

The Light of Asia
A History of Western Fascination with the East

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Swami Vivekānanda, pictured fourth from the right at the
World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago 1893.

Introduction

11 September 1893. At thirty years of age, this was Swami Vivekānanda's first attempt at public speaking. Wearing a saffron-coloured turban above robes of crimson and orange, he rose to face an audience of 4,000 people, split between the floor and gallery of the brand-new Hall of Columbus.¹

A couple of years before, this part of the Lake Michigan shoreline, just south of Chicago, had been nothing but scrubland. Then 12,000 labourers had set to work: dredging, filling, and laying railway tracks. Locals paid a fee to enter the awe-inspiring construction site, looking on as the sort of iron and steel technology used in Chicago's skyscrapers was riveted and raised into place. Off these towering frames was hung a mix of white plaster, horsehair and hemp, moulded into colossal structures intended to complement the plazas, fountains and statues all around in recalling ancient Greece and Rome.² A classical paradise, but with American backbone.

The occasion for all this was the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' famous journey west. The World's Columbian Exposition was a year late in opening. But in all other respects, a continent in whose existence Columbus himself had resolutely refused to believe – convinced until the end that his voyages had taken him to Asia – was pulling out the stops to make him proud. There were columns and porticoes, a gilded statue of the Goddess of Liberty, and murals and inscriptions celebrating everything from Isaac Newton to steamship technology. There was Stars and Stripes drapery, electric floodlights and a grand archway inscribed with the words: 'Ye Shall Know The Truth, And The Truth Shall Make You Free'.³ Here was a country entering its pomp: New Rome and New Jerusalem rolled into one, propelled into the future by Enlightenment values, scientific know-how and the kind of prosperity and

optimism without which an undertaking on this scale would be inconceivable.

Today's event was the opening session of a 'World's Parliament of Religions'. Its aim was to bring to an exposition heavily focused on material accomplishments – from engineering to finance – a touch of the transcendent. Proceedings began with the echo around Lake Michigan of the 'Liberty Bell', tolling once in honour of each of ten major world religions: Shinto, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Sixty or so speakers from around the world processed solemnly into the hall, cassocks and robes of all colours swishing along together as national flags fluttered above. An organ was fired up and a psalm sung, before everyone took to their seats for the speeches of introduction.⁴

A devoted biographer later remarked of Vivekānanda that he remained in sage-like meditation as all this unfolded. The man himself remembered things differently: 'My heart [was] fluttering and my tongue nearly dried up.' When his turn came to speak, in the morning session, he had had to decline. Now, he was ready to greet the gathered throng and, via the media clustered near his feet, to present Hinduism to a Western world which, across many centuries, had largely failed to understand it. It was a truly historic moment. And Vivekānanda hadn't prepared anything to say.⁵

'Sisters and brothers of America', he began – and was forced to stop there, as raucous applause took hold of the hall. Vivekānanda went on, when the audience allowed him, to make an outline case for Hinduism. The 'mother of all religions' had 'taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance'. 'We believe', he added, 'not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true'. To an audience consisting primarily of American Christians, familiar with the claim, attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, that 'No one comes to the Father except through me', Vivekānanda offered a contrasting line from the *Bhagavad Gita*: 'Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me.'⁶

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By the time the World's Parliament wrapped up its proceedings seventeen days later, Vivekānanda's charismatic contributions had turned him into a minor celebrity. Invitations came in to lecture across the United States and Great Britain. Rumour – or possibly hagiography – had it that extra security had been installed at the Hall of Columbus, after people surged forward on one occasion, trying to touch his robe.⁷

Vivekānanda no doubt benefitted from largely negative Western impressions of Hinduism up to this point, thanks in no small part to Christian missionary reports about life in rural India that read like grisly dispatches from the front-lines of a war on despair. Against this backdrop, Vivekānanda was a revelation. But perhaps the biggest reason for his success was that Vivekānanda richly deserved his new name, given to him shortly before departing for America by his disciple and sponsor the Mahārāja of Khetri: 'Vivekānanda' meant 'bliss of discerning knowledge'. What he discerned in America, and in the wider West, was a blend of fascination and hunger.

The fascination was old. Colourful stories about India had circulated in Europe as far back as the fifth century BCE, joined later by news of China, Japan and their Asian neighbours. Here was a region of the world – 'the East', in European eyes – that appeared rich in gold, jewels, spices and silk. There was monstrosity, too, from strange creatures rumoured to roam India's plains to the supposedly cannibalistic Japanese. From the early modern era, Asia's fascination as a place of wealth and wonder was complemented by its promise as colonial and Christian mission territory, and later as a source of fresh wisdom for the West.

The light of Asia appeared, for a time, to shine especially brightly in China. Europeans like Voltaire were thrilled to discover an ancient and successful society, built and maintained on learning and merit rather than clerical privilege. By the time that Swami Vivekānanda arrived in Chicago, Western attention had shifted to India's exalted poetry and philosophy – drawing in Goethe and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, amongst many others – and interest in Asia had become infused with a sense of lack and longing. Christianity's biblical

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foundations were being shaken by geological discoveries, Darwinian evolution and new forms of scholarship. More than a few Christians found that their religion asked too much of them, in terms of doctrine and an exclusive claim to truth, while offering too little of what they needed in return: love, peace, spiritual experience – reassurance that the universe was not just Newtonian mechanism, but spirit and fire as well.

America had particular problems of its own. The constellation of fine structures that made up the World's Columbian Exposition acquired the nickname 'White City', and not just on account of the building materials. Black America was largely missing from this celebration of the United States, a fact condemned by Ida Wells and Frederick Douglass. The latter listed all the things that he would love to share with visitors coming in from around the world, about the condition of his country almost thirty years on from the abolition of slavery:

The moral progress of the American people has kept even pace with their enterprise and their material civilization . . . two hundred and sixty years of progress and enlightenment have banished barbarism and race hate . . . the people of the United States are a nation in fact as well as in name.⁸

Douglass could not share any of this, he said, because none of it was true. The exposition was, 'morally speaking . . . a whited sepulcher'. Especially egregious was the use of plazas, walkways and exhibits to portray the cultures of the world according to favoured Western taxonomies of savage, half-civilized, and civilized. Douglass regarded an ethnographic exhibit comprising people from the west African kingdom of Dahomey (now southern Benin) as a calculated insult: they were 'here to exhibit the Negro as a repulsive savage'.⁹

Vivekānanda had only been in the United States for a few weeks, arriving from Bombay via Nagasaki and Vancouver.¹⁰ But he understood enough about the broader worries of the western world to be able to tailor his talks accordingly. He was generous in lauding

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America's virtues, and on matters spiritual he attended to the anxieties of the age almost point by point. Religious truths are an attempt to describe something real, he assured his listeners. They are not imaginary, metaphorical, or relative. But doctrine ought to be treated as a means to truth, not truth itself. Science, meanwhile, is an ally, not a threat: his own tradition, Vivekānanda claimed, had anticipated recent and future findings of the natural sciences by millennia, from the conservation of energy to the impossibility of dead matter giving rise to mind.¹¹

Greater roles for women in society? Some of the sages to whom the Vedas, India's oldest texts, had been revealed, were women. A lesser role for priests? Vivekānanda barely mentioned them, casting the spiritual life as a relationship between a human being and the divine. What about the problem of evil? Karma: a fair and rational arrangement, in which bodies may suffer but a person's soul journeys on towards union with 'the Almighty and the All-merciful' – at once father, mother, and friend, and worshipped primarily in love. Why, though, did the cosmos have to be this way – so complicated, so painful? Hindus do not know, admitted Vivekānanda – a thoroughly disarming response for anyone who had become weary, of late, with certitudes and platitudes, whether religious or scientific.¹²

Vivekānanda's appearance at the World's Parliament of Religions marked a turning point. In two and a half millennia of Western fascination with Asia, he was the first Asian religious leader to lecture widely in the West. Many more followed in his wake, and Vivekānanda's thousand-year-old Advaita Vedānta tradition – which inspired T. S. Eliot to remark that India's philosopher-poets made their European counterparts 'look like schoolboys' – was soon joined by Japanese Zen as one of Asia's most popular exports. Western enthusiasm grew rapidly from there, passing through the Beatles and flower-power, the New Age, and into the twenty-first century's mindfulness and wellness movements.

Garlands and gurus. Incense and chanting. Gnostic one-liners and quiet restraint. Had he lived to see the speed at which Asian cultures

would – in some quarters, at least – become mired in misrepresentation and cliché, Swami Vivekānanda might briefly have wondered why he had bothered boarding the boat in Bombay. In the early twenty-first century, his beloved discipline of yoga – which Vivekānanda introduced to small groups of admirers while in America – found itself beset by accusations that an ancient spiritual practice was being reduced to a glorified workout. The fact that billions of dollars was changing hands in the process, with little of it finding its way to India, raised questions about stolen property. It compounded a sense of anger amongst people with Asian heritage at having precious practices or ways of looking at the world subjected to crude and potentially lasting manipulation – sometimes just for the sake of an #uplifting Instagram post.

Disappointed Vivekānanda might have been – but probably not surprised. In his final address to the World's Parliament of Religions, he observed that Westerners' interest in Hinduism appeared to be tinged by a desire for 'the exclusive survival of [their] own religion'. He had in mind not just Christianity but the broader culture of which it was a part in the modern West. The parliament had convened amidst the most extraordinary architectural display of wealth, creativity and success. Yes, people sensed something lacking – otherwise Vivekānanda would have been speaking to an empty hall. But how much was the average person prepared to risk in addressing that lack? When it came down to it, were they in search of wisdom or window-dressing?

Any spiritual leader worth their salt knows how deep such difficulties run, and how mixed people's motivations may be. What is real? Who says? How should I live? These three questions have often been at the heart of Western fascination with 'the East', all the way from ancient authors for whom India's fabled beasts and riches marked an extension of reality's range through to the intense, even salvific allure of Asian philosophy and spirituality for their modern counterparts. The result has been an extraordinary fusion of hope, struggle, astonishment and adventure with avarice, racism, fear of new and radical notions and the desire to apply to the duller parts

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of life a splash of 'Oriental' colour. Pop culture has played its own powerful, confounding role: supplying potentially transformative ideas with unprecedented momentum via music and film, even while its rapid churn threatens to drain them of their drama and banish them to a safe, ironic remove. *Star Wars* surely retains, for some fans, its Asia-inspired fascination: 'Luminous beings we are,' says Yoda to Luke Skywalker in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), 'not this crude matter.' Others will have grown up with the parodies and the second-rate imitations.

The Light of Asia sets out to explore this rich weave, focusing on India, China and Japan and on the highs and lows of 'fascination'. Global politics and economics have, for some time, been moving us away from the notion of two cultural zones confronting one another – 'West' and 'East'. But it would be a brave commentator who claimed that those three animating questions – What is real? Who says? How should I live? – have been settled to general satisfaction. On the contrary: as institutional religion wanes in parts of the West and people sift an array of alternative worldviews, both religious and secular, fascination remains evergreen. How it plays out, in individual lives and across whole societies, feels as pressing now as ever.

Part One of the book – 'Outward: Discovering Asia' – traces the evolution of early Western knowledge about Asia, from Greek rumours of fantastical creatures to the eastward journeys of Alexander the Great, Roman traders, Marco Polo and travel writers like the Englishman Thomas Coryate (nickname: the 'Legge-Stretcher'). Part Two – 'Downward: Fathoming Asia' – traces a deepening but highly selective Western understanding of how people in India, China and Japan saw the world, beginning with the Jesuits and running through to the late Victorian era's enthusiasm for Buddhism and the occult.

Across the twentieth century, increasing numbers of Westerners looked to Asia for solutions to empty lives and faltering societies. Part Three – 'Inward: Dwellers on the Threshold' – explores this intimate concern with the East by homing in on three people who launched themselves on spiritual odysseys of a kind, touching the

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lives of many others in the process. The English writer Alan Watts (1915–73) was one of his era’s pre-eminent popularizers of Asian wisdom, and a leading light in America’s counter-culture. His fellow Englishman Bede Griffiths (1906–93) spent the second half of his life in south India, living as a *sannyasin* – religious ascetic – and working out a blend of Christianity, Hinduism and modern science that earned him the title ‘Father of the New Age’. The Swiss psychiatrist Erna Hoch (1919–2003) moved to the Indian city of Lucknow to run one of the country’s first mental health clinics. There, and later in the Himalayas, she brought her love of the Stoics and her ebbing Christian faith into conversation with Indian thought and the emerging worlds of psychotherapy and transcultural psychiatry.

Our epilogue – ‘Onward’ – returns to the three big questions that have driven and shaped Western fascination with the East, surveying the successes and failures of the past and looking to the future. The personalities and technologies are changing, but the challenges and joys seem set to remain: of encountering fresh ideas and facing the invigorating prospect – conveyed so vividly by Vivekānanda in the cavernous Hall of Columbus – that the world can yet be re-imagined, all the way down.