Migration and Spiritual Conquest

Emplacing Contemporary Comparative Theology in a Hindu Theology of the “Quarters” (dik)

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As a formal discipline, comparative theology is the creature of a distinctively modern and distinctively European scholarly imagination, with its regard directed to other “places”—to persons, traditions, and geographies conceived of as lying outside the boundaries of Christendom. This is certainly true of the “old” comparative theology, as the fruit of missionary encounters and colonial conquest.¹ But it is arguably retained in the “new”

comparative theology articulated by Keith Ward, Francis X. Clooney, Robert Neville, James Fredericks, and their students. As just one example, the well-respected scholar of Hinduism and comparative theologian Francis Clooney writes frequently of his experiences of travel and study in India, and his comparative method privileges a model of personal transformation, in which the comparativist immerses herself in the texts and practices of another tradition so as to reinterpret texts and practices of her home tradition with new eyes. Though this model need not involve literal travel, it is nevertheless most easily imagined in a geographical idiom of pilgrimage across the territorial boundaries of Hindu and Christian traditions. The comparativist departs from one place of social and religious identity, immerses herself in another, and returns home, ideally transformed.

It is worth noting that both Christian comparativists and theologians of religions frequently speak of globalization and new experiences of religious diversity in late modernity as the context for their work: the religious diversity that might once have existed “out there,” has become an intrinsic feature of the cities and academic circles in which most theologians find themselves, “here” and “now,” and thus demands our scholarly attention. One important element of such a globalized context, at least in North America, is the new religious landscape created by the loosening of restrictions on immigrants from various parts of Asia in the United States and

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Canada from the 1960s to the present. The infusion of significantly larger numbers of Hindus and Buddhists—among others—into the North American tapestry and, with it, the creation of new forms of North American Hinduism and Buddhism offer new opportunities and incentives for Hindu-Christian encounters. From a survey administered throughout Canada in the mid-1980s, for example, David J. Goa noted that particular initiatives in Hindu-Christian dialogue could often be traced to a desire among new Hindu communities for “support on a range of social and cultural issues.” So too a recently established national Hindu-Catholic dialogue initiated by the Canadian bishops identified pragmatic questions related to the formation of youth and fostering social cohesion as shared concerns for both communities.

As these examples suggest, the new proximity of Christians, Hindus, and many religious others in major urban centers of North America and Europe offers a rich field for interreligious dialogue and encounters, and it does indeed call for the development of new pastoral and theological responses. At the same time, claims that such an experience is entirely new in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, or that Western cities like New York, London, and Toronto stand out as uniquely pluralistic vis-à-vis the longer histories of diversity in many parts of Asia, can and should be contested. More

importantly for my purposes in this essay, the increasing presence of distinctively North American forms of Hinduism also complicates any easy vision of “departure” and “return” for contemporary comparative theology. What kind of departure is effected when the “other” text or tradition is nearer to hand than the geographic center(s) of one’s own “home” tradition? The impact of questions such as these on the shape of the discipline has yet to be explored in a sustained way.\(^7\) As Raymond Williams wrote at the end of the last century, “Hindu–Christian dialogue in the United States has become a triologue of American Christians, Indian Hindus, and American Hindus, with the latter a silent partner.”\(^8\)

Of course, the most significant impact on contemporary comparative theology from the North American Hindu diaspora will be the construction of comparative theologies by North American Hindus, and this important work is underway.\(^9\) But Christian

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comparativists can also seek out paths to engage diasporic and transnational Hindu traditions as resources for Christian theological reflection. Thus, in this essay, I briefly explore the transformation of place in the theological imagination of immigrant Hindu traditions, particularly as this project has been taken up in the theology of the contemporary Chinmaya Mission. One oft-cited example of such transformation is Pittsburgh’s Śri Veṅkateśwara Temple, where the sacred geography of southern India has been symbolically transposed to the similar landscape of western Pennsylvania and the Penn Hills.10

In the case of the Chinmaya Mission, the transposition from place to place is not so literal, as the tradition’s theology functions both to displace the physical geography of India and to re-place this geography itself within a longer narrative arc of religious evolution and historical transformation. At the center of this creative reinterpretation is a retelling of the great eighth-century c.e. Advaita teacher Śaṅkara’s legendary “conquest of the quarters” (dig-vijaya) by the movement’s founder Swami Chinmayananda (1916–1993) and his early collaborators.

My argument proceeds in three steps. First, I offer an overview of the distinctive history and teachings of the Chinmaya Mission, particularly as illustrated by Swami Chinmayananda’s short text, *A Manual of Self-Enfoldment* (1975). Second, I turn to another short text from the same period, *Śaṅkara the Missionary* (1978), and its creative rearticulation of the traditional four “quarters” (dik) of the Indian subcontinent in the Śaṅkara hagiographies to construct a

new, transnational identity for the Chinmaya Mission. Finally, I offer a few reflections on how this Hindu tradition might affect the way that Christians consider the place of \textit{place} in the Christian imagination. Once emplaced in this Hindu theology of the quarters, the dynamism of comparative theology may be sought less in its apparent departure from the stable place of the home tradition than in a renewed appropriation of that place, made possible by its displacement.

\textbf{A Religion of No-Place: A Manual of Self-Unfoldment (1975)}

Mission stands in the tradition of nondualist Hinduism, or Advaita Vedânta. A distinctive focus of the movement, however, at least in its self-understanding, has been to democratize the study of Hindu scriptures. In a trope one hears frequently in the movement, Chinmayananda “ended the monopoly of orthodox priests over Vedânta, handing the priceless knowledge of the scriptures to the masses of India and the world.”

Beginning with his first public lectures in Pune, India in 1951, this has taken two primary institutional forms: Jñāna Yagñas, signature week- or fortnight-long discourses on the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gīta; and the formation of small lay-directed study discussion groups whose shared scriptural study follows a well-defined “scheme of study.”

As already noted, Swami Chinmayananda understood the core teaching of Hindu tradition as the nondual vision of advaita, proclaiming the ultimate identity of the divine reality of Brahman and the innermost self of each individual. Himself a journalist and independence activist prior to entering monastic life, he often interpreted this teaching in nationalistic terms, as a “renaissance” of the Indian state. Indeed, in 1964 he became one of the co-founders of the Hindu nationalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP).

13. Dukes et al., eds., He Did It, 3.
15. See, e.g., Dukes et al., eds., He Did It, 23–35, 83–86, 212–25, quotation at 224.
16. See the discussion in Chetan Bhatt, Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 180–83; Lise McKeen, Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 101–2, 177–79; and Peter van der Veer, Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999), 130–37. According to sources within the movement, Chinmayananda envisioned the VHP as a Hindu correlate to the World Council of Churches. In their authorized history of the movement, Swami Chidananda and Rukmani Ramani contend that Chinmayananda perceived this initiative as a response to disciples in foreign countries alerting him that the immigrants there lacked exposure to India’s heritage. However, as the VHP became increasingly politicized, the Chinmaya Mission dissociated itself from it.
Yet, Chinmayananda also understood the scope of the movement to be universal. In one of his calls for renewal, for example, he wrote:

“In this vision we shall not limit our field to the Hindus only, nor is it only for India. Our vision shall comprehend all mankind, all nations, societies and communities. Man is our theme of devotion, and he is our main field of worship.”

In 1965, with the assistance of lay devotees, Chinmayananda launched the first of several world tours. Though members of the movement drew explicit parallels to Swami Vivekananda’s famous missionary journey to the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Chinmayananda’s primary goal was to revive and purify the practice of Hindus in the diaspora. He did teach the scriptures to a wider public, attracted a significant number of Western disciples, and eventually founded Chinmaya Mission West in California in 1975, as well as similar centers throughout Europe, East Asia, and Africa. Nevertheless, the primary focus of the movement was and remains a work of internal mission, to “convert Hindus to Hinduism”—albeit in the new, transnational context created by global patterns of migration.

A good example of Swami Chinmayananda’s universalization of the teaching of Advaita for a global community can be found in a significant work from 1975, titled *A Manual of Self-Unfoldment*. The preface to this work was penned in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the shadow of Harvard and MIT, and Chinmayananda describes its audience as “modern university educated [and] scientific minded.”

See their *Call of the Conch: The History of the Chinmaya Movement* (Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 2001), 38.

17. Quoted in Dukes et al., eds., *He Did It*, 224.
18. Ibid., 234.
19. See ibid., 233–90.
20. Ibid., 86.
Perhaps unsurprisingly, given this intended audience, Chinmayananda describes the teaching of Advaita unfolded therein as an objective and universal “Science of Reality,” similar to the natural sciences, but distinguished by its inward focus.23 This theme runs throughout the entire Manual. Chinmayananda first offers a portrait of true religion as a “great science,” and the ancient Rishis, correspondingly, as “scientists of the spirit” and “glorious depth-psychologists.”24 He then turns, in subsequent chapters, to a systematic analysis of human experience in terms of five “sheaths” and the vāsanās, or mental impressions, which obscure the divine, innermost self of each and every conscious being.25 From this foundation, he proceeds to outline preparatory ethical disciplines for cleansing the mind, practices for the conservation of energy and elimination of vāsanās, and, in the final chapters, detailed consideration of the threefold sādhana to release our mental power, including scriptural study, the disciplined repetition of mantras, and techniques for deeper meditation.26

Intriguingly, Swami Chinmayananda’s explicit discussion of Hindu culture and religion, though implied throughout The Manual of Self-Unfoldment, arises only late in the work, in chapter 10, long after the initial account of human experience and identification of the “Divine-Principle” as the singular goal “advocated by all Religions.”27 This brief account of the Hindu history and scriptural traditions, in turn, leads into yet another broader, more philosophical question-and-answer about the “Composition of Man.”28 The religious culture of India is thus skillfully introduced and re-inscribed into a more

22. Ibid., ii.
23. Ibid., i.
24. Ibid., 4–5.
25. Ibid., esp. 53–87.
26. For this threefold scheme, see ibid., 117–18.
27. Ibid., 75–79, 157–70.
28. Ibid., 170–79.
universal and interior understanding of religion and an easily transportable series of meditative practices. The work, appropriately, concludes with a discussion of the formation and maintenance of study groups, mentioned above, as a form of religious practice replicable anywhere in the world.  

In the *Manual of Self-Unfoldment*, it seems, Swami Chinmayananda’s vision of Vedānta is deliberately and specifically abstracted from any particular physical, cultural, or religious geography. Chinmayananda wrote to a Western disciple in 1968: “In the Eternal Heart, there are no continents, there are no peoples, there is only love.” So also, in the *Manual*, he redefines the place of the teaching less in terms of “continents” or “peoples” than in terms of cognitive, interior structures, as revealed especially in the so-called “BMI Chart.” This distinctive visual diagram, presented twice in the *Manual* and employed often by Chinmayananda in his public teaching, traces the origin of phenomenal experience—the body-mind-intellect (B-M-I) of the perceiver, with its corresponding objects, emotions, and thoughts (O-E-T)—to the obscuring power of *vāsanās* and, behind them, the divine Reality of *om*, sometimes symbolized by an X. “After listening intently to Gurudev’s explanation of the BMI chart,” one devotee reports, “I realized that this was a uniquely simple, yet comprehensive, way to explain all that is, both Real and relative.” To the degree that the *Manual* locates the teaching of Vedānta in a particular geography at all, then, it is not a physical landscape, but an interior geography of “all that is,” schematized by abstract signifiers like B-M-I, O-E-T, and X.

29. Ibid., 180–89.
30. Quoted in Dukes et al., eds., *He Did It*, 246–47.
32. See Dukes et al., eds., *He Did It*, 101, and Dukes et al., eds., *Vedānta*, 15–21.
A Religion of New-Place: Śāṅkara the Missionary (1978)\textsuperscript{34}

From one point of view, the vision of the \textit{Manual of Self-Unfoldment} and the placelessness of a cognitive map like the BMI Chart seem ideally suited to reimagining this particular Hindu movement as a transnational, global tradition. Yet, even in the U.S. and Europe, Swami Chinmayananda and the Chinmaya Mission have also consistently advocated a form of cultural nationalism, rooted in the Indian land and culture. Given this, it would not be sufficient to divest the teaching of Advaita entirely of its geographical particularity; instead, ideally, this geography itself would need to be universalized. Hence, the importance of a second work produced by the Mission a few years after the \textit{Manual: Śaṅkara the Missionary}.\textsuperscript{35}

As indicated in the prefaces of both editions,\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Śaṅkara the Missionary} originated in 1978 as a souvenir volume to honor Swami Chinmayananda’s 267th Jñāna Yagña. Twenty years later, and five years after Swami Chinmayananda’s death, the work was thoroughly reorganized: much material was removed and several appendices integrated into the main narrative. Its authors identify as their primary source the \textit{dig-vijaya} or “conquest of the quarters” of one Mādhava,\textsuperscript{37} traditionally identified with the prominent fourteenth-century sage Vidyāranya.\textsuperscript{38} This work, like many other \textit{vijaya}s dedicated to Śaṅkara and other great teacher-renouncers, narrates

\textsuperscript{34} The discussion in this section depends and draws upon the more extensive analysis in Reid Locklin and Julia Lauwers, “Rewriting the Sacred Geography of Advaita: Swami Chinmayānanda and the Šaṅkara-dig-vijaya,” \textit{The Journal of Hindu Studies} 2 (2009): 179–208, esp. 191–99.

\textsuperscript{35} Except where otherwise noted, all references to this work are taken from the 1998 revised edition: \textit{Śaṅkara the Missionary}, rev. ed. (Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 1998).

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., iii; \textit{Śaṅkara the Missionary} (Bombay: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 1978), xiii.