Rita D. Sherma (ed.) *Swami Vivekananda: His Life, Legacy, and Liberative Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021). Pp. xxx + 261. £73.00 / US$95.00 (Hbk). ISBN 9781498586047.

Swami Vivekananda was born into a Bengali household in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1863 and died just thirty-nine years later in one of the monasteries he had founded in that same city. Within that short lifespan, he travelled extensively, making a transformative impact both in India and in the West. He was a major figure in anti-colonial politics but also in the spheres of philosophy and theology, promoting a vision of Hinduism that was to have enduring implications for how Hinduism has been conceptualized ever since. Emerging onto the world stage as the representative of Hinduism at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Vivekananda went on to found the Vedanta Society in the USA in 1894 and the Ramakrishna Mission in India in 1897, the latter being named after his beloved guru Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–1886). The volume under review is based on papers that were initially presented at an academic conference on Vivekananda's life, legacy and contemporary relevance, held at the University of Southern California in 2013. As its editor announces in the introductory chapter, the 'volume offers a multi-layered exploration of the contributions of Swami Vivekananda to a range of discursive and practical engagements that cut evenly across the fields of philosophy, theology, interreligious studies, ethics, postcolonial studies, and social justice' (xiv).

Following Sherma's introduction, the book comprises fourteen chapters, divided into three loosely thematic parts. Part I, 'Vivekananda in Relation to Hindu Philosophies and Major Thinkers', contains five chapters that examine how Vivekananda's ideas relate either to those propounded by other philosophers-cum-theologians within the venerable tradition of Vedānta or, in the case of Chapter 3 (by Michael Stoeber) to interpretations of meditative

yoga. A highlight of this part is Chapter 4, by Andrew Nicholson, which admirably demonstrates how a widely esteemed figure such as Vivekananda can be discussed respectfully and yet with a degree of critical scrutiny that is lacking in some of the other chapters in the volume. While Swami Medhananda, in Chapter 2, argues that Vivekananda advocated the 'harmony' or 'reconciliation' of the various schools of Vedānta philosophy, Nicholson maintains that Vivekananda consistently presented the 'non-dualist' (Advaita) school of Vedānta as superior to those that are characterized as 'dualist' or 'qualified non-dualist'. Although neither Medhananda nor Nicholson mentions the other's work in his chapter, this interpretive disagreement between them instantiates one of several implicit debates that are operative within the volume as a whole.

Part II, 'A Legacy of Service', features four chapters which, between them, examine Vivekananda's conception of the role of *seva* ('organized service to humanity' (89)) in the religious life (Chapters 6 and 8), the place of love and compassion in his theological vision (Chapter 7) and his pioneering promotion of the right of women to pursue a spiritual vocation (Chapter 9). In some places these chapters portray Vivekananda as something close to a saint, 'a modern spiritual pathfinder and a fighter on behalf of the poor and the downtrodden' (as Srinivas Tilak puts it in Chapter 8). But if we refer back to Nicholson's chapter in Part I, we gain a more nuanced perspective, according to which Vivekananda displayed, for example, an ambivalent attitude towards the social hierarchies of power and privilege that are institutionalized in the Indian caste system. On the one hand, he regarded this system as embodying the 'natural order' of things; on the other hand, he saw that an implication of his monistic cosmology was that all caste distinctions are ultimately illusory.

Part III, 'Revisiting Appraisals of Vivekananda', contains four chapters followed by a final chapter (Chapter 14), which is styled by its author Arvind Sharma and by the book's editor as an epilogue. The four chapters in this part showcase a rich selection of themes from

Vivekananda's oeuvre. Jeffrey Long, in Chapter 10, considers the nature of Vivekananda's 'theology of religions'. Recognizing, as have others, that it includes 'an element of the "perennial philosophy" – the idea of a shared conceptual and experiential core existing within the mystical strands of the world's religions', Long also detects in Vivekananda's theology 'an element of "deep pluralism"' (162), the latter being a term coined by David Ray Griffin for the view that diverse religions may be seen as complementing rather than contradicting one another. Like Medhananda in Chapter 2, Long emphasizes the notion of harmony in Vivekananda's position. While Medhananda stresses the reconciliation that Vivekananda purportedly sought between different brands of Vedānta philosophy, Long foregrounds Vivekananda's idea of multi-religious harmony, 'a commonwealth of religions, with each learning from and assimilating the ideals of the others while continuing to develop in its own distinctive way' (166). There is undoubtedly evidence in Vivekananda's speeches and writings for this interpretation: 'I believe that they [religions] are not contradictory; they are supplementary', Vivekananda proclaimed (quoted by Long, 169). Again, however, if we consult Nicholson's chapter, we find the contention that 'understanding Vivekananda's attitude toward religious pluralism requires an acknowledgment that he was both a Hindu supremacist and an inclusivist' (61). He was an inclusivist in the sense that, in at least some of his moods, he held all religions to be partially successful means of achieving spiritual fulfilment whereas it is Hinduism – or more precisely Advaita Vedānta – that constitutes the truest path. Indeed, in Chapter 13, Sharada Sugirtharajah quotes Vivekananda's claim that 'Advaitism is the last word of religion and thought. … We believe it is the religion of the future enlightened humanity' (216). In this respect, one might characterize Vivekananda as an Advaita supremacist, even though he undoubtedly had his genuinely pluralist moments.

James Madaio, in Chapter 11, designates Vivekananda as a 'cosmopolitan theologian' (185), 'a pioneer of cross-cultural pedagogy' (187) and 'an influential architect of global

Hinduism' (175). The chapter is a highpoint of the volume, exemplifying how a historically contextualized analysis of Vivekananda's relation to earlier expositions of Hindu philosophy and religiosity can challenge oversimplified binary distinctions between supposedly authentic 'traditional' or 'classical' formulations of Advaita and supposedly inauthentic modern formulations, where the latter are typically qualified by the prefix 'Neo-' (as in 'Neo-Vedānta' or 'Neo-Hindu'). By drawing attention to medieval Indic sources that blend aspects of Advaita philosophy with theistic devotionalism, Madaio calls into question the assumption, purveyed by some Indological scholarship, that Vivekananda's own reconfiguring of Advaita Vedānta was merely a product of his appropriation of European philosophical ideas. Displacing this assumption not only facilitates a re-evaluation of Vivekananda's innovative contributions to philosophy and theology but also opens up the possibility of 'a de-essentialized, polyvalent, and theologically expansive' reconceptualization of the Advaita tradition more generally (187).

Less insightful is Chapter 12, by Kapil Kapoor, which uncritically celebrates Vivekananda as a defender of *Sanātana Dharma*. Not only is the latter term (roughly 'eternal law') occasionally misspelt as '*Santāna Dharma*' in the chapter, but the term's vigorously contested history is entirely sidestepped. Kapoor includes a section headed 'Swami Vivekananda: A Historical Contextualization' which goes little further than sketching a few biographical details and proclaiming Vivekananda to have been an eloquent spokesperson who 'was able to channel the ocean of his love to speak not only to Hindus, but to the entire world' (205). On a charitable interpretation, one might say that such hyperbole at least benefits the reader by providing a taste of the adulation that is accorded to Vivekananda by his votaries.

The penultimate chapter, Chapter 13 by Sharada Sugirtharajah, examines Vivekananda's deployment of the concepts of 'manliness' and muscularity to identify the form of Hinduism

that was needed to confront attempts by sundry European missionaries, colonialists and orientalists to define Hinduism as 'effeminate' in contrast to the 'manly vigor' of Abrahamic monotheisms, with Protestant Christianity being the paradigm case (212). Seeking neither to excuse Vivekananda's militancy and hyper-masculinist rhetoric nor to decry it from a contemporary feminist perspective, Sugirtharajah carefully explicates Vivekananda's stance in relation to the cultural, religious and political environment in which he was situated. An especially striking passage from Vivekananda, quoted by Sugirtharajah, is one in which he lambasts Vaiṣṇava devotionalism, with its commitment to nonviolence, for turning 'the whole nation' into 'a race of women'; even Bengal, he continues, 'has almost lost all sense of manliness!' (quoted by Sugirtharajah, 219). Such glimpses into Vivekananda's aggressive campaigning style supply a salutary counterbalance to earlier chapters, such as those by Kusumita Pedersen and Pravrajika Vrajaprana, which emphasize Vivekananda's theology of love and his advocacy of women's empowerment respectively.

Finally comes Arvind Sharma's epilogue, in which he presents, in a relatively colloquial manner, an inquiry into the meaning of 'Hinduism'. Though purportedly carried out from a position congruent with that of Vivekananda, the inquiry makes scant direct reference to Vivekananda aside from a lengthy quotation in the chapter's opening section. Despite stressing that Hinduism is neither 'static' nor 'monolithic', Sharma sporadically slides into reifying or even personifying Hinduism as capable of holding 'axiomatic assumption[s]' or making claims (240, 241). Having declared that 'find[ing] out what Hinduism is' requires a move 'beyond such words as non-exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, to universalism' (239), Sharma ends by defining Hinduism as *dharma*. While admitting that the term *dharma* is itself hard to define, he maintains 'that the semantic swathe it cuts is so uniquely Hindu as to make one feel secure in the belief that the word may indeed be used to define Hinduism' (241). Whether this comes even close to a conclusion that Vivekananda might have reached

is difficult to say, but, at the very least, it is surprising that Sharma fails to acknowledge the centrality of the concept of *dharma* in Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as well as in Hinduism. In the absence of such an acknowledgement, the assertion that the term's 'semantic swathe' is 'uniquely Hindu' looks both naïve and unfittingly proprietorial.

Among the strongest characteristics of the volume is the implicit internal debates to which I have alluded. By bringing together these assorted perspectives from diverse authors, rooted in a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, the book constitutes a colourful multiplex picture of Swami Vivekananda's life and ideas, which are themselves profoundly generative and thought-provoking. Although, as I have indicated, the quality of scholarship is not consistently high, the volume is undoubtedly a valuable contribution to the study of Vivekananda in relation to philosophy, religion, ethics and politics. It is likely to be useful to readers who are looking for an accessible introduction as well as to more seasoned scholars of Vivekananda's work.

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