

# Vivekananda and Nietzsche as Critics of Western Bourgeois Civilization<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the German academic prodigy working in a Swiss university, and Swami Vivekananda *alias* Narendranath Datta (1863-1902), a precocious youth of north Calcutta turned a globe-trotting ascetic, have been the two prominent world personalities of the nineteenth century. While Nietzsche represented the prosperous and powerful West, the Swami hailed from the British colony of India. Both in their own way provided a critique of Western civilization. Nietzsche's condemnation of the materially prosperous but morally bankrupt bourgeois civilization of Europe was echoed by Vivekananda's spirited and often dramatic denunciation during his sojourn in the West (1893-97 and 1899-1901). Yet there was a world of difference between their critical perspectives. Nietzsche's repudiation of the Judeo-Christian culture was predicated on the vision of a new moral society informed partly by a quasi-Buddhist ascetic ideal (though he was never an endorser of Hindu asceticism). Vivekananda's attitude to Western material culture was partly negative and partly supportive. He clearly appreciated the merits of materialism for British India seeking to develop technologically and economically, though he was wary of excessive materialism and convinced of the superiority of spiritual progress over the material. However, the Swami's lectures, letters, and sermons, when contrasted with Nietzsche's writings and conversations, often appear to be singularly lacking in substance, depth, and analysis. This paper, then, examines the *oeuvres* of both men with a view to providing some explanation of their differing tone and content.

At the outset, a brief comparative outline of India and Europe in the nineteenth century is expected to contextualize the writings of Nietzsche and Vivekananda with a view to

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appreciating the contrast between the critiques of these two nineteenth-century personalities--one feared, resented and rejected by his Europe during his lifetime and grossly misinterpreted and misunderstood by the posterity and the other idealized and idolized by his admirers in India and in the West during his lifetime and made a cultural icon of postcolonial India.

### **India and Europe in the Late Nineteenth Century: An Overview**

The nineteenth century witnessed the completion of the process of British domination of India--first the Company rule and, following the Sepoy Mutiny of the mid-century, imperial rule. Richard Colley Wellesley's Governor-Generalship (1798-1803) began the trend which reached a significant landmark during the regime of James Andrew Brown Ramsay, Marquess of Dalhousie (1848-56), "British India's most talented and energetic governor-general."<sup>2</sup> The consolidation of the East India Company's rule followed by the absorption of the subcontinent into the British Empire was accompanied by Western efforts to educate the natives in order to awaken them to their own cultural heritage as well as to transform them into useful and easily governable subjects (Orientalist approach). In this project of modernization the contributions of three Baptist missionaries are of signal importance. They were Joshua Marshman, William Carey, and William Ward. These talented trio were instrumental in fostering Anglo-Orientalist education and advancing the study of Indo-European languages. Thereafter Thomas Babington Macaulay's Anglo-Indian Law of 1833, combining the cultural idealism of the missionaries with the functional pragmatism of the ruling class, intended to train "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and intellect."<sup>3</sup> The combined modernizing enterprise of the Christian missionaries and colonial masters, leading to the founding of the Hindu College in 1816 (later to be renamed Presidency College), of India's first library in 1818 (later to be renamed the National Library), evoked a cultural response from the Western educated youths of Bengal, which is known as the Hindu or Bengal Renaissance. The home of this renaissance was Calcutta, capital of British India since 1771.

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<sup>2</sup>Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (1977. Second ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 223.

<sup>3</sup>Macaulay, "Minute on Education," House of Commons (July 10, 1833) cited in Percival Spear, *India: A Modern History* (1961. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 257.

However, wittingly or unwittingly, modernization created a base for Indian nationalism, particularly during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Consolidation of British power brought home the "foreignness" of the white rulers. The influx of missionaries (since the Charter Act of 1813), the founding and funding of English education, the continuing process of territorial consolidation and economic exploitation, in short the ongoing modernization of Indian society and economy, brought the native social, cultural, and economic differences into sharper focus. The Indian negative response to the Western challenge was cultural (the Brahmo movement of Raja Rammohan Roy, 1772-1833) as well as political (the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and the revolt of the Muslim *taluqdars* of Oudh, 1858). The Indian positive response was the construction of their national consciousness under the leadership of the English educated gentle folks, the *bhadralok*, of Calcutta and it soon spread to the Maharastrian lands in western India, especially the cities of Bombay and Poona.

It is, of course, well known that the introduction of the Indian Civil Service examination system after 1854 enabled the sons of the *bhadralok* to compete for high offices in the government but by the same token infuriated them at the prevalence of racial discrimination and led one victim, Surendranath Banerjee (1848-1926), to found the first national political organization, the Indian Association, in 1876. Seven years later, the notorious controversy surrounding the Ilbert Bill of 1883 demonstrated to the Indian nationalists the efficacy of a united struggle. Thus was founded the Indian National Congress in Bombay on December 8 1885. Its mentor was Allan Octavian Hume and its first president was the Calcutta barrister Woomesh C. Bonnerjee.

Indian nationalist movement, hitherto secular, took on a religious hue under the leadership of a brilliant Marathi journalist Balwantrao Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) who invoked the Hindu religious tradition in opposing the Age of Consent Bill of 1891, revived an old Maharastrian festival to commemorate the birth of the elephant-headed god Ganesh (1893), and inaugurated (in 1895) the festival in honor of Shivaji Bhonsle (1627-80), who had spearheaded a Hindu resistance to the Muslim Mughal rule. Even in Bengal, the later Renaissance underwent a shift from rationalist to nationalist enterprise and the liberal modernizing tendencies gave way to a conservative parochial mood, which glorified the Hindu heritage. This attitude was reflected in the construction of an indigenous paradigm of cultural autonomy and self-respect in opposition to the Enlightenment paradigm of modernity imposed

by the metropolitan West.<sup>4</sup> Swami Vivekananda grew into adulthood under the influence of this Janus-faced emerging modern India buffeted by the crosscurrents of liberal modernism and romantic nationalism.

The nineteenth century was as eventful and complicated for Europe as it was for British India. This period constituted for Western world in general a charmed era, the banquet years, or as some Frenchmen would regard it, *la belle époque*. With the formation of an independent Belgium in 1830 and united Germany and Italy in 1871, nationalism was ascendant, fueling ethnic aspirations and agitations in South Eastern Europe and Ireland. Industrialization had taken a new course from the twenties and thirties exploring a new source of energy and embarking on a communication revolution with the invention of telegraph, radio, and railways, and the construction of canals, bridges, and roadways. The mid-century announced the triumphant march of science and technology at the international industrial fair held in London in 1851 while the century ended celebrating its apotheosis of modernity at the World Fair of 1900 in Paris. A historian has observed with uncanny hindsight that "in the nineteenth century the optimism that stemmed from the Enlightenment was gratified in a series of astonishing political, scientific, and social accomplishments."<sup>5</sup> Twentieth century was born, yelling, in this age of grandeur, glamor, and gargantuan appetite for power.

Throughout the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, two broad cultural ideological trends confronted each other: one celebrating progress toward modernity and the other castigating modernism. In 1879 the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) wrote that "irresistibly ... armed with weapons and science, the spirit of the West subdues the world."<sup>6</sup> Yet deep down at its center of gravity, the century turned, churning out a counter current of dispute and despair--the antithesis of its gorgeous superstructure. Underneath the razzle-dazzle of modernity and progress there could be heard faint but firm murmurs of disappointment, protest, and anger of a handful of intellectuals and humanists who relentlessly searched for deeper truths and for the salvation of humanity. A number of thinkers rejecting Enlightenment's view of people as fundamentally rational, held that subconscious drives govern

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<sup>4</sup>See Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), pp. 233-53.

<sup>5</sup>Edmund Stillman & William Pfaff, *The Politics of Hysteria* (New York: Colophon Books, 1964), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>Cited in Henry Grosshans, *In Search for Modern Europe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), p. 277.

human behavior more than reason does. Impulses and instincts are the true essence of human life. "I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance--the revolt of the soul against the intellect--now beginning in the world," wrote William Butler Yeats (1865-1939).<sup>7</sup> This kind of discordant refrain was commonplace in the writings of the last years of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth. "No one has the slightest praise for our era. It is bad, thoroughly bad, and getting constantly worse. We live in an evil time," noted a respected German publication in 1893, the year Vivekananda made his debut at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. The renegades repudiated the Enlightenment conception of human rationality which had defined human beings by their capacity to think critically. This rationalism, they believed, had corrupted the human spirit and smothered its spontaneity and creativity. Instead they saw blind strivings--impulses, drives, and instincts, those forces below the surface--as the primary fact of human existence. The most memorable epitaph for the demise of rationality was uttered by the hero of Romain Rolland's (1866-1944) epic novel *Jean Christophe*: "Human reason was tired ....It surrendered to sleep....Even science manifested signs of this fatigue of reason."<sup>8</sup>

### **Friedrich Nietzsche**

Nietzsche was disgusted with his age, which he found had degenerated into a "plebeian" and "semibarbarian" mediocrity. Mediocrity was ubiquitous, everything was commonplace, and the Westerner was well on his way to becoming "the most intelligent slave animal, very industrious, basically very modest, excessively curious, spoiled, weak-willed ... all very equal, very small, very rotund, very amenable, very boring"<sup>9</sup>--the so-called last men of the market place. These men are crying "before God we are all equal .... But now this god has died."<sup>10</sup> He thought

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<sup>7</sup>Cited in Ronald N. Stromberg, *Redemption by War* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1982), p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Roland N. Stromberg, *European Intellectual History since 1789* (1966. Sixth ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1994),p. 155.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Grosshans, *Search for Modern Europe*, p. 291.

that the primary reason for the enfeeblement of Western civilization was the excessive development of the rational faculty at the cost of creativeness that comes only with the spontaneous flow of will. In his *Twilight of the Idols or How One Philosophizes with a Hammer* (1889), Nietzsche discovered the roots of this civilizational malaise in the time of Socrates, when logic had triumphed over rhetoric, reason over will. As he wrote: "Our modern world ... recognizes as its ideal the man of theory ... whose archetype and progenitor is Socrates."<sup>11</sup> He believed that a man of theory or science was the lowliest of the plebeians, a veritable "Chandala". He in fact considered Socrates as not only belonging to a low class but also monstrously ugly physically and spiritually—to quote Nietzsche's Latin expression, "*monstrum in fronte, monstrum in animo.*"<sup>12</sup>

Europe had intellectualized too long; the result was the weary mediocrity of the age of bourgeois materialism. Nietzsche has Zarathustra say: "I saw a great sadness descend upon mankind. The best grew weary of their works .... 'All is empty, all is the same, all has been'!"<sup>13</sup> Western man, Nietzsche felt, had lost the capacity for feeling and become as cold and frigid as a "Hyperborean."<sup>14</sup> "The European today is vastly inferior in value to the European of the Renaissance," Nietzsche wrote in *The Antichrist* (1888). "*This* modernity was our sickness: lazy peace, cowardly compromise, the whole virtuous uncleanliness of the modern Yes and No."<sup>15</sup>

The only cure for this malady lay in a new primitivism which Nietzsche discovered in the life of pre-Socratic Greece when the Greek genius was based not on philosophical rationalism but on a primitive emotionalism. This emotionalism was reflected and celebrated in the cult of Dionysus, who was a god of chaos and destruction as well as of fertility and productivity. The Dionysian vitality--the ability to say "Yes to everything questionable, even to the terrible"<sup>16</sup> was

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<sup>10</sup>Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [1883-85], Part IV in Walter Kaufmann, ed. *The Portable Nietzsche* (Viking Press 1954. Penguin 1976. Rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 398. Zarathustra is an ancient Persian philosopher and founder of Zoroastrianism, whom Nietzsche made his protagonist.

<sup>11</sup>*The Birth of Tragedy* [1887] and *the Genealogy of Morals* [1887], trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 109.

<sup>12</sup>*Twilight of the Idols* in *Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 474-5.

<sup>13</sup>*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part II in *ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>14</sup>Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (1950. Fourth ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 385.

<sup>15</sup>*Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 571, 569. Italics in original.

<sup>16</sup>*Twilight of the Idols* in *ibid.*, p. 484. Italics in original.

replaced by Socratic empty abstractions and "theoretical optimism" and Aristotelian good life, the so-called *Eudaimonia*, that formed the foundation of Western civilization.

This electrifying reversal of previous perspectives--happiness is in fact wretchedness--was what Nietzsche called *Umwertung* or "revaluation" (or "transvaluation") of values. Invoking a Dionysian *élan*, Nietzsche's Zarathustra thus claims that "the hour of the great contempt," the time when happiness arouses disgust, "is the greatest experience," when one affirms that happiness is "wretched contentment," indeed real "poverty and filth."<sup>17</sup> "Let us not underestimate this," he declared with ferocious clarity, "*we ourselves*, we free spirits, are nothing less than 'a revaluation of all values,' an *incarnate* declaration of war and triumph over all the ancient conceptions of 'true' and 'untrue.'"<sup>18</sup> This transvaluation was predicated on an initial work of deconstruction which he called "disvaluation" or, simply, rejection of accepted valuations.

Among his rejections were Christianity<sup>19</sup>, democracy, and nationalism--the three most prominent props of bourgeois society. Nietzsche wrote that "Christianity is called the religion of pity," and that "we are deprived of strength when we feel pity." "What is more harmful than vice?" he asked rhetorically and his answer was: "Active pity for all the failures and all the weak: Christianity."<sup>20</sup> "In Christianity," he continues a few pages later, "neither morality nor religion has even a single point of contact with reality .... The Christian conception of God--God as god of the sick, God as a spider, God as spirit--is one of the most corrupt conceptions of the divine ever attained on earth ... God degenerated into the *contradiction* of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes!"<sup>21</sup>

Yet Nietzsche's rejection of Christianity is not crass atheism but a rejection of Christian morality and pity which he abhorred. He ridiculed his contemporaries: "They are rid of the

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<sup>17</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part I in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 125.

<sup>18</sup> *The Antichrist* in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 579. Italics in original.

<sup>19</sup> For a succinct discussion of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity see Kathleen M. Higgins, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), ch. II: Nietzsche's Case against Christianity; John T. Wilcox, *Truth and Value in Nietzsche: A Study of His Metaethics and Epistemology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), ch. III: Nietzsche as Cognitivist, A Test Case: His Critique of Christianity. See also Charles M. Natoli, *Nietzsche and Pascal on Christianity* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1985), pp. 74-85, 107-13, 142-47.

<sup>20</sup> *The Antichrist* in *Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 573, 570.

<sup>21</sup> Higgins, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, pp. 581, 585. Italics in original.

Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality.<sup>22</sup> He observed elsewhere: "We are deprived of strength when we feel pity .... Pity is the practice of *nihilism* .... It multiplies misery and conserves all that is miserable and is thus a prime instrument of the advancement of decadence: pity persuades men to *nothingness*."<sup>23</sup> He was angry with the madhouse world of pity and piety. He invented the parable of the madman "who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, 'I seek God! I seek God!'" and then cried: "Whither is God?" and answered his own query: "I shall tell you. We *have killed him*."<sup>24</sup> He was quite unequivocal in his assertion that "in truth, there was only *one* Christian, and he died on the cross."<sup>25</sup> To have lost God was sheer madness. The world without God was only a void.

Although God and cosmic order were gone, human life, with all its disorder and dissonance, was still a living reality. If Christ was no more, Dionysus still ruled: "The God on the cross is a curse on life, a pointer to seek redemption from it; Dionysus cut to pieces is a *promise* of life; it is eternally reborn and comes back from destruction."<sup>26</sup> "Have I been understood?-- *Dionysus versus the Crucified*"--these were Nietzsche's words in the last book he wrote before his terminal insanity.<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche thus invoked the Dionysian Adam-- the *Übermensch*, the Superman or Overman-- who rejects the values and the civilization of the Western world and declares a war on the masses to end "the dominion of *inferior* men." He awaited the arrival of this "true Redeemer," this anti-Christ and anti-nihilist, conqueror of both God and Unbeing," who will "make the will free once more and restore to the earth its aim, and man his hope."<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche's Zarathustra proclaimed in no uncertain terms: "The overman is the meaning of the earth."<sup>29</sup> For the overman, life is not a struggle for existence but a struggle

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<sup>22</sup>*Twilight of the Idols* in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 515

<sup>23</sup>*The Antichrist* in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 572-73. Italics in original.

<sup>24</sup>*The Gay Science* in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 95. Italics in original.

<sup>25</sup>*The Antichrist* in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 612. Italics in original.

<sup>26</sup>Notes (1888) in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 59. Italics in original.

<sup>27</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (1888) in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (1927. New York: The Modern Library, 1954), p. 933. See also Notes (1888) in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 459. I have substituted "Christ" in the Modern Library version with the more recent and popular "Crucified." Italics in original.

<sup>28</sup>*The Genealogy of Morals*, p. 231.

<sup>29</sup>*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part I in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 8.

for power, the power to make something better himself, to "overcome the small virtues, the grain-of-sand consideration, the ant's ruffraff, the wretched contentment, the 'happiness of the greatest number'," to garner the audacity to despair rather than surrender.<sup>30</sup> In short, the Nietzschean superman rejects the values and the civilization of the Western world and dares to fill the void created by the death of the Christian god.

Europe also requires the annihilation of democracy or, as Nietzsche called, "*suffrage universal*," that is, the system through which "the lowest nature prescribes themselves as laws for the higher."<sup>31</sup> He would also have nothing to do with a nation state, "a hellish artifice": "State I call it where all drink poison, the good and the wicked; state, where all lose themselves, the good and the wicked; state, where the slow suicide of all is called 'life.'"<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche saw that nationalism caused the isolation of countries from each other. "Owing to the pathological estrangement which the insanity of nationalism has induced, and still induces, among the peoples of Europe," he wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "owing also to the shortsighted and quick-handed politicians who are at the top today with the help of this insanity ... the most unequivocal portents are now overlooked, or arbitrarily and mendaciously interpreted--*that Europe wants to become one*."<sup>33</sup> His final verdict on nationalism was uttered in *Ecce Homo*: "Nationalism, this *nervose nationale* with which Europe is sick, this perpetuation of European particularism (*Kleinstaaterei*), of small politics [has] deprived Europe of its meaning, of its reasons --(has) driven it into a dead-end street."<sup>34</sup>

In the ultimate analysis, Nietzsche was the great iconoclast, the destroyer of all the icons of Western culture and the deconstructionist of all its missions and visions. He, however, was not in a haste to herald his "brave new world." Unlike his putative *Urbemensch* armed with an indomitable will to power, he awaited the process of decadence of the old world to work itself out. Though he invoked the advent of the messiah he believed that there was little sense in being

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<sup>30</sup>*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part IV in *Ibid.*, pp. 399-400.

<sup>31</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), sec. 861, pp. 458-59. Italics in original.

<sup>32</sup>. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part I in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 162.

<sup>33</sup>Cited in Tracy Strong, "Nietzsche and Politics" in Robert C. Solomon, ed., *Nietzsche: A collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1973), p. 284. Italics in original.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 285. Italics in original.

"insanely impatient for the superman." He thus remained, as he did in the last years of his insanity before death, silent--resting against a pillow on the bed, paralyzed and unable to move, staring at the horizon from his window, almost in a "repose of the great stream" at "the immense future spread out before him like an unrippled sea." The abiding mood of the dying patient was, to quote from one of his own writings, "luminousness, peace, *no exaggerated* longing, joy in the *rightly employed, eternized moment!*"<sup>35</sup> His was the disposition of a soul that will not seek compassion or consolation but that is fortified with the love of fate or, to quote his Latin expression, *amor fati*.

### Swami Vivekananda

In his interesting, witty, but somewhat idiosyncratic essay, "Pracya O Pashchatya" ("East and West"), serialized (1900-01) in *Udbodhana*, a popular Bengali journal of the Ramakrishna Order, Vivekananda lambasted Western civilization:

What is the meaning of the progress of civilization of which the Europeans are so proud? Its meaning is: achievement of success by legitimating unjust means ... The European policy is "Go away, we want to come here;" for example, wherever the Europeans went the natives there were annihilated by the application of that policy. This civilization has progressed by regarding lechery in London, abandoning the family in Paris, or committing suicide as mere aberration.<sup>36</sup>

The Swami harbored a curiously ambivalent attitude to Western women. He was clearly appreciative of the power and prosperity of the West as he was of the generosity, magnanimity, and civility (not to mention their sheer physical beauty), as well as to the "culture, education, and spirituality in the highest sense" of Western women.<sup>37</sup> Yet he found Western culture devoid of divinity and spirituality and Western women artificial, unspiritual, and lustful.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Cited in George A. Morgan, *What Nietzsche Means* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1941), p. 377. Italic in original.

<sup>36</sup>Cited in *Swami Vivekananda Vani O Rachana*, 10 vols ) 8th-12<sup>th</sup> ed. Kalikata: Udbodhana Karyalaya, 1401-03 B.E.), VI )1402 B-E), 165. B.E. stands for Bengali era which followed the Gregorian Calendar by 593 years, 3 months and 14 days. All citations from this and subsequent Bengali sources appeared in my own translation.

<sup>37</sup>See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 8 vols. (Mayavati Memorial ed. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1990), VII, 474-75: Vivekananda's letter to Manmathanath Bhattacharya (September 5, 1894). Hereafter cited as

Swamiji's real animus was directed against the religion of the Westerners, Christianity. But he was careful and resourceful in first isolating Jesus Christ, a historical personality from Asia, from the white Christians, and then Hinduizing Christ. He then attacked the European missionaries in India for their alleged ignorance, arrogance, and nonchalance. "I tell you ... you are not like your Christ, who we honour and reverence," Vivekananda thundered at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.<sup>39</sup> On August 12 next year he declared at Greenacre, Maine: "I learn of your Christ learning of Krishna, of Buddha, in learning Mohamet."<sup>40</sup> A year later, he observed in his address to the Brooklyn Ethical Association that "Christianity is founded in Buddhism."<sup>41</sup> Years later, Vivekananda told Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble) that "no such person as Jesus Christ ever existed and that the truths and ideals of the Therapeutes' [Theraputra, "son of the old (monk)"] creed were given out by the Christians as having been taught by Jesus."<sup>42</sup> He had, however, argued that "Buddha was one of the Sannyasins of the Vedanta .... The ideas which ... are called Buddhism were not his [but] ... much more ancient."<sup>43</sup> Thus through his various statements Vivekananda made the point that Christianity really was not different but was in fact derived from the Hindu Vedanta.

Though Christ was thus assimilated and appropriated, the soldiers of Christ, that is, the Christian missionaries, were alienated and attacked vehemently by the militant monk. "You come," the Swami yelled, waving his arms and foaming at the mouth, "with the Bible in one hand and the conqueror's sword in the other .... You trample on us .... You destroy our people

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*CW; Letters of Swami Vivekananda* (Sixth impression. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1986), 76: Vivekananda's letter to Raja Ajit Singh (1894).

<sup>38</sup>Marie L. Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, 6 pts. (Third ed. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983-87): *His Prophetic Mission*, 2 pts. (1983-84); *The World Teacher*, 2 pts. (1985-86); *A New Gospel*, 2 pts. (1987). Hereafter cited with subtitles only. Present reference is to *Prophetic Mission*, I, 98: Vivekananda's address at a reception organized by Mrs. Potter Palmer of Chicago (September 14, 1893); *New Gospel*, I, 272: "The Women of India."

<sup>39</sup>Rev. Hugh R. Haweis, *Travel and Talk*, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1896), I, 74 reprinted in the *Indian Mirror* (November 28, 1893), Sankari P. Basu & Sunil B. Ghosh, ed. *Vivekananda in Indian Newspapers, 1893-1902* (Calcutta: Basu Bhattacharya & Co., 1969), p. 4.

<sup>40</sup>*Prophetic Missions*, II, 155.

<sup>41</sup>*Brooklyn Standard Union* (27 February 1895) in *ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup>Shailendra N. Dhar, *A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols. (1975-76. Second ed. Madras: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, 1990), II, 84.

<sup>43</sup>Vivekananda's conversation with the audience at the Graduate Philosophical Society, Harvard University (March 25, 1896), *ibid.*, p. 108.

with drink. You insult our women."<sup>44</sup> His wonderfully colorful assessment of English atrocities as contrasted with the Muslim invaders of Hindu India was: "You look about India, what has the Hindoo left? Wonderful temples, everywhere. What has the Mohammedan left? Beautiful palaces. What has the Englishman left? Nothing but mounds of brandy bottles!"<sup>45</sup> The English are not only a nation of drunkards, they are also inordinately dirty. "Ah, the English, only just a little while ago they were savages, ... the vermin crawled on the ladies' bodices, ... and they scented themselves to disguise the abominable odor of their persons .... Most hor-r-ible."<sup>46</sup>

The Hindus, on the other hand, are the cleanliest people in the whole world, because, as Swamiji wrote in "Prachya O Pashchatya," they take daily plunge bath and in fact the garlic eating and odorous Westerners learned how to bathe only after they had come in contact with the Indians. He, however, was shrewd and sensible enough to mention the dirty habits of the Indians, though in a humorous vein, while making the point that as compared to the Europeans who are keen on external cleanliness, the Hindus cleanse their bodies and their homes.<sup>47</sup> The Hindus (Swamiji often referred to them as Aryans) are also the handsomest race whose women boast of regular features, dark hair, and a "skin the color of which would be produced by the drops which fell from a pricked finger into a glass of milk" (the English rendering of the Bengali expression "*dudhe-alta*").<sup>48</sup> Finally, the Hindus are a hospitable and "other-regarding" people. They build homes not for their personal comfort but for worshipping their gods and for entertaining their guests. A Hindu, the Swami is reported to have declared in Boston, "will serve himself last if any hungry stranger applies; and this feeling extends throughout the length and breadth of the land. Any man can ask for food and shelter and any house will be opened to him."<sup>49</sup>

However, the greatest contrast between the Eastern and Western civilizations has to do not so much with the externals as with the conception and conduct of the inner life by the people of both cultures. "You are all running after life," the Swami told the Americans in San Francisco,

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<sup>44</sup>Haweis, *Travel and Talk*, I, 74 reprinted in *Vivekananda in Indian Newspapers*, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup>Excerpts from the typescript of an article by Mary Tappan Wright, *Prophetic Mission*, I, 32-33.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> "Prachya O. Paschatya," p. 132.

<sup>48</sup>Scrap off conversation with Vivekananda reported in the *Detroit News* (April 1, 1894), *Prophetic Mission*, I, 445-46.

"and we find that is foolishness. There is something much higher than life even. This life is inferior, material. Why should I live at all? ... Living is always a slavery."<sup>50</sup> By contrast, the Hindus live in their inner world unknown and inaccessible to the Westerners. As he told his French acquaintance Jules Bois,

what you and others call a dream is for us the only reality. Cities, luxuries, the marvels of material science--we have awakened from that brutal dream by which you are still entranced. We close our eyes, we hold our breath, we sit under the kindly shade of a tree before the primitive fire, and the Infinite opens its doors to us and we enter into the inner world which is the real one.<sup>51</sup>

"The Hindoo's view of life is that we are here to learn," he declared in New York.<sup>52</sup> He further explained in another sermon that "the lower the civilisation of the man, the greater is the power of the senses .... The higher the organism, the lesser is the pleasure of the senses .... The pleasures of the senses are great. Greater than those is the pleasure of the intellect." He thus exhorted his Western audience to strive to attain the higher by turning a renouncer. "Renounce! Renounce! Sacrifice! Give up! Not for zero. Not for nothing. But to get the higher."<sup>53</sup> The Vedanta lion roared: "And mark you this--the most marvelous historical fact--that all the nations of the world have to sit down patiently at the feet of India to learn the eternal truths embodied in her literature."<sup>54</sup>

The Swami, however, did not debunk the technological and scientific achievements of the Western countries. He in fact admired them for their strength, vitality, and creativity. In stark contradiction of his earlier negative assessment of Western, especially English, contributions to India, he admitted in a public lecture in Calcutta that "the backbone of Western civilisation is --expansion and expression." He added further:

This side of the work of the Anglo-Saxon race in India ... is calculated to rouse our nation once more to express itself, and it is

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<sup>49</sup>Report of Boston *Evening Transcript* (April 5, 1894), *CW*, IV, 199-200.

<sup>50</sup>Vivekananda's sermon at the Washington Hall, San Francisco (April 3, 1900), *CW*, IV, 232.

<sup>51</sup>Cited in Wendall Thomas, *Hinduism Invades America* (New York: Beacon Press, Inc., 1930), p. 87.

<sup>52</sup>Vivekananda as reported by *Brooklyn Times* (December 31, 1894), *CW*, II, 499.

<sup>53</sup>Vivekananda's sermon at Alameda, California (April 18, 1900), *CW*, IV, 242-43.

<sup>54</sup>*CW*, III, 444.

inciting it to bring out its hidden treasures before the world by using the means of communication provided by the same mighty race. The Anglo-Saxons have created a future for India, and the space through which our ancestral ideas are now ranging is simply phenomenal."<sup>55</sup>

He also quite ingeniously interpreted the Vedanta by situating its principles on the Western value system. As he declared:

To my mind, ... modern science is proving ... that we are one--mentally, spiritually, and physically .... We are absolutely one .... This is exactly the teaching of the Advaita .... The Self is the essence of this universe, the essence of all souls; He is the essence of your own life, nay, "Thou art That." .... Thus we see that the religion of the Vedanta can satisfy the demands of the scientific world."<sup>56</sup>

Nevertheless, Vivekananda's main agenda was Vedantization of the Christian West, a sort of muted counterconversion of the people whose missionaries had been Christianizing the Hindu Orient. "India must conquer the world," the "cyclonic Hindu" announced in the West.<sup>57</sup> He further proclaimed that the Hindu "thought must enter into the make-up of the minds of every nation."<sup>58</sup> And in various sermons delivered in the United States and the United Kingdom Swamiji claimed that he was the pioneer teacher in the world: "I was born for this , and it was left for me to do!"<sup>59</sup> It was indeed an audacious challenge from a colonial native to the imperial West--a powerful response to the Western "civilizing mission" in the colonial world--a dramatic reversal of the concept of "white man's burden" into that of a "colored man's burden."<sup>60</sup> The Swami also proclaimed Hindu autonomy even in the field of strength and power for which he had admired the West. As he was to declare in India: "We want strength, strength, and every

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 441.

<sup>56</sup>*CW*, I, 3763-74.

<sup>57</sup>Cited in *Swami Vivekananda and His Guru with Letters from Prominent Americans on the Alleged Progress of Vedantism in the United States* (London & Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 1897), ii.

<sup>58</sup>Vivekananda's notes (note # 39), *CW*, IV, 311.

<sup>59</sup>*New Gospel*, II, 190.

<sup>60</sup>See Ursula King, "Indian Spirituality, Western Materialism: An Image and Its Function in the Reinterpretation of Modern Hinduism," *Social Action*, XXVIII (January-March 1978),

time strength. And the Upanishads are the great mine of strength. Therein lies strength enough to invigorate the whole world; the whole world can be vivified, made strong, energised through them."<sup>61</sup> "Let it first of all be realized," claimed the Swami, "that India too possesses power and substance [*Bharateo bal acche, mal acche*]."<sup>62</sup>

### **Comparative Analysis of Nietzsche and Vivekananda**

There are several intriguing similarities of attitudes, aspirations, and anomalies between Nietzsche and Vivekananda. First and foremost, both were unabashed elitists. "My ancestors were Polish noblemen," Nietzsche wrongly and naively claimed in *Ecce Homo*.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Vivekananda's love for the Kshatriyas was quite explicit in his deliberate public protestations that he belonged to the Kshatriya caste whereas he really was a Kayastha, a caste below the Kshatriya.<sup>64</sup> An anonymous correspondent to the *Indian Mirror* (March 2, 1897) wondered: "What will he do with the empty title of Kshatriya. He is a devotee, he has cut off all connection with the world, yet he claims the Kshatriya title."<sup>65</sup> This desire to identify with the class or caste of warriors explains Nietzsche's exaggerated mustache and the Swami's oversize turban, a putative headgear for a militant monk.

Both men were gifted with impressive eyes; nobody could ignore the glare of the piercing eyes of the troubled intellectual of Basle while nearly everybody adored Swamiji's large expressive eyes that reminded his devotees and admirers of the popular polychrome representation of the icons of the Lord Krishna or the statues of the Buddha. In fact Swamiji's spiritual mentor Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa was so enamored of his young devotee's eyes that he nicknamed him *Kamalaksa* ("Lotus Eye").<sup>66</sup> Both men were also highly rhetorical and even used almost similar style. For example, Nietzsche claimed that he would "write on all

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<sup>61</sup>"Vedanta in Its Application to Indian Life," *CW*. III, 238.

<sup>62</sup>"Prachya O Pashchatya," p. 118.

<sup>63</sup>*Ecce Homo* in *Philosophy of Nietzsche*, p. 821. Nietzsche himself imagined himself to have descended from a family of refugee Polish nobles named Nietzky.

<sup>64</sup>Dhar, *Comprehensive Biography*, I, 22.

<sup>65</sup>*Vivekananda in Indian Newspapers*, p. 164.

<sup>66</sup>Romain Rolland, *Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*, trans. E.F. Malkcolm-Smith (Tenth Impression. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1984), p. 57.

walls” with “letters to make even the blind see.”<sup>67</sup> Vivekananda challenged his audience that his words would “burn their way into” their brains and they would “never get away with them.”<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche’s Zarathustra declared: “Behold, I am the herald of the lightning and a heavy drop from the cloud; but this lightning is called *overman*.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, the Swami, whom his *guru* Sri Ramakrishna in an ecstatic mood had seen drop from the heavens, wrote to his *gurubhai* (monastic brother) Swami Abhedananda (Kaliprasad Chandra, 1866-1939) that he had acquired “so much power” that he felt he would “explode one day.”<sup>70</sup> Then, their death-defying phrases--Nietzsche’s “casting dice for death” or “death freely chosen, ... at the right time, brightly and cheerfully accomplished” and the Swami’s equally audacious, if grammatically solecistic, “die game, die game”--chimed very well together.<sup>71</sup> Like his Indian contemporary, who was an accomplished stage actor and singer, Nietzsche, too, harbored something of a grand actor in his disposition.<sup>72</sup>

In spite of their craving for power (Nietzsche's philosophically conceived "Will to Power" as self-discipline<sup>73</sup> and Vivekananda's idea of both physical power and spiritual potency<sup>74</sup>), both men had a pitifully fragile health with markedly unhealthy lifestyle which a biographer has elegantly labeled as that of an "intellectual"<sup>75</sup>. Since his early youth, the

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<sup>67</sup>*Antichrist* in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 656.

<sup>68</sup>*New Gospel*, II, 57-58.

<sup>69</sup>*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part I in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 128. Italics in original.

<sup>70</sup>Swami Gambhirananda, *Sriramakrishna Bhaktamalika*, 2 vols. (Kalikata: Udbodhana Karyalaya, 1396-98 B.E.), I, 54.

<sup>71</sup>Vivekananda’s lecture on the *Bhagavatgita* in San Francisco (May 29, 1900), *New Gospel*, II, 218; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part II in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 227; *Twilight of the Idols* in *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 536.

<sup>72</sup>See Narasingha P. Sil, *Swami Vivekananda: A Reassessment* (Selinsgrove/Cranbury: Susquehanna University Press/Associated University Presses, 1997), pp. 34, 97-98; Hans Kung, *Does God Exist?*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. 415.

<sup>73</sup>Nietzsche wrote in *The Gay Science* (1882): “For one thing is needful: that a human being *attain* his satisfaction with human life ... only then is a human at all tolerable to behold.” Cited in Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, pp. 420-21. Italics in original.

<sup>74</sup>See n. 61 above. Vivekananda told a disciple that “the physically weak are unfit for the realization of the Self.” Sarachandra Chakravarti, *Swami-Shisya Samvad* (Ninth ed. Kalikata: Udbodhana Karyalaya, 1400 B.E.), p. 132: Chakravarti’s diary of 1898. He concluded his essay “Bartaman Bharat” (“Modern India”) with the prayer: “O Lord of Gauri [Shiva], O Mother of the Universe [Jagadamba, an incarnation of Gauri, Parvati, Kali, and Durga], endow me with manliness. O Ma, remove my weaknesses and cowardice, make me a man.” *Udbodhana* (March 1889) reprinted in *Vivekananda Vani O Rachana*, VI, 194.

<sup>75</sup>Crane Brinton, *Nietzsche* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 24.

reclusive and precocious and profoundly intellectual Nietzsche had been a victim of poor eyesight, headaches, and insomnia. At the universities he "neglected himself, ate the wrong things, ate irregularly ...".<sup>76</sup> The correspondence of his adult years is always spotted with complaints about his health. A typical example is the one he wrote to his sister Elizabeth on April 27, 1883, in which he complained of "all my days of sadness and ill health."<sup>77</sup> On July 4, 1888 he confessed in a letter to Franz Overbeck: "I lack not only health but the predisposition to get healthy. My life-force is no longer intact."<sup>78</sup> He possibly contracted syphilis (AIDS of the nineteenth century) while a student at the University of Bonn due, among others, to youthful exuberance, excessive partying, drinking, and whoring.<sup>79</sup> In fact, in 1879, at the age of 34, he had to retire from his prestigious post of Professor of Philology at the University of Basle. His terminal insanity began in 1889 and his condition became aggravated with the paralysis of the lower part of his body; he died on August 25, 1900 at Weimar.

Since his childhood days, Narendranath's personal habits had been far from exemplary. He had been an addict to snuff powder and tobacco since he was a young boy. He often expectorated nasal and oral phlegm everywhere and he was an incorrigible spitter--a genetic characteristic that earned his family the sobriquet of the "spitting Dattas."<sup>80</sup> Fond of food, he was an overeater and was a chain smoker. His dirty and dishevelled study convinced a friend and a visitor that Naren was "oblivious of the need to please himself." He was a patient of weak heart condition and diabetes--partly a genetic endowment and partly an outcome of his personal habits and lifestyle. Additionally, he suffered from dyspepsia or diarrhea, liver troubles, gallstones, lumbago, and toward the later part of his life, from asthma. During the last two years of his short life, the Swami suffered from sleeplessness, breathing troubles, swollen feet and partial blindness (due to an aggravated diabetic condition) and finally died on July 4, 1902.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>77</sup> Cited ibid., p. 52.

<sup>78</sup> Cited in Lesley Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin: An intimate Biography* (New York: Picador USA 1998), p. 113.

<sup>79</sup> Brinton, *Nietzsche*, pp. 14-16. As early as 1865 Nietzsche was reported to have been treated for syphilis in Leipzig. Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin*, p. 250 n. 27.

<sup>80</sup> Mahendranath Datta, *Srimat Vivekananda Swamijir Jivaner Ghatanavali*, 3 vols. (Calcutta: Mahendra Publishing Committee, 1393-95 D.E.), I, 112-13.

<sup>81</sup> For all this see Sil, *Vivekananda: Reassessment*, chs. 1, 10, and Conclusion.

Both Nietzsche and Narendranath seem to have suffered from stunted sexuality. From his "coddled childhood" and "cloistral adolescence" under a prolonged domination of his womenfolk (grandmother, two aunts, and sister), Nietzsche, as noted earlier, had found liberation as a university student at Bonn to his utter personal peril. However, his repressed erotic attraction for his elder friend and mentor Richard Wagner's (1813-83) wife Cosima and his humiliating experience with his Finnish admirer Lou Andreas-Salomé might have resulted in his failure to lead a normal sexual life and thus disturbed his *ataraxia* -- mental and physical balance.<sup>82</sup>

Similarly, and sadly, Swami Vivekananda's monastic training as well as his personal psychosocial development in an all-male world caused his severe emotional arisis arising from his relationship with his Anglo-Irish disciple Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita). Bred in the *bhadralok* culture of Bengal which never afforded him an opportunity to interact with young women other than his siblings or near relations, he could never transcend his masculist worldview. Even at college, which was an all male missionary institution, he never encountered a woman classmate. It was therefore quite easy for him to court an ascetic's life, the most and perhaps important requirement for which was celibacy. However, his contact with Western women in general, and with Miss Noble in particular, brought about a profound psychic revolution, thus aggravating his terminal illness. His dual struggle against failing health and crumbling monastic indifference to *kamini-kanchana* ("woman and wealth" as taught by Ramakrishna) contributed to a sense of utter nothingness and extinction. He died a frustrated *sannyasi*, a victim to "the conflict between his idealized manliness and unrealized manhood."<sup>83</sup>

Both Nietzsche and Vivekananda sought to rejuvenate their society by invoking new leadership. Thus Nietzsche's Superman was to commandeer the project of deconstruction of all existing values and norms and usher in a brave new world of secular humanism. Such a leader, "the genius, in work and deed is necessarily a squanderer: that he squanders himself, that is his greatness. The instinct of self-preservation is suspended .... He flows out, he overflows, he uses

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<sup>82</sup> See H. W. Brann, *Nietzsche unde die Frauen* (Leipzig: Meiner, 1931).

<sup>83</sup> Narasingha P. Sil, *Prophet Disarmed: Vivekananda and Nivedita* (Working Paper No. 2. Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, 1997), p. 20. See also note 74 above.

himself up, he does not spare himself.”<sup>84</sup> Likewise, Vivekananda wished to create a band of super *sannyasis* who would hail from a higher caste and be trained in the ideal of renunciation and *jivaseva*, "service to beings."<sup>85</sup> His idea of a super patriot is expressed in one of his letters to Nivedita:

If you are really ready to take the world's burden, take it by all means. But do not let us hear your groans and curses. Do not frighten us with your sufferings ... The man who really takes the burdens blesses the world and goes his own way. He has not a word of condemnation, a word of criticism, not because there was no evil, but that he has taken it on his own shoulders willingly, voluntarily. It is the Saviour who should "go his way rejoicing and not the saved."<sup>86</sup>

It is, however, a fact that in spite of some intriguing similarities in their rhetoric, Nietzsche was everything the Swami was not. Vivekananda, a self-confessed renouncer by default (actually a failed householder), emphasized the efficiency of asceticism in all of his speeches, sermons, and writings, though in real life he was a *bon vivant* with a pronounced preference for physical comfort and sybaritic pleasures.<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, on the other hand, was a voluntary exile from the settled life of a university don, almost in the manner of a Hindu ascetic, a veritable Brahmin who "bears a strange resemblance to the philosopher of the future,...to the *Urbemensch*."<sup>88</sup> Then, Nietzsche was an intellectual by training, publication, and academic practice. By contrast, Vivekananda possessed a first degree from a Calcutta college in the moderate second division. His knowledge of Western history and culture never went beyond the texts he had read as an undergraduate – witness his remarks on Western civilization in his carious writings, most especially, in his much publicized and much adored essay, "Prachya O Pashchatya" which contains a plethora of witty but historically dubious comments on the history

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<sup>84</sup> *Twilight of the Idols in Portable Nietzsche*, p. 548.

<sup>85</sup> Chakravarti, *Swami-Shisya Samvad*, p. 143: Chakravarti's diary of 1898.

<sup>86</sup> *Letters of Vivekananda*, p. 404.: Letter to Nivedita (December 6, 1899),

<sup>87</sup> Sil, *Vivekananda: reassessment*, chs. II and IV.

<sup>88</sup> Michel Hulin, "Nietzsche and the Suffering of the Indian Ascetic" in *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 70. He, however, remained contemptuous of the

and habits of Europeans. On his own admission he was a preacher *par excellence*<sup>89</sup> and his avowed aim in the United States and the United Kingdom remained, since 1894, proclaiming the anteriority and superiority of Hindu religion, even though he paid lip service to Jesus and Mary.

Nietzsche's denunciation of the bourgeois-Christian culture of Western society – a searching critique by an informed and reflexive insider – stands in sharp contrast with that of Vivekananda, an outsider with little or superficial understanding of Western civilization, culled mostly from his undergraduate texts and personal observation or second-hand information gathered in the West where he was a visitor and preacher. When the Swami's peroration and preaching on Western history and culture are compared to Nietzsche's – admittedly I am trying to compare a philosopher *Kulturkritiker* and a religious missionary and patriot – it becomes absolutely clear that Vivekananda's remarks were made mostly to make an impression and that they were not products of deeper understanding and analysis of the Western civilization. Nietzsche's works, on the contrary, betray his profound reading and reflection on the Classical culture as well as that of contemporary Europe over which he agonized.

Nietzsche's sincere and searching critique is philosophical and scholarly, while Vivekananda's various *obiter dicta* and *ex cathedra* pronouncements appear to be nothing but polemical and political -- product no doubt of a natural capacity for making facile and funny generalizations but not of serious study or thinking. In his mockery of and contempt for the culture of the spiritual midgets Nietzsche was heir to an intellectual tradition that harked back to the Romantic artists and authors of an earlier generation. It must also be noted that his trenchant critique appeared at a time when the West was the master of the world and Western science and technology had realized the dream of the Enlightenment idea of progress. Swami Vivekananda's culture consciousness was rooted firmly in Hindu ascetic ideals which he foregrounded as a superior alternative to Western materialism. His critique of Western civilization was motivated by his anticolonial agenda to confront the militarily and economically powerful metropolitan

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[Christian] ascetics,. Whose ideals “betoken...an excuse to hibernate...their repose in nothingness (“God”), their own brand of madness.” *Genealogy of Morals in Birth of Tragedy and Morals*, trans. Golffing, p. 231.

<sup>89</sup> The *Saginaw Courier-Herald* (22 March 1894) reported: One statement he [Vivekananda] made was decidedly un-American. Upon being asked if he had been investigating our institutions, he replied: ‘No, I am a preacher only.’ This displayed both a want of curiosity and narrowness, which seemed foreign to one who appeared to be so well versed upon religious topics as did the Buddhist [sic] preacher.” *CW*, II, 484-85. See also Thomas L. Bryson, “The

West with the spiritual weapons of the colonized East. Thus, unlike his Western contemporary, Nietzsche, who had been disenchanted with the flabby and self-deluding bourgeois culture of his own society, the Swami, in his colonial defiance, remained a cultural narcissist insofar as his own country was concerned. He would have nothing to do with Western-style democracy with its parliaments, senates, or “vote ballot majority” (*sic*). As he wrote, India does not possess such creatures as the European politicians who are nothing but a “bunch of thieves and blood-suckers [preying upon] their countrymen. The Indians, on the other hand, quite sensibly, allow themselves to be led by powerful men who are actually religious leaders.”<sup>90</sup>

In one sense, Vivekananda’s Hindu critique of Western civilization undergirded a pronounced inferiority complex normal for a preacher from a colonial and technologically disadvantaged country among audiences from free and industrialized and prosperous societies. He was sensible enough to acknowledge the utter necessity for scientific and material advancement of India in order to bring the country at par with the West. Echoing his illustrious senior contemporary, the Calcutta intellectual Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Vivekananda admired the colonial culture which he believed “created a future for India.” And again, following Bankim, the Swami admonished the Indians against a passive imitation of the West. “O India,” Vivekananda wrote in “Bartaman Bharat,”

the spell of imitating the West is getting such a stronghold upon you that what is good or bad is no longer decided on the basis of reason, judgment, discrimination, or the Shastric criteria. Whatever the Whiteman admires is good and whatever he despises is not.... If Western contempt be the only basis for the disrepute of our manners and morals, it must be our duty to protest against it.<sup>91</sup>

Quite obviously, he had to proclaim his country’s superiority in a higher realm. Hence his effort to reveal materially backward India’s spiritual cornucopia *vis-à-vis* materially

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Hermeneutics of Religious Syncretism: Swami Vivekananda’s Practical Vedanta” (Ph.D dissertation, University of Chicago, 1991), p. 321.

<sup>90</sup> “Prachya O Pashchatya,” p. 126.

<sup>91</sup> *Vivekananda Vani O Rachana*, VI, 193. Bankim had written that “the English are the greatest benefactor of India” who taught the Indians “love for liberty” and “nationalism” and yet declared that the Indians “are not and cannot be submissive, because ...[they] are an ancient people.” See Narashingha P. Sil, “Swami Vivekananda and Rishi Bankimchandra as Patriot and Nationalist: A Critical Comparison,” *Asian Culture Quarterly*, XXVIII, 3 (Autumn 2000), 38, 42.

prosperous West's spiritual bankruptcy. As he admonished the missionaries triumphantly, invoking not the potency of the Vedas which he had been preaching in the West, but of traditional and popular Hindu beliefs and practices:

The Himalayas that you see harbors in the northern corner the [mount] Kailash, the principal hangout of the old Shiva. Even Ravana [the demon king of the *Ramayana*] with his ten heads and twenty hands failed to shake it. What could those missionary buggers do [*O ki ekhan padri-phadrir karma*]? That old fart Shiva [*oi budo Shib*] will go on beating his drum [*damaru*], Ma Kali gorging goats, and Krishna playing his flute forever. Why should our people undergo unnecessary hassles for a few foreigners?<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

Unfortunately neither Nietzsche or Swamiji was vindicated. Posterity made a travesty of Nietzsche's ideal of the Superman and produced the monstrous totalitarian dictators who for a while appeared to drag the entire world to a precipice. Nietzsche's denial of the norms and accomplishments of his own culture alienated him from the mainstream of the European intellectual world where he remained benignly neglected as an *avant garde* crank at best or contemptuously maligned as the "madman of Europe" at worst. Swami Vivekananda, on the other hand, projected the superiority of his own culture *vis-à-vis* that of the West and thus his exaggerated encomia for Hindu spiritualism and his exaggerated critique of Western materialism made him a hero and a patriot. Of course, his fantastic vision of Hindu India bearing the beacon of spiritual light to the world never materialized.<sup>93</sup> Nor did his band of ascetic warriors ever show up. The impossibility and impracticability of such a monumental undertaking finds a pathetic expression in his final confession of failure at the end of his diseased, tumultuous, and troubled life, which lasted less than four decades.<sup>94</sup> In fact, a leading scholar has made a remarkable admission recently that the current young generation of Indians are quite impervious to Vivekananda and Vedanta. He has suggested ways to modernize and adapt the Swami's "radicalism" (that is, "going to the root of national and human problems and finding their

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<sup>92</sup> "Prachya O Pashchatya," p. 119.

<sup>93</sup> Sil, *Vivekananda: Reassessment*, pp. 175-77.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, Conclusion.

discovery of the human soul, the *atman*”) and project “a new image of Vivekananda” by telling the indifferent and heedless Indian youths that “not few great minds of the West today share his faith in the philosophy of the Vedanta as the spiritual foundation of a new civilization.”<sup>95</sup> However, the Ramakrishna Order which Vivekananda helped to found created a highly efficient monastic bureaucracy, whose *sannyasi* members work on various socio-economic projects in India and engage in cultural activities abroad -- arguably a dedicated band of spiritual *mandarins* – very progressive, patriotic, and humanitarian – but not quite the regal renouncers (*dharmavira*) of Swamiji’s dream.

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<sup>95</sup> R.K. Dasgupta, “Swami Vivekananda and our Younger Generation” in idem, ed., *Swami Vivekananda: A hundred years since Chicago: A Commemorative Volume* (Belur: Ramakrishna Math and Mission, 1994), pp. 884-85.