when Western physicists such as Nikola Tesla regarded matter and energy as entirely separate entities, Swamiji introduced them to the significance of Sankhya philosophy, wherein energy and matter are understood as interchangeable forms of the same entity. Tesla himself adopted Swamiji's Sankhya terminology of "akasha" as the proto-substance from which everything originates. This concept travelled across many Western fields through the currents of Tesla's influence, and developed further into the theories of Ilya Prigogine, a Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, who later influenced such scholars as Ervin Laszlo, Rudolph Steiner and David Bohm.

Swamiji's championing of Raja Yoga as a science revolutionised conceptions of the nature of the human self across medicine, psychology and spirituality, triggering a revival of esoteric traditions long dismissed by the West as unscientific. Consequently, non-Western religions that had hitherto been regarded as primitive, heathen, and superstitious suddenly came to be regarded in a new light. Hundreds of Western thinkers began to mine the rich lode of Indian spiritual traditions, reformulating its intellectual wealth into their own philosophies. For example, Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, referred to the *Gita* and the Upanishads in the first edition of *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1875) (of note, subsequent editions have completely purged this reference).

In the 1890s, Swamiji's lectures were hosted by renowned Harvard philosopher William James, who explicitly credited the monk for having influenced his own work in psychology. Yet in the West today, James alone is regarded as the pioneer of modern psychology, while Swami Vivekananda's contributions find no mention.

At an event marking the launch of the centenary edition (2002) of James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, considered to be a groundbreaking work of modern psychology, Swamiji and other Indian sources were utterly ignored. An authentic celebration would have paid tribute to the sources of James's ideas, most notably Swami Vivekananda, and also



Buddhism. For that matter, the first known psychologist or mind scientist in the world ought to be recognised as Kapila or Patanjali, not James.

Other prominent Harvard philosophers who were influenced by Vivekananda include Josiah Royce and George Santayana. The latter based his own ideas of “naturalism” on Sankhya and continued, until his death, to search for parallels in Greek thought. Ultimately, he borrowed whatever fit his views from Indian tradition while rejecting karma as a “negative idea”. Such cherry-picking of Indian philosophy for ideas previously unknown to (or rejected by) the West, became commonplace among Western thinkers following Swamiji’s seminal exposition of Indian thought. Some Westerners celebrated Indian sources; others criticised them, and used the “repackaged” versions of Western thinkers as substitutes; still others sought correlations between both. But regardless of the stance adopted by any particular thinker, Swamiji’s enduring influence was undeniable.

Before Swamiji’s visit, American interest in classical Indian thought was restricted to Universalists, Transcendentalists, Theosophists and other groups limited in their direct knowledge of the East. Post-Vivekananda, Americans with such interests gravitated increasingly to the Ramakrishna Mission, and to its various branches outside India, known as Vedanta Societies. This initiated an unprecedented depth of engagement with Indian thought.

A prominent scion of this new encounter was Romain Rolland, a French devotee of Swamiji who went on to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1915. In his writings, Rolland performed a great service by further extending Swamiji’s influence into the American mainstream. In recognition of this, Herman Hesse (himself a Nobel Laureate for literature in 1946) dedicated his novel *Siddhartha* to Rolland.

The 1940s saw a further upsurge of American interest in Swamiji’s ideas, which were re-injected into the American public consciousness by some of the era’s most prominent public intellectuals, including Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood and Gerald Heard. Each of these writers was an initiated disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, contributed regularly to *Vedanta and the West* (the official publication of the Vedanta Society of Southern California) and served on its editorial board. This journal featured contributions from many other prominent intellectuals, including Alan Watts, J. Krishnamurthi and W. Somerset Maugham.

Gerald Heard expanded the movement’s influence in intellectual circles. Like many contemporary Western initiates into Vedanta, however,



Heard later attempted to substitute LSD for meditation as a means to elevate consciousness—seeking to experience, as it were, “instant non-dualism”. There began an unfortunate fad, among Western initiates, of using hard drugs to bypass the rigorous demands of ancient Indian practices.

Heard introduced the previously unknown Huston Smith to the movement. Deeply immersed in Vivekananda’s ideas, Smith rapidly enhanced his standing as a scholar and became a renowned authority on global religions.

The corpus of work produced by the legendary Aldous Huxley contributed to the Westward spread of Vedanta. One of his best known publications, *The Perennial Philosophy*, explains Vedanta in generic terms devoid of classical Indian context, positioning its philosophy as a universal substratum for interpreting all spiritual faiths. The book was acclaimed a “masterpiece” by the *New York Times* and remains an American classic.

Although Huxley contributed 48 articles to *Vedanta and the West* and served on its editorial board, he too turned to hard drugs and became an icon in the hippie movement for having promoted psychedelics as a way of achieving “instant nirvana”. Huxley was also a major influence at the California-based Esalen Institute which, at the time, led large-scale experiments aimed at digesting Indian spiritual traditions into “new” Western substitutes that combined mysticism with hard drugs. The institute has produced numerous Western champions and “pioneers”, who have transplanted Indian ideas into Western religions and philosophies while gradually erasing their sources.

Ironically, Ken Wilber first equates all of Vedanta to Huxley’s perennialism, and then uses the flaws he discovers in perennialism to diminish Vedanta! Thus, the limits of Huxley’s understanding are often presented today as limitations of Vedanta itself. The flaws Wilber identifies were, in fact, introduced during Western disciples’ transplantation of Swamiji’s teachings onto their own perennialism frameworks; this process gave Wilber a straw man to justify his claims of having superseded Vedanta.

Perhaps the deepest, most authentic transmission of Swamiji’s ideas to the West occurred through Christopher Isherwood who, under Swami Prabhavananda’s guidance, published translations of several Hindu texts, many essays on Vedanta, the biography *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, and numerous fictional works imbued with Vedantic themes. Another prolific intermediary was J.D. Salinger, whose works left a profound impact on American literature. Popular biographies imply that in later life, Salinger



turned unsociable and reclusive. In fact, he became influenced by Swamiji's disciples in New York from the 1950s onward, and his writings thereafter became less typically "Western" and more Vedantic. In 1944, Somerset Maugham wrote one of his most popular works, *The Razor's Edge*, which introduced mainstream readers to Vedanta philosophy and meditation.

The tectonic shifts wrought by Swamiji were not confined to literature. Freud's top student (and later, harshest opponent), Carl Jung, wrote extensively on Indian spirituality. Several core concepts of Jungian psychology are either directly borrowed from or influenced by Indian thought. Many of Jung's students went on to become leaders in various disciplines, carrying forward the influence of Swami Vivekananda. Among these was the young Joseph Campbell, who became highly active at New York's Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, serving as its president for several years, and assisting Swami Nikhilananda's translations of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and the Upanishads. Campbell cited the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda throughout his prolific and influential works. Yet eventually, he reformulated Swamiji's ideas as his own "original" theories, and claimed their derivation from myths common to every world culture. He then went on to attack Hinduism harshly.

Into this milieu emerged Arthur Lovejoy, a former student of William James who went on to teach philosophy at Johns Hopkins University and founded the influential History of Ideas Club. Lovejoy's *Revolt Against Dualism* recounts Western thinkers' attacks on dualism as if they were exclusively Western in origin, without crediting any Indian influences. His later book, *The Great Chain of Being*, is premised entirely on a framework of Christian and Hellenistic traditions. It neglects to mention Swami Vivekananda's contributions to the discourse, which are nonetheless essential to its substance. (The term "Chain of Being" is indeed found in earlier Western writing; however, such occurrences are shallow approximations of the concept as formulated in Lovejoy's book—shallow, because the notion of "involution" is absent prior to Swamiji's influence.)

The premier 20th-century theologian Teilhard de Chardin borrowed heavily from Vedanta to reformulate Christianity. For example, he introduced the notion of divine immanence by translating Saguna Brahman as "body of Christ". At the time, his views were rejected by the Church as too radical. Today his ideas are accepted by many Christians, and yet his biographers leave out any mention of his stay in India, his commentaries on Vedanta, or his extensive critique of Hinduism.



The prominent religious philosopher Heinrich Zimmer, whose writings radically altered Western views of Indian philosophy, attended the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center regularly. Other notable transmitters of Swami Vivekananda's ideas into the Western public sphere include the Catholic theologian Thomas Merton, and the acclaimed historians Arnold Toynbee and Will Durant.

It is unfortunate and frustrating that Swamiji's ideas are continually attributed to Western sources, be they Hellenistic, early Christian or modern. This methodical "re-mapping" allows today's Western thinkers to co-opt the mantle of Swamiji's wisdom for their own. To protect what is called "Western heritage" from the exposure of its vast indebtedness to Indian civilisation, each successive generation promotes the further dilution and erasure of Swamiji's pivotal influence. Worse yet, it has become trendy among Western thinkers to reject Vedanta and Indian thought in general, while simultaneously espousing its ideas in Western vocabulary.

*Swami Vivekananda Introduces Involution  
into the West in the 1890s*

In the mid-19th century, Darwin's theory of evolution created much excitement in the scientific community, and triggered yet another clash between Western science and religion. Into this philosophical climate, Swami Vivekananda brought an ancient Indian idea with potential to bridge the chasm. Darwinian evolution, he said, is incomplete by itself, because it claims the origin of life from matter solely through material interactions. Western religion is equally flawed, since the idea of Creation does not allow for evolution.

Swamiji writes of a critical insight of the ancient Indians, "which in modern times is not yet so clearly perceived, and that is involution."<sup>2</sup> By this, he means the idea that God, manifested as the cosmos, has become involuted in the cosmos. Evolution, then, is a consequence of this God-as-cosmos. He writes: "The beginning was, therefore, intelligence. At the beginning that intelligence becomes involved, and in the end that intelligence gets evolved. The sum total of the intelligence displayed in the universe must, therefore, be the involved universal intelligence unfolding itself. This universal intelligence is what we call God."<sup>3</sup>

He argues against the validity of Darwinian evolution, using science's own arguments:



- The law of conservation of energy must be expanded to include the entire chain of existence: "The effect is the cause manifested. There is no essential difference between the effect and the cause. ...We have seen that everything in this universe is indestructible. There is nothing new; there will be nothing new."<sup>4</sup>
- Time and causation are not uni-directional but cyclical: "Indian mythology has a theory of cycles, that all progression is in the form of waves."<sup>5</sup>
- Higher intelligence is not simply the result of lower intelligence, but the reverse is also true, because higher intelligence was previously involuted into lower intelligence: "What we call instinct in men or animals must therefore be involved, degenerated, voluntary actions, and voluntary actions are impossible without experience."<sup>6</sup>

Challenging both Darwinian evolution and Western religion, Swamiji subsumes both poles into Sankhya philosophy, which encompasses both the involution of God into matter and the evolution of matter into God. He describes continuous cycles of involution/evolution with neither beginning nor end.

This idea of involution became a central theme in many of Swamiji's lectures before Western audiences, including "Maya and Illusion", "The Cosmos: The Microcosm", "Realisation", "The Absolute and Manifestation", "The Real Nature of Man", and "The Cosmos and the Self". This pivotal concept triggered a series of breakthrough ideas, some of which are summarised below.

*There is no such thing as "Creation"*

Swami Vivekananda explains involution/evolution in a manner consistent with all three major schools of Vedanta.<sup>7</sup> In a lecture delivered soon after the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, he explained that the cosmos manifests and dissolves in cycles as follows: "All matter throughout the universe is the outcome of one primal matter called Akasha; and all force, whether gravitation, attraction or repulsion, or life, is the outcome of one primal force called Prana. Prana acting on Akasha is creating or projecting\* the universe. At the beginning of a cycle, Akasha is motionless,

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\* The word which is "creation" in the English language is in Sanskrit exactly "projection", because there is no sect in India which believes in creation as it is regarded



unmanifested. Then Prana begins to act, more and more, creating grosser and grosser forms out of Akasha—plants, animals, men, stars, and so on. After an incalculable time this evolution ceases and involution begins, everything being resolved back through finer and finer forms into the original Akasha and Prana, when a new cycle follows. Now there is something beyond Akasha and Prana. Both can be resolved into a third thing called Mahat—the Cosmic Mind. This Cosmic Mind does not create Akasha and Prana, but changes itself into them.”<sup>8</sup> Mahat thus becomes Akasha-Prana, and the interactions between this pair comprise the entire cosmos. There is no “creation” out of nothing.

He reiterates the point by explaining that cause and effect imply one other: “Thousands of years ago, it was demonstrated by Kapila, the great father of all philosophy, that destruction means going back to the cause. If this table here is destroyed, it will go back to its cause, to those fine forms and particles which, combined, made this form which we call a table. If a man dies, he will go back to the elements which gave him his body; if this earth dies, it will go back to the elements which gave it form. This is what is called destruction, going back to the cause. Therefore we learn that the effect is the same as the cause, not different. It is only in another form.”<sup>9</sup>

*Cyclical Time, and Infinite Series of Universes with no Beginning*

Swamiji shows how this is explained by the cyclical nature of time itself. The corollary, groundbreaking for Western audiences, is that there is no such thing as “the absolute beginning”: “There comes a time when this whole universe melts down and becomes finer and at last disappears entirely, as it were, but remains as superfine matter. ...The acts of going back to causes and coming out again, taking form, are called in Sanskrit Sankocha and Vikasa, which mean shrinking and expanding. The whole universe, as it were, shrinks, and then it expands again. ...Thus we find that there is no creation in the sense that something is created out of nothing. To use a better word, there is manifestation, and God is the manifester of the universe. The universe, as it were, is being breathed out of Him, and again it shrinks into Him, and again He throws it out. A most beautiful simile is given in the Vedas—‘That eternal One breathes out this universe and breathes it in.’

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in the West—as something coming out of nothing. What we mean by creation is projection of that which already existed.



..How was it at the first cycle? The answer is: What is the meaning of a first cycle? There was none. ...This idea will give us God as the Eternal Creator. ...As the universe is without beginning and without end, so is God.”<sup>10</sup>

*Everything is God's Immanence*

Western religions consider creation to have been engendered ex nihilo (out of nothing) by a creator (God) separate from the cosmos. Swamiji explains that the cosmos is God, manifesting as form. This perspective differs from Western monotheism, which sees God as solely transcendent; it also differs from pantheism, wherein the divine is exclusively immanent and not transcendent. Indian thought reconciles the binary opposites of transcendence and immanence in Western traditions, postulating a single reality that unifies God-as-transcendent with God-as-immanent. Below is an excerpt from one of Swamiji's many lectures on this topic:

“We now see that all the various forms of cosmic energy, such as matter, thought, force, intelligence and so forth, are simply the manifestations of that cosmic intelligence, or, as we shall call it henceforth, the Supreme Lord. Everything that you see, feel, or hear, the whole universe, is His creation, or to be a little more accurate, is His projection; or to be still more accurate, is the Lord Himself. It is He who is shining as the sun and the stars, He is the mother earth. He is the ocean Himself. He comes as gentle showers, He is the gentle air that we breathe in, and He it is who is working as force in the body. He is the speech that is uttered, He is the man who is talking. He is the audience that is here. He is the platform on which I stand, He is the light that enables me to see your faces. It is all He. He Himself is both the material and the efficient cause of this universe, and He it is that gets involved in the minute cell, and evolves at the other end and becomes God again. He it is that comes down and becomes the lowest atom, and slowly unfolding His nature, rejoins Himself. This is the mystery of the universe.”<sup>11</sup>

Many decades after Swamiji, the American philosopher Charles Hartshorne coined the term “panentheism” (distinct from “pantheism”) to represent Swamiji's idea of unified transcendence-immanence. This new term gained popularity, and Hartshorne is generally credited with its conception, even though he had studied and written on Ramanuja's *vishishtā-advaita* philosophy, and was familiar with Sri Jiva Goswami's *achintya-bheda-abheda*.



*The Absence of Involution in Abrahamic Religions*

The following excerpt from an article in *Prabuddha Bharata*, written by a Western scholar, summarises how the absence of the idea of involution in the Abrahamic religions renders those religions fundamentally different from Eastern faiths: "Practically, all Asiatic cosmogonies consider the evolution of the objective cosmos not as a progress or an ascension, but, on the contrary, as a descent. Whether it is conceived as production, emanation, or manifestation, the world process, as such, is a perpetual departure from its divine origin towards worldly periphery; becoming is a centrifugal movement from Reality to unreality; pre-cosmic plenitude unfolds itself towards periodic dissolution (pralaya). ... Correspondingly, all Eastern ways leading to the Divine ... strictly speaking consist in an inner counteraction which neutralises this centrifugal evolution by a symmetrically inverse involution. [...]"

"In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, both these movements have an exactly opposite orientation. Their common holy scripture, the Bible, describes the world-evolution not as centrifugal, but as theo-centric, centripetal, not as descending from God, but as ascending towards God according to the scheme (or divine plan) prefigured by the 'six days of the Genesis'; during these six world-periods, universal existence emerges first from non-being ('nothing') to inanimate (mineral) existence, then progresses to vegetation and animal life, and finally culminates in man as in an epitome of the cosmos as well as a free image of God, so that through man the whole cosmos can and should culminate in God. Thus, biblical becoming, even of the outer world, is not essentially a production, an emanation, a manifestation in the Eastern sense; not a production out of some pre-existing matter, but a total invention including matter out of nothing; not an emanation, a flowing out of an impersonal Divinity towards illusion, but a progress, a growth proceeding, not down from God, but up from nothing to God, rising through impersonal life towards an increasingly personal Reality; nor even a manifestation, a necessary unfolding of the 'possibilities' of a unique Reality, but the result of a free act of the absolute Person; in one word, a real creation. Creation places an intrinsically real world and free creatures in front of an ultimately personal Creator. Therefore, Judaic, Christian, and Islamic salvation or sanctification, i.e. monotheistic way of union with God is, accordingly, not an inner ascending recession from world and ego, but an ascending inner



progression with world and ego, a spiritual movement forward towards a divine Thou, not a spiritual retreat into a pure Self; a fulfilment of creation by achieving its growth inaugurated by God, not a neutralisation of the world-process. The basic inner gesture here is recollection before God, confrontation, not pure concentration within; full response to all values whether infinite or finite, not an interiorisation of the finite.”<sup>12</sup>

*All Existence is One Unified Chain of Being*

A central concept stressed in Swamiji's lectures is that all existence comprises one unified chain of being. As noted above, pre-Vivekananda Western usage of the term “chain of being” lacked the critical idea of God's involution into the cosmos—an idea that contradicts the established doctrines of Abrahamic religions. This new understanding of the concept has been digested into Western thought over the past century, but all the while, Swamiji's vital role in defining it has been glossed over. His contribution is illustrated in the following excerpts from his lectures:

“It has been said in the Vedas, ‘Knowing one lump of clay we know the nature of all the clay that is in the universe.’ Take up a little plant and study its life, and we know the universe as it is. If we know one grain of sand, we understand the secret of the whole universe. Applying this course of reasoning ... everything is almost similar at the beginning and the end. ...The universe with its stars and planets has come out of a nebulous state and must go back to it. What do we learn from this? That the manifested or the grosser state is the effect, and the finer state the cause. ...This universe must be resolved into its causes; the sun, moon, stars, and earth, the body and mind, and everything in this universe must return to their finer causes, disappear, be destroyed as it were. But they will live in the causes as fine forms. Out of these fine forms they will emerge again as new earths, suns, moons, and stars.”<sup>13</sup>

“The whole period of one manifestation of the universe—its going down into the finer form, remaining there for some time, and coming out again—is, in Sanskrit, called a Kalpa or Cycle. ...Out of what has this universe been produced then? From a preceding fine universe. Out of what has man been produced? The preceding fine form. ...So, the whole of this universe has been created out of this very universe existing in a minute form. It has been made manifest now. ...This coming out of the fine and becoming gross, simply changing the arrangements of its parts, as it were, is what



in modern times is called evolution. ...Every evolution is preceded by an involution. The seed is the father of the tree, but another tree was itself the father of the seed. The seed is the fine form out of which the big tree comes, and another big tree was the form which is involved in that seed. The whole of this universe was present in the cosmic fine universe. ...Applying the same reason to the whole of the universe, we see that intelligence must be the Lord of creation, the cause."<sup>14</sup>

"This involution and evolution [are] going on throughout the whole of nature. The whole series of evolution beginning with the lowest manifestation of life and reaching up to the highest, the most perfect man, must have been the involution of something else. The next question is: The involution of what? What was involved? God. The evolutionist will tell you that your idea that it was God is wrong. Why? Because you see God is intelligent, but we find that intelligence develops much later on in the course of evolution. It is in man and the higher animals that we find intelligence, but millions of years have passed in this world before this intelligence came. This objection of the evolutionists does not hold water, as we shall see by applying our theory. The tree comes out of the seed, goes back to the seed; the beginning and the end are the same. The earth comes out of its cause and returns to it. We know that if we can find the beginning we can find the end. Conversely, if we find the end we can find the beginning. If that is so, take this whole evolutionary series, from the protoplasm at the one end to the perfect man at the other, and this whole series is one life. In the end we will find the perfect man, so in the beginning it must have been the same. Therefore, the protoplasm was the involution of the highest intelligence. You may not see it but that involved intelligence is what is uncoiling itself until it becomes manifested in the most perfect man. ...What is this intelligence? If it was not present in the protoplasm, it must have come all of a sudden, something coming out of nothing, which is absurd."<sup>15</sup>

"This is the whole history of man, the whole history of nature, the whole history of life. ...Everything is present in its cause, in its fine form. This evolution, or gradual unfolding of grosser and grosser forms, is true, but each case has been preceded by an involution. The whole of this universe must have been involute before it came out, and has unfolded itself in all these various forms to be involved again once more. ...We find two things that make the plant a unity by itself—its growth and development, its decay and death. These make one unity the plant life. So, taking that plant life



as only one link in the chain of life, we may take the whole series as one life, beginning in the protoplasm and ending in the most perfect man. Man is one link, and the various beasts, the lower animals, and plants are other links. Now go back to the source, the finest particles from which they started, and take the whole series as but one life, and you will find that every evolution here is the evolution of something which existed previously.”<sup>16</sup>

*Swami Vivekananda versus  
the Western Science of his Time*

Swamiji demonstrated the integral unity of many ancient Hindu philosophical principles: for example, involution-evolution, infinite cycles of time without beginning, and the cosmos as a unified chain of being representing manifestation rather than creation. He was well aware that his ideas were novel in the West, and particularly so in Western science: “Every day we find that the wall that was thought to be dividing one thing and another is being broken down, and all matter is coming to be recognised by modern science as one substance, manifesting in different ways and in various forms; the one life that runs through all like a continuous chain, of which all these various forms represent the links, link after link, extending almost infinitely, but of the same one chain.”<sup>17</sup>

He debated modern evolutionists, using involution as a provocation. Evolutionists, he said, claim that man is an evolved descendant of the mollusc, whereas mythic stories claim that man is the degenerate form of a higher being. Dharma reconciles both these positions because it is based on cycles, where alternating rises and falls mutually cause one another. Every evolution presupposes an involution. Something cannot be produced out of nothing. If a man is an evolution of the mollusc, perfect being was already involuted in the mollusc.<sup>18</sup> He also explains how ancient dharma shatters the Western philosophy of science of his time:

“Is it not curious that, whilst under the terrific onset of modern scientific research, all the old forts of Western dogmatic religions are crumbling into dust; whilst the sledge-hammer blows of modern science are pulverising the porcelain mass of systems whose foundation is either in faith or in belief or in the majority of votes of church synods; whilst Western theology is at its wit’s end to accommodate itself to the ever-rising tide of aggressive modern thought; whilst in all other sacred books the texts have been stretched to their utmost tension under the ever-increasing



pressure of modern thought, and the majority of them are broken and have been stored away in lumber rooms; whilst the vast majority of thoughtful Western humanity have broken asunder all their ties with the church and are drifting about in a sea of unrest, the religions which have drunk the water of life at that fountain of light, the Vedas—Hinduism and Buddhism—alone are reviving? The restless Western atheist or agnostic finds in the Gita or in the Dhammapada the only place where his soul can anchor. The tables have been turned, and the Hindu, who saw through tears of despair his ancient homestead covered with incendiary fire, ignited by unfriendly hands, now sees, when the searchlight of modern thought has dispersed the smoke, that his home is the one that is standing in all its strength, and all the rest have either vanished or are building their houses anew after the Hindu plan. ...Thanks to the ancient sages who have discovered such an all-pervading, ever-expanding system of religion that can accommodate all that has been discovered in the realm of matter, and all that is to be known; he has begun to appreciate them anew, and discover anew, that those discoveries which have proved so disastrous to every limited little scheme of religion are but rediscoveries, in the plane of intellect and sense-consciousness, of truths which his ancestors discovered ages ago in the higher plane of intuition and super-consciousness.”<sup>19</sup>

#### **SWAMI VIVEKANANDA’S IDEAS AND THE SECOND REVOLUTION IN THE 21ST-CENTURY WESTERN THOUGHT**

The second revolution in the Western thought due to Swamiji’s ideas occurred through the agency of individuals unaffiliated with his lineage, but through whom many of Swamiji’s ideas entered modern English-language discourse.

A key protagonist was Sri Aurobindo, who regarded Swami Vivekananda as his guru. Few details of the transformative interactions between Sri Aurobindo and Swamiji are available; yet, the latter’s ideas, including involution, clearly had a profound influence on the Pondicherry seer’s philosophy. The three major processes that constitute Sri Aurobindo’s integral yoga are as follows:

- 1) Involution, the process of Creation whereby the Supreme Reality descended in stages, finally plunging into the most inconscient, deep, and dense matter.



2) A subsequent upward spiral: the ascending process of spiritual evolution. In this, humanity is not the ultimate state but an intermediate one, with the capacity to evolve further toward the Supramental.

3) The ultimate return of Supramental consciousness, to divinise all humanity in the terrestrial plane. Yogis strive to transform the entire world, not just themselves or their own communities, into the Supramental.

These processes are readily recognisable as elaborations of concepts introduced by Swamiji:

1) There is One divine manifested in many different forms; its pure, undifferentiated, transcendental reality is linked to the lowest matter through a series of planes and levels. This is the Chain of Being: nested levels of ascending consciousness, each progressively more complex and differentiated.

2) Undifferentiated reality first created space, time and causation, and then entered them through the involution process, “involuting” continuously until it formed the densest matter. Thus, consciousness is present as matter and in matter, and evolves towards regaining its pure state. This continuous, ongoing process manifests ascending planes of life and mind, and will continue manifesting them into the future.

Both Swamiji and Sri Aurobindo understood that evolution occurs because consciousness is initially involuted in matter. In Western materialist conception, consciousness evolves from dead matter. In contrast, a central Indian idea is that consciousness pre-exists in matter—not coincidentally, but through involution into matter and as matter. The evolution of consciousness, therefore, is natural to expect.

Ascending planes of involuted consciousness are progressively manifested throughout the evolutionary process. Matter gives rise to life, life engenders mind, and all higher levels of consciousness emerge from mind in a nested chain of ascendance. Sri Aurobindo explains that just as matter is a form of “veiled life”, life in turn is a form of “veiled consciousness”. Thus mankind’s impulse to evolve towards divinity, and aspire to states of consciousness beyond the mind, is just as natural a consequence of involution as the imperative of certain forms of matter to evolve into life.<sup>20</sup>

Western biologists believe in a strictly mechanical process, devoid of prior consciousness or purpose, through which consciousness evolved purely by chance. At the other extreme, Biblical creationists attack the very idea of evolution, claiming that God created man directly. No such conflict exists in the integral, unified worldview represented by Indian thought.



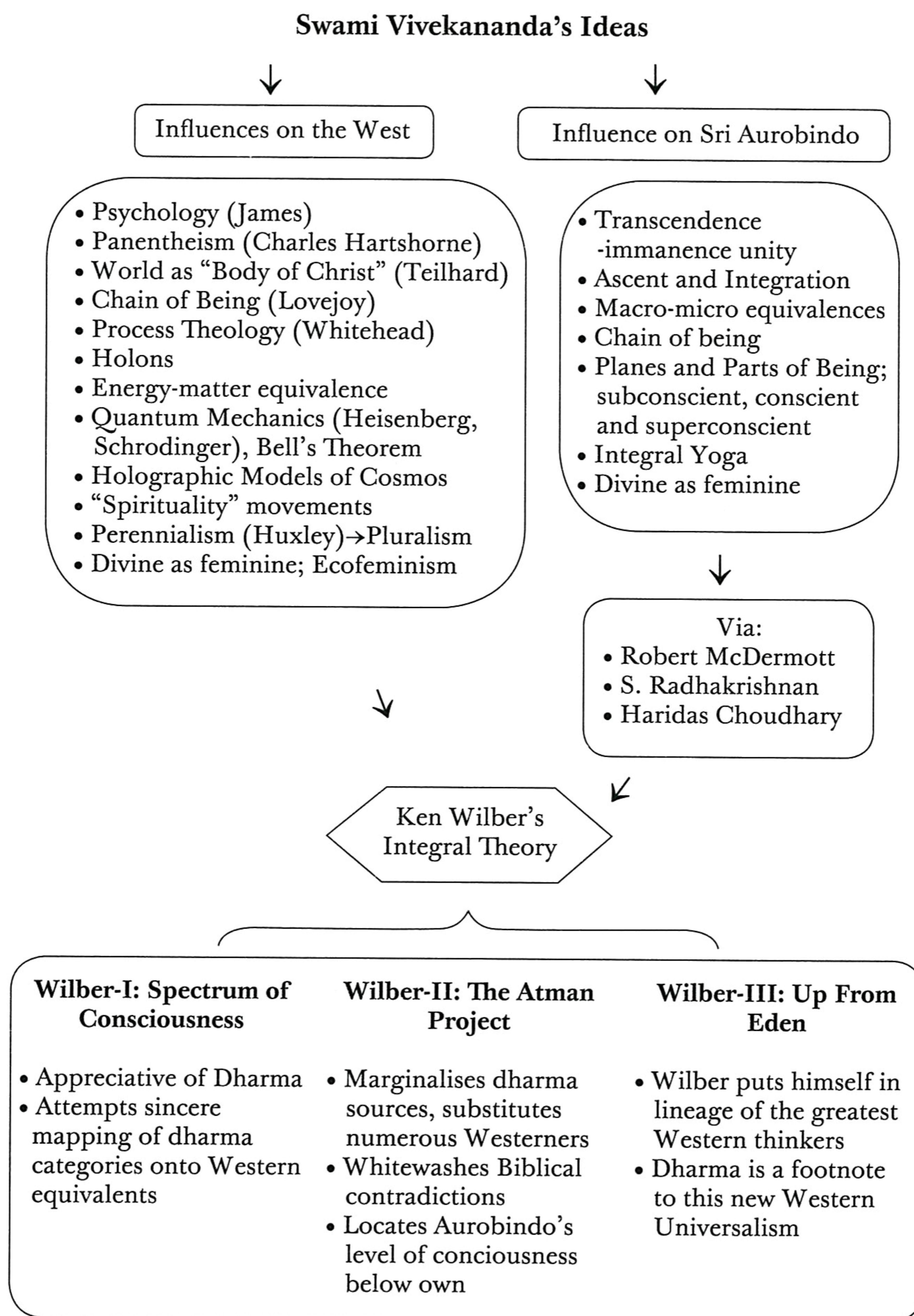


Fig 2: Swami Vivekananda's Ideas and the Second Revolution



One can easily trace how the notion of involution travelled from Swamiji, via Sri Aurobindo, to form the foundation of what the modern American philosopher Ken Wilber calls his "Integral Movement". The act of digestion employed by Wilber in formulating his movement is an informative case study in how Western philosophy continues to plunder the wealth of Indian knowledge systems without attribution.

### CASE STUDY:

#### *Wilber Maps Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo onto Western Thought*

Figure 2 shows that Wilber is the beneficiary of both (a) Western thinkers, who in turn had borrowed heavily from Vedanta in general and Swamiji in particular, and (b) Sri Aurobindo. Ken Wilber's ideas thus derive from Swamiji's concepts, transmitted through Western intermediaries and through Sri Aurobindo. Wilber contrives to substitute himself as their originator, thereby reducing the entire system of Indian knowledge to an inferior subset of Western thought. He progressively de-contextualises Indian ideas from their sources, and then re-contextualises them in modern Western idiom, incorporating Hellenistic references, Western psychology, European philosophy, and eventually his own jargon. Since his audience is predominantly Western, he is able to claim all this as original.

Wilber classifies ascending levels of consciousness according to the self-defined stages "Wilber-I" through "Wilber-V". He thus appoints himself a benchmark for the assessment of levels of consciousness attained by other human beings. Patronisingly, he declares that Sri Aurobindo is at Wilber-II! A synopsis of the first three levels of Wilber's consciousness reveals how he has appropriated Indian thought and claimed to supersede it.

#### *Wilber-I: Collapsing all Indian Spirituality into Perennialism*

At the first stage of his intellectual journey, Wilber positions himself as a compiler of broad knowledge while sacrificing depth. He adopts the framework of perennialism, collapsing into it the whole diversity of Indian spiritual traditions. He substitutes generic descriptions for distinct insights, and derives flawed equivalences, such as blanket conclusions about non-duality, across a vast range of mystic traditions. At this stage, he is at least candid about his appropriations, citing examples from Indian traditions and acknowledging the potential for further exploration.



*Wilber-II: Appropriating Involution-Evolution*

At this second stage, marked by his publication of two books: *The Atman Project* and *Up from Eden*, Wilber begins to appropriate the elaborate explanations of involution-evolution originally expounded by Swamiji and Sri Aurobindo.

*The Atman Project* presents involution-evolution as a generic idea common to all traditions. In explaining it, Wilber makes only sparse, inconsequential references to Indian thought. Indeed, he attributes the notion of involution itself to Arthur Lovejoy and Huston Smith, without acknowledging that they, in turn, adopted the concept from Swamiji. Where Wilber lacks credibility and personal experience, he sometimes supports himself by quoting Sri Aurobindo; but where he expects to get away with it, Wilber claims the Indian ideas as his own.

In the book's preface, Wilber states that his ideas of involution-evolution coincide with Sri Aurobindo's, implying that he developed them independently.<sup>21</sup> Wilber goes on to cleverly marginalise Sri Aurobindo, often citing his words with the generic attribution, "according to many sages..."<sup>22</sup> Sri Aurobindo's elucidations of involution-evolution are buried in a table in the Appendix among a long list of theorists from other traditions. In contrast, Wilber meticulously cites and references each and every Western source. For example, Eric Janstch, who himself was influenced by Indian sources, is credited with the statement: "Evolution is self-realisation through self-transcendence."<sup>23</sup>

Every Indian idea that Wilber mentions is drowned out by extensive discussions of numerous Western substitutes that he considers equivalent. Moreover, he contrives to disguise Indian ideas in the garb of Greek mythology, and then re-state them in the vocabulary of Western Psychology. Swamiji's cosmological explanation of Brahman's manifestation is described without acknowledgment, and re-labelled "a process of kenosis" according to "perennial philosophy". Sri Aurobindo's descriptions of consciousness at the three lower planes of existence (matter, vital and mind) are appropriated and transferred entirely onto a Greek mythic framework. In this way, Wilber replaces the Indian foundation with a Hellenistic one, paving the way for misattribution to Western sources.

Other ideas expounded by Sri Aurobindo are blatantly repackaged as "original" concepts by Ken Wilber. *The Life Divine* explains "Ascend and Integrate", a pattern of evolution whereby the prior level of consciousness



is transcended but not left behind; rather, it is moved forward as a subset integrated into the higher level.<sup>24</sup> Wilber replaces “ascend and integrate” with his own phrase “transcend and include”,<sup>25</sup> claiming an original discovery.

Elsewhere, Wilber claims to have resolved the “Pre-Trans Fallacy”: an error made by Western psychoanalysts in confusing the “mystic state” with regression to a pre-rational “child-like state”. Having grasped this error, Wilber claims to have evolved an original resolution<sup>26</sup> that, in fact, simply appropriates Swami Vivekananda’s notion of involution-evolution. He writes: “To return to the Divine, one doesn’t regress to infancy. Mysticism is not regression in service of the ego, but evolution in transcendence of the ego.”<sup>27</sup>

Wilber’s claim of originality conveniently ignores that Buddha, Shankara, Ramanuja, Panini, Bharthrihari, Abhinavagupta and modern masters like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo did not regress to the child’s-ego level upon achieving enlightenment. Indian traditions do not confuse pre-ego with post-ego, and Indian spirituality does not aspire to child-like states.

By obscuring the Indian origins of involution-evolution, Wilber can pass off this concept as his “original” solution to a Western problem: the conflict between Christianity and modern science. Accordingly, he uses the qualifying phrase “as theologians have long known...” even to substantiate ideas of Indian origin diametrically opposed to Biblical ex nihilo Creation. His implication, that there is nothing novel or unique about replacing Biblical Creation with involution-evolution, completely contradicts the historical position taken by Western theologians.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, Wilber intends to conceal the difference between these radically divergent perspectives.

In Wilber’s later book, *Up from Eden*, appropriations from Vedantic involution-evolution are attributed exclusively to Western sources such as Joseph Campbell, Earnest Becker, L.L. Whyte and Erich Neumann. Wilber uses these appropriations to reinterpret Christianity in a contrived consonance with modern science. While presenting this as an original breakthrough, he mentions in passing that similar contentions were held by Sri Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Haridas Chaudhri and Gopi Krishna; yet, nowhere does he cite them, or ever acknowledge Swami Vivekananda’s original contributions.<sup>29</sup>

Wilber uses involution-evolution to formulate his own version of developmental and dynamic transpersonal psychology. Its inaccuracies arise from Wilber’s reliance on secondary accounts by Western intermediaries,



rather than on his own direct spiritual experience. For instance, he postulates a linear, reductionist model of human evolution in sequential stages: archaic-uroboric, magical-typhonic, mythic-membership, and mental-egoic. However, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo clearly explain that the overall forward trajectory of consciousness is characterised by “coils and zigzags of Nature”, not by “a mental straight line”.<sup>30</sup> Wilber’s errors are further compounded by his dependence on Western theories of naive realism and scientific materialism, which assume an objective reality independent of the observer. This perspective has long been superseded by postmodern thought.

With “Ascend and Integrate”, once again, Wilber introduces distortions. Sri Aurobindo holds that evolution is driven not only by the involution of consciousness in matter, but also by a pull from higher realms present in the cosmos. Wilber restricts himself to the former concept only, diminishing his model to something resembling the mechanistic view of evolution.

Strangely enough, Wilber attributes the “Pre-Trans fallacy” to Hinduism, and uses this as a platform to attack Hinduism. This is ironic, because the “fallacy” itself is a product of Western thought, arising from Romanticist notions of primitive perfection and the limitations of psychoanalytical theory.

Wilber also deforms the theories of Western thinkers, to force-fit purloined Indian concepts onto a framework that can be used to claim Western origins. In transplanting the ideas of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo onto the German Idealist philosophers Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, Wilber superimposes interpretations that expand the Germans’ writings far beyond their original scope and meaning.<sup>31</sup> In addition, he ignores the influence of Indian thought on many German philosophers, and claims instead that Fichte and Schelling were thinking “quite along the lines used by [Christian writer] Plotinus: the higher stages are implicit in the lower, they are unconscious potentials of the lower...”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Wilber borrows the idea of “nature as a unified, self-developing organism” and projects it onto Plato’s “visible God”.

### *Wilber-III: Claims to Supersede Indian Spirituality and “Cure” it*

In his third stage, Wilber falsely alleges a “fatal deficiency” of “other-worldliness” in Indian knowledge systems, and rejects them as irrelevant



to progress in this world. The teachings of Swamiji and Sri Aurobindo, though entirely relevant to this world, are dismissed by the artifice of limiting them to Western notions of perennialism. While ignoring Sri Aurobindo's extensive elaborations on the lower states of consciousness, Wilber claims that Indian systems lack insight into such lower states,<sup>33</sup> and suggests that Western psychology could remedy the "defect".<sup>34</sup>

Thus, Wilber criticises Indian spirituality by focusing exclusively on those aspects of it that equate conveniently to perennialism. Meanwhile, he repackages other aspects of Indian spirituality, such as Tantra and Shakti, in his own vocabulary to conceal their Indian origins. He then prescribes his unacknowledged appropriations from Indian spirituality, as a novel cure for his own selective misinterpretation of Indian spirituality!

Had Ken Wilber explicitly acknowledged the origins of his appropriations, experts on Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo would have been able to verify their validity. By disguising them instead, Wilber has created an opacity which shields him from cross-examination by outsiders.

### CONCLUSION

The cross-fertilisation of ideas between different civilisations is inevitable, and indeed desirable. However, just as a tree disconnected from its roots cannot yield fruit, a flawed repackaging into new vocabularies deprives such ideas as involution of their potential to deeply impact today's discourse. The gradual erasure of the history of Indian thought, and its replacement with fashionable substitutes, has led to a decline of interest in the subject. Swamiji's 150th birth anniversary is an opportune moment to revive that interest.

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1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama), Vol. 2, p. 207. Hereafter *Complete Works*.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 221.



7. For example, in Kashmir Shaivism, *nimesha* and *unmesha* refer to involution and evolution, respectively. Also, *svarupa-gopanam* and *svarupa-prakashanam* refer to involution and evolution, respectively.
8. *Complete Works*, Vol. 1, p. 360.
9. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 205.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 426-28.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
12. Cuttat Jacques-Albert, Dr., "The Spiritual Encounter of East and West", *Prabuddha Bharata*, 1961, p. 9.
13. *Complete Works*, Vol. 2, pp. 205-06.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 207-09.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 208-09.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-78.
19. *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, pp. 348-50.
20. Sri Aurobindo birth centenary library: *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Vols. 18-19), pp. 3-4. Hereafter Sri Aurobindo.
21. Wilber's explanations and ideas on involution and evolution from Wilber-II stage onwards are significantly different from the ones held at Wilber-I stage. In the *Spectrum of Consciousness* he does use the terms "involution" and "evolution", but they do not mean anything like what they mean here (in *The Atman Project*). Furthermore, there is no reference whatsoever to materialistic evolution with either spiritual involution or spiritual evolution. At best, one can say that Wilber-I shows similarities with Sri Aurobindo on matters of involution and evolution that are very rudimentary in nature.
22. Wilber, K., *The Atman Project: A Transpersonal View of Human Development* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1980) p. 76. Hereafter Wilber, K.
23. *Ibid.*, p. XVII.
24. Sri Aurobindo, 1972, pp. 702-03, p. 733.
25. Wilber, K., 1997, p. 238.
26. Wilber writes, "Perhaps no other idea of mine has caused such turmoil." (Wilber, 1983, p. 13).
27. Quoted in Reynolds, B., *Embracing Reality: The Integral Vision of Ken Wilber* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2004), p. 29.
28. Wilber, K., pp. 185-186.
29. Wilber, K., *Up from Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (1981), pp. 330-331.



30. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, "The Human Cycle" (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Vol. 25), p. 6. He also writes: "Progress admittedly does not march on securely in a straight line like a man sure of his familiar way or an army covering an unimpeded terrain or well-mapped unoccupied spaces. Human progress is very much an adventure through the unknown, an unknown full of surprises and baffling obstacles; it stumbles often, it misses its way at many points, it cedes here in order to gain there, it retraces its steps frequently in order to get more widely forward. The present does not always compare favourably with the past; even when it is more advanced in the mass, it may still be inferior in certain directions important to our inner or our outer welfare. ...Even in failure there is a preparation for success: our nights carry in them the secret of a greater dawn." (Ibid., "The Renaissance in India", Vol. 20.)
31. Wilber, K., *One Taste: Daily Reflections on Integral Spirituality* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2000), p. 515.
32. Ibid., pp. 514-15.
33. Wilber, K., *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for World Gone Slightly Mad* (Boston, MA: Shambhala), p. 303.
34. Wilber, K., p. 3.