

Review of Anantanand Rambachan's The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas

by Harold Coward

Every now and then one encounters a book which brings unexpected illumination to longstanding questions. This is such a volume. Rambachan's critical analysis of Vivekananda's thought and its legacy in the Hinduism of today is as important a contribution as Wilhelm Halbfass' *India and Europe*. (Albany: Suny, 1988). While others have highlighted Vivekananda's influence on Indian nationalism and the impact of the Ramakrishna mission, this is the first critical assessment of his thought and its influence on contemporary Hinduism--especially Advaita Vedanta of which Vivekananda claimed to be a contemporary exponent. This book brought answers to puzzles which had been in my mind for years: why do Hindus not show much serious scholarly interest in dialogue?; why has Hindu scholarship in this century become so flabby?; and why does Vivekananda use this extra category of *rajayoga*? Rambachan's critical study of Vivekananda's view of scripture (*sruti*), in comparison with that of Sankara, provides surprising and convincing answers to these questions.

Whereas Sankara gives priority to *sruti* as the only valid way to obtain knowledge of *brahman* and release (*moksa*), Vivekananda, responding to the enlightenment critique of the authority of scripture, superimposes direct personal experience (*anubhava, samadhi*) of *brahman* above scripture as its ultimate validation. And for Vivekananda, direct personal experience (*samadhi*) also provides the verifying capstone of the alternate paths to release of karma and *bhakti*. This insertion by Vivekananda of personal experience as the extra and final step in the achievement of knowledge of *brahman* and *moksa* raises the question as to how such *samadhi* is achieved? In answer Vivekananda presses into service the eight steps of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, of which *samadhi* is the last. The fact that this introduces a dualistic system (*Sankhya*) which hangs loosely to scripture is not dealt with by Vivekananda. He is more interested in seeing the direct supersensuous *samadhi* experience of *brahman* as a parallel to the perceptual verification of knowledge offered by modern science. While Vivekananda's move of giving priority to *samadhi* over *sruti* may seem compatible with modern science, it introduces significant changes into

Sankara's understanding of Vedanta and Hinduism--yet these are glossed over by Vivekananda and his followers. But this is much more than just an academic squabble between Sankara and Vivekananda, as Rambachan's analysis makes clear.

In chapter 1, Rambachan traces the gradual ascendance of personal experience (*anubhava*, *samadhi*) over scripture (*sruti*) in the Indian Renaissance thinkers that preceded and influenced Vivekananda--Rammohun Roy, who places reason above scripture; Debendranath Tagore, who rejected the *mahavakyas* of the Upanisads (e.g. "that thou art") as undercutting the separation of the devotee and God necessary for worship; Keshub Chandra Sen, who rejected books, priests, and rituals as stultifying forms of authority and instead embraced direct individual perception of God (*darsan*) as the way to spiritual knowledge; and Ramakrishna, who judged sacred scripture to be simply a map which pointed the way to God but required the confirmation of direct "seeing" for true knowledge of that to which texts of all religions point. As a follower of Keshub and then Ramakrishna, Vivekananda absorbed these influences which paved the way for his presentation of a nonscripturally based Hinduism.

In chapter 2, Rambachan unfolds Vivekananda's view of *sruti* as having no authority in and of itself but only in terms of the purity of the *rsi* who "sees" it. Such a scriptural direct perception is valid knowledge only if the *rsi* is pure, if the content is unavailable through the senses, and if the content is not contradicted by other sources of valid knowledge (e.g. reason and science). For us as hearers, the Vedas (or any other scripture) act as "maps" pointing the way to a direct perception of God, which, when experienced, makes the scripture valid (p. 44). Chapter 3 contrasts this view with that of Sankara and demonstrates the significant changes that Vivekananda introduces-- especially his claim that scripture (*sruti*) is not a valid source of knowledge (*pramana*) but must be verified by the further step of direct personal experience. Chapter 4 is devoted to an assessment of Vivekananda's *rajayoga* as the method by which such personal experience is to be achieved. It is through Patanjali's eight yoga steps, detailed in the Yoga Sutras, that this capstone *samadhi* experience of *brahman* (or other religions) is to be realized. The difficulties for both Advaita and Hinduism of this divergence from Sankara are elucidated in chapters 5 and 6. For Sankara nothing can or needs to transcend *sruti* as the means for

knowing *brahman*. For Vivekananda, *sruti* not only can be but must be transcended by the *samadhi* experience of *rajayoga* if knowledge of *brahman* is to be gained. Implications of this shift for the theory of error, for the *jivanmukta*, and for the mind as an independent source of knowledge of *brahman* are detailed by Rambachan. He concludes that in spite of its radical inconsistency with Sankara, Vivekananda's thought has been uncritically adopted by Hindus of this century and is not serving them well.

Vivekananda's downgrading of scriptural scholarship to mere intellectual theory, requiring supplementation by the *samadhi* of *rajayoga*, has led to the glossing over of differences of doctrine as unimportant (e.g. differences between Sankhya and Advaita, between Hinduism and other religions). It asserts too quickly that all religions lead to the same goal (p. 135). The uncritical embracing of this view has not served Hinduism well in the religious pluralism of the twentieth century, for it fails to take *difference* seriously--something Sankara always did. It has led to a lack of rigor in scholarship (since intellectual differences do not really matter) and to a failure to take the differences between religions seriously. While Vivekananda's attempt to respond to the nineteenth century challenge of science was commendable, his solution of replacing Sankara's faith in *sruti* with an uncritical embracing of *samadhi* as the only valid religious knowledge has left Hinduism with a flawed legacy that needs critical reexamination. Rambachan's book is a first and most important step in this direction.