SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

His Life, Legacy, and Liberative Ethics

Edited by
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lokasamgraha in raising the self-esteem of the people, which probably found expression in the motto he coined for his order of samnyāsins.

Others have also tried to come up with reasons for choosing such a motto by Vivekananda. Thus, Swami Prabhananda, as Shrínivas Tilak mentions in his chapter in this volume, has a very interesting explanation which is also appealing. According to him “ca…” in the motto conveys the idea or a relation of identity (samuccaya) between the two goals and not as alternative between the two goals (vikalpa): “The twin goal of service to humanity and attaining oné’s own liberation was continuous with the traditional strategy of jhānakarmasamuccaya but with a new objective of an ideal human being that was committed to offering meaningful service rooted in contemplation and action for the benefit of the weak and disadvantaged” (see Shrínivas Tilak’s chapter in this volume).

CONCLUSION

All this might just be speculation and it will never be known what prompted Vivekananda to coin this motto for his order of samnyāsins. The selfless service rendered by the Ramakrishna Mission nmates with utter honesty and total transparency in dealing with finances has earned for it a reputation for upright and honest spending of all finances donated to it and sincere praise for the kind of selfless service provided both by samnyāsins and lay followers of the Mission for the various humanitarian causes. One must credit Swami Vivekananda for his foresighted vision in coining this motto which with one stroke achieved his dual purpose of selfless action for the betterment of those in need and through that alone also assured one’s own mokṣa as well. He was thus a true visionary.

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ASMINNASYA CA TADYOGAŚ SĀŚTī: SWAMI VIVEKANANDA’S INTERPRETATION OF BRAHMĀŚṬRA 1.1.19 AS A HERMENEUTIC BASIS FOR SAMANVAYI VEDĀNTA

Swami Medhananda

Swami Vivekananda’s fertile—and startlingly modern—observations on scriptural hermeneutics remain a woefully neglected dimension of his thought. He was unsparing in his criticism of the text-torturing of traditional commentators such as Saṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhva:

Coming to our commentators again, we find another difficulty. The Advaitic commentator, whenever an Advaitic text comes, preserves it just as it is; but the same commentator, as soon as a dualistic text presents itself, tortures it if he can, and brings the most queer meaning out of it... In the same way, if not in a still worse fashion, the texts are handled by the dualistic commentator. Every dualistic text is preserved, and every text that speaks of non-dualistic philosophy is tortured in any fashion he likes. (CW III, 233)

In other words, Vivekananda accuses traditional commentators of eisegeesis, the practice of imposing one’s own philosophical assumptions and doctrines onto a text instead of trying to understand the text on its own terms. On one occasion, he went so far as to remark that “all the great commentators... were at times ‘conscious liars’ in order to make the texts suit their philosophy” (CW VII, 36).

Breaking with traditional commentators, Vivekananda called for a new hermeneutic approach that strives to harmonize the various apparently conflicting passages of the scriptures without resorting to text-torturing. Significantly, he credits his guru, Sri Ramakrishna, for inspiring him.
to interpret the ancient scriptures on an “independent and better basis than by blindly following the commentators” (CW III, 233). For Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna’s life and teachings exemplified a perfect philosophical synthesis of Advaita, Vīśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita and an ideal practical synthesis of the yogas of jñāna, bhakti, karma, and dhyāna. Inspired by the ideals of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda championed a non-eisegetic hermeneutic approach to the prasthānātraya—the Upaniṣads, the Bhāgavat Gītā, and the Brahmasūtras—that refrains from one-sidedly privileging certain teachings of the scriptures while denigrating or distorting other teachings.

Unfortunately, Vivekananda left this mortal plane too soon to carry out the full-blown reinterpretation of the prasthānātraya he had envisioned. Nonetheless, at various points in his work, he did hint at how the ancient scriptures could be interpreted on an “independent and better basis.” Most fundamentally, he argues that the original non-sectarian Vedānta of the Upaniṣads can be understood best through the Gītā and the Brahmasūtras themselves rather than through the traditional commentators. Following Satish Chandra Chatterjee (1963, 104–5), I would argue that the non-sectarian Vedānta championed by Vivekananda is best characterized as “Samanvayi Vedānta,” since it is based on a samanvaya (“harmony” or “reconciliation”) of the various Vedāntic schools. According to Vivekananda’s Samanvayi Vedānta, the prasthānātraya teaches the jīva’s inherent divinity without dogmatizing in favor of any narrow or sectarian conception of the jīva’s relation to the Divine. Vivekananda frequently appealed to the Brahmasūtras as an authoritative scriptural basis for Samanvayi Vedānta. Indeed, he often praised the Brahmasūtras as the best “organised system” (CW IV, 335) of Vedānta available, but he rarely provided interpretations of specific sūtras, so it is difficult to determine precisely how the Brahmasūtras might support his Samanvayi Vedānta. Interestingly, however, in a little-known conversation with his disciple Svāmī Sūdhanānanda—which is recorded only in Svāmī Abhijñānŝa’s Bengali work, Svāmījīr Ādānāṣṭe, and not in the Complete Works—Vivekananda hinted at a remarkably original and far-reaching interpretation of Brahmasūtra 1.1.19, “asminnasya ca tadyogasāsti” (“The scriptures teach the union [yogam] of the jīva and Brahman”):

Who has told you that the sūtras [of the Brahmāsūtras] support the Advaita philosophy alone? Sāṅkarācārya was an Advaitin, so he tried to interpret the sūtras in terms of Advaita philosophy. But you should try to understand the literal meaning [ṣaṅkārārthā] of the sūtras themselves, the true intention [abhijñāprājñā] of Vyāsā [the purported author of the Brahmāsūtras]. Take, for example, the sūtra, “asminnasya ca tadyogasāsti” [1.1.19]. I think that if we interpret this sūtra correctly, we will find that Bhāgavān Vedavyāsa indicated both Advaita and Vīśiṣṭādvaita through it [ete advaita o viśiṣṭādvaita uñavyā nādi bhagavān vedavyāsa kartācā samaḥ notave]. (Abhijñānānanda 1983, 15; my translation)

Vivekananda encouraged his disciple to adopt a broad-minded and unbiassed approach to the Brahmāsūtras that strives to understand the meaning of the sūtras themselves, apart from the traditional commentaries. In fact, Svāmī Sūdhanānanda, inspired by his guru’s words, wrote an extensive independent commentary on the Brahmasūtras in Bengali, but it was never published and the manuscript has since been lost (Abhijñānānanda 1983, 15). It is worth noting, moreover, that Vivekananda’s call for a non-eisegetic approach to the Brahmāsūtras proved to be quite prescient, since a number of subsequent scholars—including George Thibaut, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, V.S. Ghate, and George C. Adams—have attempted to examine the Brahmāsūtras on an independent basis. As Adams (1993, 3) puts it, “Our concern is not with what Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, or other theologians have said about the Brahma Sūtras, but what the Brahma Sūtras themselves say.”

In the passage cited above, Vivekananda himself furnishes a striking example of such an independent approach to the Brahmāsūtras: sūtra 1.1.19, he claims, supports both Advaita and Vīśiṣṭādvaita. This essay aims to explore and develop Vivekananda’s provocative—if all too brief—reading of Brahmasūtra 1.1.19 by placing it in the context of his broader hermeneutic speculations and showing how his reading of 1.1.19 might help explain other relevant sūtras from the Brahmāsūtras. For Vivekananda, I argue, sūtra 1.1.19 not only captures the essence of the original Samanvayi Vedānta of the Upaniṣads but also provides the hermeneutic key to interpreting the entire prasthānātraya in a non-eisegetic and harmonizing spirit.

Part I outlines briefly some of the fundamental principles of Vivekananda’s scriptural hermeneutics and his basis in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. This set the stage for Part II, which develops Vivekananda’s unique interpretation of Brahmasūtra 1.1.19. As we will see, while both traditional and modern commentators have tended to explain Brahmasūtra 1.1.19 in terms of a particular philosophical sect, Vivekananda suggests—quite radically—that the author of the Brahmasūtras
deliberately employs the spacious and open-ended language of “yogam” (“union”) in 1.1.19 in order both to harmonize a variety of apparently conflicting scriptural passages concerning the jīva’s relation to Brahman and to accommodate numerous sectarian interpretations of these passages. From Vivekananda’s perspective, Brahmasūtras 1.1.19 serves as an ideal hermeneutic framework for encompassing and reconciling the various types of union with the Divine expressed in the Upaniṣads and the Gītā, ranging from the Advaitic union of absolute identity with Brahman to the Viśiṣṭadvaitic unity of part and Whole, the Bhedābhedā unity of difference and non-difference, and the Dvaitic unity of servant and Master.

VIVEKANANDA’S SCRIPTURAL HERMENEUTICS AND ITS BASIS IN THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

For Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna was the living embodiment of Samavatī Vedānta, so it is no surprise that he credits his guru for inspiring him to adopt a harmonizing approach to the ancient scriptures:

> It was given to me to live with a man [Sri Ramakrishna] who was as ardent a dualist, as ardent an Advaitist, as ardent a Bhakta, as a Jnani. And living with this man first put it into my head to understand the Upaniṣads and the texts of the scriptures from an independent and better basis than by blindly following the commentators; and in my opinion and in my researches, I came to the conclusion that these texts are not at all contradictory. So we need have no fear of text-tormenting at all! The texts are beautiful, ay, they are most wonderful; and they are not contradictory, but wonderfully harmonious, one idea leading up to the other. (CW III, 233)

Taking this passage as a very suggestive hint, I believe we can reconstruct from Vivekananda’s work the broad contours of a full-blown scriptural hermeneutics. In this section, I will outline briefly what I take to be the four central tenets of Vivekananda’s scriptural hermeneutics and trace each of them to certain aspects of the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. I will then be in a position to develop, in the next section, a harmonizing interpretation of the Brahma-sūtras based on Vivekananda’s own interpretation of 1.1.19.

(1) The Gītā and the Brahmasūtras themselves, rather than any of the later sectarian philosophical schools, provide the most reliable and capacious hermeneutic framework for interpreting the Upaniṣads. Vivekananda frequently remarks that the prasthānātraya is self-contained, since the Gītā and the Brahmasūtras themselves are the twin hermeneutic keys to interpreting the Upaniṣads. As he puts it, the “Bhagavad Gītā. . . . is the best commentary we have on the Vedanta philosophy,” while the Brahmasūtras “are the systematising of the marvellous truths of the Vedanta” (CW III, 396). However, he insists that the Gītā and the Brahmasūtras must, in turn, be interpreted in the catholic spirit of Sri Ramakrishna rather than through any sectarian lens. Traditional commentators, according to Vivekananda, are not reliable guides to understanding the liberal spirit of the prasthānātraya, because they tended to torture or suppress those passages in the texts that appeared to contradict their own sectarian philosophies. By contrast, the Gītā and the Brahmasūtras show how the various ideas of the Upaniṣads can be reconciled. The Gītā, Vivekananda argues, “harmonizes the many contradictory parts of the Upaniṣads” (CW IX, 274) and the Brahmasūtras demonstrate similarly that “all the preceding systems of philosophy. . . . are not contradictory to one another, but one is based on another” (CW III, 324–25).

On this basis, Vivekananda claims that the Samavatī Vedānta embodied in the prasthānātraya, far from lending support only to one particular sect, reconciles a variety of sects in the true spirit of Hinduism: “Therefore it would be wrong to confine the word Vedanta only to one system which has arisen out of the Upaniṣads. . . . The Viśiṣṭadvaitist has as much right to be called a Vedantist as the Advaitist; in fact I will go a little further and say that what we really mean by the word Hindu is really the same as Vedantist” (CW III, 324–25). In the remainder of this section, we will see precisely how the Gītā and the Brahmasūtras, in Vivekananda’s view, reconcile numerous apparently conflicting Vedāntic ideas:

(2) The scriptures teach the infinitude and illimitability of God or Brahman. Accordingly, God is best conceived as both personal and impersonal, both with form and without form, both immanent in the universe and beyond it, and infinitely more besides.

According to Śāṅkara, Brahman is only nirṇaya (“without qualities”), so Īśvara—the personal God—is unreal because it is the same nirṇaya Brahman with the unreal spādhī (“limiting adjunct”) of īśvaratva (“lordship”). By contrast, according to Rāmānuja, Madhva, and many other exponents of Vedāntic bhākta schools, Brahman is only the sāguna (personal) God, so nirṇaya Brahman in Śāṅkara’s sense does not exist. Vivekananda accuses all of these traditional commentators of reading their own narrow conceptions of God into the scriptures. According to Vivekananda, the scriptures—when examined on an independent basis—
many different conceptions of God, all of which are true, because all of them capture real forms and aspects of one and the same infinite impersonal-personal Brahman. Hence, he repeatedly asserts that “our religion preaches an Impersonal Personal God” (CW III, 249) and specifically points out that “[t]he Vedas teach God—both personal and impersonal” (CW VI, 120). He also observes that while God is essentially “without form or shape,” God is nonetheless capable of acquiring “name and form” (CW IV, 47).

Vivekananda is equally emphatic that the scriptures teach both the immanence and transcendence of Brahman. As he puts it, “impersonality includes all personalities, is the sum total of everything in the universe, and infinitely more besides” (CW II, 319). He then goes on to cite Kaṭha Upaniṣad 2.2.9 and Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad 4.3, which indicate that Brahman is at once immanent in the universe and beyond it (CW II, 319–20). In a similar vein, he departs boldly from Śaṅkara in arguing that Śaṅkara Upaniṣad and Chāndogya Upaniṣad do not dismiss the world as unreal but teach rather the “deification of the world” (CW III, 146; CW III, 312).

Vivekananda’s conception of the infinite impersonal-personal God can be traced to Śri Ramakrishna’s life and teachings. Śri Ramakrishna, after having realized both the personal and impersonal aspects of God through the disciplines of bhakti and jñāna, remained in the exalted state of “vijñāna” (“Intimate Knowledge”), his term for the direct realization of God as both nirguna and saguna, with and without form, immanent and transcendent. On the basis of his spiritual experiences, Śrī Ramakrishna taught: “[E]verything is possible for God. He is formless, and again He assumes forms. He is the individual and He is the universe. He is Brahman and He is Śakti. There is no end to Him, no limit. Nothing is impossible for Him” (Gupta 2010, 997). Vivekananda suggests that Śrī Ramakrishna’s teachings about God’s infinitude and illimitability are much truer to the broad and inclusive spirit of the scriptures than the narrow views of sectarian commentators, who one-sidedly advocate one particular conception of God while dismissing all the others as untrue or inferior at best.

The scriptures prescribe a variety of spiritual practices (yogas), all of which are equally effective paths to realizing God and attaining liberation. Śaṅkara, as is well known, takes jñāna—knowledge—to be the only direct path to liberation and claims that bhāktya—bhakti—yoga, karma—yoga, and dhvānaya—yoga are merely preparatory practices for attaining the mental purification and concentration needed to practice jñāna—yoga. Rāmānuja, by contrast, claims that bhāktya—yoga—the path of devotion—is the only direct path to liberation and demotes jñāna—yoga and karma—yoga to the status of preparatory disciplines. Vivekananda, in stark contrast to traditional commentators, argues that the Gītā teaches the much more inclusive view that all the major yogas are direct paths to liberation, whether practiced singly or in combination. He argues, for instance, that the first line of Gītā 5.4—“Fools alone say that work and philosophy are different, not the learned”—supports the view that the “Yogas of work, of wisdom, and of devotion are all capable of serving as direct and independent means for the attainment of Moksha” (CW I, 93). Similarly, he often claims that Gītā 4.11 teaches that all spiritual paths lead to mokṣa.

Śrī Ramakrishna affirmed the harmony of all religions—embodied in his well-known teaching that “all faiths are paths” (Gupta 2010, 577; Gupta 1992, 559)—on the basis of his own richly varied spiritual experiences and eclectic religious practices, both Hindu and non-Hindu. It was evidently the example of Śrī Ramakrishna which inspired Vivekananda to interpret the teachings of the Gītā in an independent spirit and to argue that the Gītā holds the liberal view that all spiritual paths are equally efficacious paths to God-realization.

(4) The scriptures teach numerous philosophical doctrines which are complementary rather than contradictory.

Traditional commentators, when confronted with teachings in the scriptures that did not conform to their own philosophical views, often lapsed into isegesis. Śaṅkara, for instance, when interpreting Gītā 15.7—“It is an eternal portion of Me that becomes the jīva in the world of living creatures” (manomāṁśa jīvadoke jīvahitāb sanātanaḥ)—claims, with no contextual justification, that “ānīsa” should be understood as “anīsa” (“portion, as it were.”), since his Advaitic framework denies the ultimate ontological reality of jīvas as individual spiritual entities (Śaṅkara 2013, 370–71). Meanwhile, Madhva notoriously interprets the famous declaration in Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7—“sa ātmā tath tvam as” (“That is the Self; Thou art That”)—as “sa ātmā atatu tvam as” (“That is the Self; Thou art not That”), by breaking the sandhi between the words “ātmā” and “tath” in a flagrantly isegetic manner (Madhva 1969, 437).

Vivekananda not only criticizes the traditional commentators for such text-torturing but also suggests a harmonizing approach to the scriptures that strives to reconcile various apparently conflicting scriptural doctrines (CW III, 233–34):

But the one fact I found is that in all the Upanishads, they begin with dualistic ideas, with worship and all that, and end with a grand flourish of Advaitic ideas.
Therefore I now find in the light of this man’s [Sri Ramakrishna’s] life that the dualist and the Advaitist need not fight each other. Each has a place, and a great place in the national life. The dualist must remain, for he is as much part and parcel of the national religious life as the Advaitist. One cannot exist without the other; one is the fulfillment of the other; one is the building, the other is the top; the one the root, the other the fruit, and so on. Therefore any attempt to torture the texts of the Upanishads appears to me very ridiculous.

A great deal depends on how we interpret Vivekananda’s remark above that the Upanishads begin with “dualistic ideas” and “end with a grand flourish of Advaitic ideas.” It might be tempting to take his statement as an endorsement of the Advaitic “ladder-theory,” the view that non-dual nirguna Brahman alone is real from the ultimate (pāramārtha) standpoint, so all theistic conceptions of God have only empirical (vyāvahārīka) reality as lower stages on the path leading to Advaita. Although an extensive discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this essay, I will briefly provide four reasons why I think this sectarian Advaitic interpretation of Vivekananda’s position is not correct and then suggest a more plausible way to interpret his view.

First, if Vivekananda believed that the Advaitic pāramārtha-vyāvahārīka distinction was the best way to interpret the scriptures, then he would not have repeatedly accused Śaṅkara of text-torturing, since Śaṅkara himself often invokes the Advaita two-tier ontology in order to explain scriptural passages that seem to support non-Advaitic doctrines. Moreover, the Advaitic strategy for harmonizing the various conflicting philosophical schools by means of the pāramārtha-vyāvahārīka distinction is a condescending one. As Tapasyananda (1990: xiv–xv) puts it, Advaitins residing on the “Everest peak” of pāramārtha truth dismiss all theists as “manda-adhikāri” (“inferior aspirants”) who are “patronisingly permitted to dwell in the cozy base camp of the Vyāvahārīka status.” This Advaitic denigration of theistic traditions does not accord with the more egalitarian harmonizing of religions and spiritual philosophies taught by Śrī Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. We need only recall Vivekananda’s emphatic statement—found throughout his work—that the theistic path of bhaktiyoga is a “direct and independent” path to salvation (CW III, 93). The fact that Vivekananda grants equal salvific efficacy to bhaktiyoga and jñānayoga directly contradicts the Advaita ladder-theory, which takes jñānayoga alone to be a direct path to mokṣa.

Second, Vivekananda, as far as I am aware, only refers to the Advaitic pāramārtha-vyāvahārīka distinction once in the entire Complete Works, and this sole reference is a decidedly critical one:

Notice that Vivekananda singles out for attack the Advaitic doctrine of pāramārtha and vyāvahārīka levels of reality precisely because it justifies, in his view, the tyrannical exploitation of “the poor and the low.” Hence, it is extremely unlikely that he would have adopted this very Advaitic doctrine in his reading of the scriptures.

Third, Vivekananda, as we have seen, repeatedly credits Śrī Ramakrishna for having inspired him to recognize the harmony of the various philosophical doctrines propounded in the scriptures. As he puts it, the “Vedas can only be explained and the Shastras reconciled by his [Śrī Ramakrishna’s] theory of Avastha or stages—that we must not only tolerate others, but positively embrace them, and that truth is the basis of all religions” (CW V, 53). As Vivekananda was aware, Śrī Ramakrishna accepted the truth of all spiritual doctrines ranging from dualism to the highest reaches of Advaita. Accordingly, Śrī Ramakrishna, on the basis of his own spiritual experience of vijñāna, declared: “I have come to the final realization that God is the Whole and I am a part of Him, that God is the Master and I am His servant. Furthermore, I think every now and then that He is I and I am He” (Gupta 2010, 594; Gupta 1992, 638). As a vijñānī, Śrī Ramakrishna did not consider the Dvaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita attitudes toward God to be false or inferior stages but as true attitudes that he himself continued to adopt even after he attained the Advaitic realization of nirguna Brahman. Vivekananda explicitly states that the theory of “Avastha or stages” he endorses is based on Śrī Ramakrishna’s broad-minded harmonization of various spiritual attitudes rather than on the sectarian Advaitic ladder-theory.

Fourth, Vivekananda’s own account of the three “stages” of Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Advaita strongly suggests that he takes all the stages to be true. As he puts it, “The idea of an Objective God is not untrue—in fact, every idea of God, and hence every religion, is true, as each is but a different stage in the journey . . . ” (CW I, 331). Similarly, he remarks elsewhere, “The soul passing through its different stages goes from truth to truth, and each stage is true; it goes from lower truth to higher truth” (CW I, 385). That Vivekananda’s language of “lower” and “higher” truths should not be understood in terms of the Advaitic pāramārtha-vyāvahārīka-
vyāvahārika ontology is clear from one of his favorite analogies for illustrating the truth of all doctrines about God (CW VIII,189):

Suppose you want to go towards the sun. After you get a few thousand miles nearer, you will see another sun, much bigger. Suppose you proceed much closer, you will see a much bigger sun. At last you will see the real sun, millions and millions of miles big. Suppose you divide this journey into so many stages, and take photographs from each stage, and after you have taken the real sun, come back and compare them; they will all appear to be different, because the first view was a little red ball, and the real sun was millions of miles bigger; yet it was the same sun. It is the same with God: the Infinite Being we see from different standpoints, from different planes of mind.

Just as different pictures of the sun taken at varying distances are all accurate in their own way, all the doctrines about God taught in the scriptures—from Dvaita to Advaita and everything in between—are true since they all refer to one and the same “Infinite Being” seen from “different standpoints” and “different planes of mind.” Vivekananda’s analogy clarifies his theory of stages: various doctrines about God correspond to progressive psychological stages in the soul’s journey toward God, all of which are true. In the next section, we will see how Vivekananda’s non-sectarian theory of stages holds the key to understanding his distinctive interpretation of Brahmaṣūtra 1.1.19.

VIVEKANANDA’S INTERPRETATION OF BRAHMAṢŪTRA 1.1.19 IN THE CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN COMMENTATORS

1.1.19 is the last stūra of the Ānandamaya-Adhikarana of the Brahmaṣūtras (1.1.12–1.1.19), so it has to be understood within the context of the previous stūras. In 1.1.2 (jñānādyayya yatah), the Śūtrakāra defines Brahmā as “That from which [are derived] the birth etc. of this universe.” 1.1.12 (ānandamayo bhāvyād) indicates that the ‘Ānandamaya Ātma’ of Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.5 is that same Brahmā defined in 1.1.2, because Brahmā is “repeatedly” referred to as “Ānanda” in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad. In the eight stūras comprising the Ānandamaya-Adhikarana, the Śūtrakāra provides various arguments to support the view that “Ānandamaya” in fact refers to Brahman. In particular, stūras 1.1.16–1.1.18 argue that “Ānandamaya” cannot refer to the transmigrating jīva and, hence, must refer to Brahman. Interestingly, however, 1.1.19 (asminnya ca tadyogam sāsti)—translated literally as “[The scriptures] teach the union of this with That”—declares the “union” (yogam) of the Ānandamaya Brahman (asmin) and the jīva (asya). Taken together, the eight stūras of the Ānandamaya-Adhikarana indicate that the scriptures teach the jīva’s difference from, yet intimate relation to, Brahman.

Not surprisingly, traditional commentators tended to interpret the Ānandamaya-Adhikarana in terms of their own sectarian views on the relationship between the jīva and Brahman. For instance, while 1.1.17 (bhedaḥvyapadeśācācā)—“And because of the assertion of difference”—clearly asserts the “difference” (bheda) between the jīva and the Ānandamaya Brahman, Śāṅkara attempts to make the sūtra conform to his own Advaitic philosophy, which maintains the identity of the jīva and Brahman. According to Śāṅkara, 1.1.17 asserts the difference between the jīva and Brahman only from the empirical (laukkīka) standpoint while it denies any difference between the jīva and Brahman from the ultimate standpoint (paramārtha) (Śaṅkarācārya 2007, 39; Śaṅkarācārya 2006, 70). As both traditional and modern commentators have pointed out, the Śūtrakāra himself does not make a distinction between empirical and ultimate standpoints, so Śāṅkara’s reading of 1.1.17 seems to be a flagrant case of eisegetics. It must be said, however, that many of the non-Advaitic commentators on the Ānandamaya-Adhikarana are also guilty of eisegetics. For instance, the Dvaitin Madhva claims with little justification that the term “ānandamayo” in 1.1.12 stands for all five of the sheaths mentioned in Taittirīya Upaniṣad, beginning with the Annamaya-Ātmā, and hence, that the Śūtrakāra intends to identify all five sheaths with Brahman (Madhvācārya 1915, 11).

1.1.19 is likewise interpreted in a variety of ways by the traditional commentators. Glossing “asmin” as the Ānandamaya Brahman and “asya” as the enlightened jīva, Śāṅkara interprets “tadyogam” as the jīva’s “identity” with Brahman (tadvipāva-vapatiḥ), which is tantamount to liberation (muktiḥ). Śāṅkara goes on to clarify that 1.1.19 asserts that the liberated jīva “is established in absolute identity with Brahman” (nirantaram tādāyam pratiṣṭhāt) (Śaṅkarācārya 2007, 39–40). Bhāskara, a proponent of Bhedābheda, rejects Śāṅkara’s reading of “yogam” of 1.1.19 as absolute identity and argues that the stūras of the Ānandamaya-Adhikarana support his own Bhedābhedavāda viewpoint that the jīva is at once different and non-different from Brahman (Bhāskarācārya 2006, 26). The Viśiṣṭadvaitins Rāmānuja (2000, 352), the Bhedābhedāvadāvin Nimbārkaśāstra (1967, 4–5), and the Viśiṣṭadvaitins Vallabhācārya (2002, 213) all reject Śāṅkara’s Advaitic interpretation of 1.1.19 and argue that “tadyogam” means the jīva’s attainment of Ānandamaya Brahman, which implies that the jīva is different from Brahman. The Dvaitin Jayatīrtha interprets “yogam” of 1.1.19 as a “relation-
that we should understand Vivekananda’s claim that the Sūtrakāra, in 1.1.19, meant to support “both Advaita and Viśiṣṭādaśīvaita.”

Specifically, I suggest that we understand Vivekananda’s comment on 1.1.19 in the context of the fourth hermeneutic principle outlined in the previous section—namely, that the scriptures harmonize the sectarian philosophies of Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādaśīvaita, and Advaita. Brahmacāraṇa 1.1.19 embodies this harmonizing dimension of the scriptures highlighted by Vivekananda. From Vivekananda’s perspective, the Sūtrakāra deliberately employs the open-ended and fluid word “yogam” (“union”) in 1.1.19 in order to leave open a variety of ways of interpreting the jīva’s relationship with Brahman. 1.1.19 supports both Advaita and Viśiṣṭādaśīvaita because the word “yogam” can be interpreted either in the Advaitic sense of absolute identity (tādāmya) or in the Viśiṣṭādaśīvaitic sense of part and Whole (aṁśa-aṁśi). I would argue, however, that while Vivekananda singled out the two schools of Advaita and Viśiṣṭādaśīvaita by way of example, he actually meant to encompass the entire spectrum of Vedāntic sāmpradāyas ranging from Dvaita to Advaita and everything in between.

As we have seen, each of the sectarian philosophical schools conceives the jīva’s relationship with Brahman in a particular way, and the followers of a given sect insist that their view alone is correct while the views of competing sects are wrong. For Vivekananda, however, the Sūtrakāra did not belong to a particular sect; rather, he was a harmonizer of the various nascent sects that were beginning to develop during his time. Vivekananda suggests that 1.1.19, far from propounding a narrow sectarian view of the jīva’s relationship with Brahman, in fact declares that the essence of Vedānta is the union (yogam) of the jīva and Brahman, however that “union” is conceived. Accordingly, 1.1.19—from Vivekananda’s perspective—hints at a philosophical basis for Samanvayi Vedānta, which teaches the inherent divinity of the soul without insisting dogmatically on a particular sectarian conception of the jīva’s relation to the Divine. Vivekananda gives voice to this central teaching of Samanvayi Vedānta in his famous epigraph to Rāja Yoga, which declares that the goal of spiritual life is to manifest the “Divinity within” while “[d]octrines” and “dogmas” are only “secondary details” (CW I, 124).

At this point, however, some urgent questions arise. How can we be sure that Vivekananda was not simply reading his own non-sectarian understanding of Vedānta into the Brahmacāraṇa? How do we know, in other words, that Vivekananda himself was not guilty of eisegesis in his harmonizing reading of 1.1.19? Did the Sūtrakāra really intend “yogam” of 1.1.19 to be open-ended and non-sectarian? Is Vivekananda right to claim that the Sūtrakāra strove to harmonize various philosophical sects rather than to propagate a sectarian view of his own? Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this essay to give full answers to these large ques-
that traditional commentators interpreted the Śtrākāra’s siddhānta on the ījīva’s relation to Brahman in a variety of ways depending on their own philosophical framework.

Śaṅkara, not surprisingly, claims that 1.4.22 asserts the absolute identity of the ījīva and the Supreme Ātman: the “Supreme Ātman exists as the individual soul” (ātma eva paramātmanam anena api viśiṣṭātmanah ātmavāvasฏhānā) (Śaṅkaraṭīcārya 2007, 171). Bhāskara similarly interprets 1.4.22 as stating that the “Supreme Ātman exists in the form of the ījīva” (jīvarūpaṇa paramātmanah ātmavāvasṭhānā), but explicitly rejects Śaṅkara’s “māyāvāda” position of absolute identity in favor of his own Bhedābheda standpoint, which conceives the ījīva as an “āmsa” (part) that is both different and non-different from Brahman (Bhāskaraṭīcārya 2006, 81–82).

According to Rāmānuja, 1.4.22 supports the Viṣṇuṭāvitac position that Brahman “abides in the ātmavāman as its body” (svātāntarabhūte ātmavāmanī ātmavāmanā avasthitah) (2000, 613). Nimbārka claims that 1.4.22 upholds the Bhedābheda view that the “Supreme Ātman resides” in the ījīva “as the Inner Controller” (paramātmamānasī naṇamrtrvēna avasthitēḥ) (Nimbārkaṭīcārya 1967, 22–23). Vallabha reads avasthitēḥ of 1.4.22 as “āstavaḥ” and claims, from his standpoint of Śuddhādvaita, that the “ījīva is only an āstava of God” (ḥagavatāt eva avastava ījīvaḥ) (Vallabhaṭīcārya 2002, 527). Baladeva claims that 1.4.22 supports the Acintyābhedābheda view that Brahman is “indissolubly united” with the ījīva (tannadhvagatam) but nonetheless remains “different from” it (1965, 77).

Although Vivekananda does not discuss Brahmasūtra 1.4.22 anywhere in his work, I believe the sūtra supports his interpretation of 1.1.19, since the open-endedness of “avasthitēḥ” of 1.4.22 dovetails with the capacious language of “yogam” of 1.1.19. In both 1.1.19 and 1.4.22, the Śtrākāra characterizes the ījīva’s relationship with Brahman so broadly that any number of sectarian views can be accommodated. It should be kept in mind that Vivekananda does not perceive the Śtrākāra’s harmonization of the various sectarian views in terms of Śaṅkara’s Advaita philosophy, which accommodates non-Advaitic doctrines only at the vyākaraṇa level. As I argued in the previous section, Vivekananda never tries to impose Śaṅkara’s pāramāṁśha-vyākaraṇa framework onto the prasthānatraya.22

From Vivekananda’s perspective, the Śtrākāra’s broad, non-sectarian view of the ījīva’s relation to Brahman is entirely in keeping with the catholic spirit of the Upaniṣads themselves, which express the relation between the ījīva and Brahman in numerous ways. For instance, while Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad 2.5 characterizes ījīvas as “children of Immortality” (āmrastyāt putrāḥ), Bhādarāyana Upaniṣad 3.7.15 describes Brahman as the “antaryāṁ” inhabiting “all beings,” which constitute the
“body” (sarīram) of Brahman. Munḍaka Upaniṣad employs two striking analogies to explain the relationship between the jīvas and Brahman: according to 2.1.1, jīvas emerge from Akṣara Brahman like “sparks” (visphulindhi) from a fire, while according to 3.1.1, the jīva and Brahman are likened to “two birds that are intimately akin” (dvā suparnā sayajī sakhīyā). By contrast, the well-known mahāvidyās from Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7 (tat tvam asi) and Bhādarāyana Upaniṣad 14.10 (aham brahmāsmi) seem to express the absolute identity of the jīva and Brahman.

Like the Upaniṣads, the Śrītrakāra suggests various ways of conceiving the jīva’s relation to Brahman at numerous points in the Brahmasūtras. For instance, 2.3.43 clearly supports non-Advaitic schools of Vedānta which maintain that the jīva is a real manifestation or “āmsā” of Brahman: “āmsā nānāyopadesādanyatā cūpi . . .” (“The jīva is a part [of Brahman] on account of the declarations of difference and otherwise”). According to Rāmānuja, 2.3.43 supports the Viśiṣṭādvaitic view that the jīva is the “body” (sarīra) of Brahman (2000, 562). Bhāskara, from the standpoint of Bhedābheda, claims that 2.3.43 indicates that the jīva is related to Brahman as a spark is related to fire (Bhāskarācārya 2006, 140). Śaṅkara agrees with Bhāskara that the jīva is “a sort of God, just as a spark is of fire,” but he then adds implausibly that the jīva is an “āmsā jīva”—only metaphorically a “part”—since his Advaitic philosophy denies the ultimate reality of the jīva (Śaṅkaraśāstra 2007, 297).

Ghate (1981, 159) rightly points out that Śaṅkara’s metaphorical interpretation of 2.3.43 is “obviously forced.”

On the other hand, 2.3.50 (ābhdāsa eva ca) states that the jīva is an “ābhdāsa” (“reflection” or “appearance”) of Brahman, and Śaṅkara is quick to point out that this sūtra supports the Advaitic pratibimbavāda, according to which the jīva is a false appearance of the supreme Ātmā, “like a reflection of the sun in the water” (jalaśayakādvā) (Śaṅkaraśāstra 2007, 302). Rāmānuja clearly lapses into eisegesis when he interprets “ābhācāsa” of 2.3.50 as “hetu-ābhācāsa” (fallacious argument), arguing that 2.3.50 rejects as a “fallacious argument” the Advaitic reasoning that the jīva is the Supreme Ātmā conditioned by an unreal upādhi (2000, 569). Indeed, Nakamura (1983, 450) dismisses Rāmānuja’s interpretation of 2.3.50 as “absurd and far-fetched.” 4.1.3 also lends itself to an Advaitic interpretation: “ātmeti tāpagaacchanti grāhivanti ca” (“But [the Upaniṣads] acknowledge [Brahman] as the Ātmā and cause It to be so understood”). Śaṅkara plausibly suggests that 4.1.3 alludes to Upaniṣadic statements like “aham brahmaśāmi,” which assert the jīva’s absolute identity with the Supreme Lord (ātmā iti eva paramārthavārah) (Śaṅkaraśāstra 2007, 434).

Meanwhile, sūtras such as 2.3.41 (parāt tu tadvid) and 2.1.22 seem to support Madhva’s Dvaita philosophy, according to which the jīva is paraatmā, a being entirely dependent on—and eternally different from—God. As Madhva points out, 2.1.22 asserts that Brahman is both different from, and ‘greater’ than, the jīva: “adhiṣṭhata tu bhedanirdesātaḥ” (“But [Brahman is] greater than the jīva” on account of the declaration of the difference [between the two]”) (Madhvacārya 1882, 61). Śaṅkara obfuscates the clearly dualistic thrust of 2.1.22 by claiming that the sūtra asserts the duality of the jīva and Brahman only from the empirical standpoint and that duality “does not exist from the ultimate standpoint” (na tu paramārthaḥ astī) (Śaṅkaraśāstra 2007, 209).

Moreover, as numerous recent scholars have argued, many sūtras seem to support the standpoint of Bhedābheda, which holds that the jīva is both different and non-different from Brahman. Both Nakamura (1983, 500–503) and Adams (1993, 28), for instance, argue that the various analogies used in the Bhāmāsaūtras to describe the relationship between the jīva and Brahman—such as the snake and its coil (3.2.27) and a torch and the light it emits (3.2.25 and 2.3.46)—are most convincingly explained from the Bhedābheda standpoint. According to Adams (1993, 28), these analogies strongly support Nimbārka’s Bhedābheda standpoint, according to which “both Identity and Difference are equally true of the relationship between the Brahman and the universe.”

From Vivekananda’s perspective, the sūtras 1.1.19 (asminnasya ca tadyogam śāṣṭi) and 1.4.22 (avasthitītīt kāśākṣrtaḥ) hold the key to explaining how the Śrītrakāra can coherently assert different conceptions of the relation between the jīva and Brahman at numerous points in the Brahmasūtras. 1.1.19 asserts the “union” (yogam) of the jīva and Brahman but leaves open a variety of ways of understanding that union. Similarly, 1.4.22 declares that Brahman “abides” in—or “exists” as—the jīva, but the Śrītrakāra accommodates multiple ways of interpreting avasthitītī, whether as absolute identity, as part and Whole, as difference and non-difference, or otherwise.

Indeed, the open-ended terms “yogam” of 1.1.19 and “avasthitītī” of 1.4.22 dovetail with the similarly open-ended word “avibhāga” in 4.4.4, a key sūtra that explains the liberated jīva’s relationship with Brahman: “avibhāgena dṛṣṭaḥ” (“The liberated jīva abides [in non-division [from the Supreme Ātmā], because that is seen [from scripture]”). As Ghate (1981, 168), Sriniwasachari (1934, 181), and Thibault (1890, lxxxi) have pointed out, the vague word “avibhāga” of 4.4.4 has been interpreted in numerous ways by traditional commentators, depending on their own sectarian views. Appealing to scriptural statements such as “tat tvam asi” and “aham brahmāsmi,” Śaṅkara interprets “avibhāga” of 4.4.4 as the absolute identity of the liberated jīva and Brahman: “the liberated
\textit{jīva} is non-different from the Supreme Self (\textit{avibhaktah eva pareṇa ātmānā muktaḥ avatīśhate}) (Śaṅkaraśāstra 2007, 505). While Rāmānuja appeals to the same scriptural statements, he interprets \textit{avibhāga} of 4.4.4 in terms of Viśiṣṭādvaita: the \textit{jīva} “has for its inner self the Supreme Self, and it constitutes the body of that Self and hence is a mode of It” (paramāntāmānakaṁ taccharitratyā tatprakārabhūtām) (2008, 1161).

Bhāskara, meanwhile, interprets \textit{avibhāga} in terms of his Aśvabhāvikha Bhedābheda philosophy: “The \textit{jīva} is essentially non-different from the Supreme Brahman, and difference is only due to upādhi; hence, difference is abolished when the upādhis are removed” (jīvaparavahy ā namāntāka hūbheda u pādhipa tu bhedah sat tannirvatā nivartate) (Bhāskarācārya 2006, 243). The difference between the views of Bhāskara and Śaṅkara is that Bhāskara takes the \textit{upādhis} to be real limiting adjuncts, while Śaṅkara claims that the \textit{upādhis} are unreal superimpositions on Brahman (Śrīnivasaśāri 1934, 69–72). Baladeva, by contrast, interprets \textit{avibhāga} of 4.4.4 as a \textit{sāyujya} relationship between the liberated \textit{jīva} and Brahman, in which the \textit{jīva} is intimately united with—but nonetheless not absolutely identical to—the Lord in the realm of Viśiṣṭādvaita (Baladeva 1965, 256). Meanwhile, according to Madhava, \textit{avibhāga} of 4.4.4 in no way suggests the ontological non-difference between the liberated \textit{jīva} and Brahman. Rather, the \textit{sūtra} conveys the idea that the liberated \textit{jīva} enjoys the same celestial enjoyments as God: “the very enjoyments experienced by the Supreme Self are enjoyed by the liberated \textit{jīva}” (ye bhogāḥ paramāntānā bhūjyante te eva mukte bhūjyante) (Madhavacārya 1882, 177).

From Vivekananda’s standpoint, the Śūtrakāra deliberately employed the open-ended word \textit{avibhāga} in order to accommodate all such sectarian interpretations of the relationship between the liberated \textit{jīva} and Brahman. Instead of adopting a narrow sectarian view of the final state of the \textit{jīva}, the Śūtrakāra in 4.4.4 leaves open the possibility that there are numerous modes of uniting with Brahman that are equally salvific. Indeed, such a liberal soteriological outlook would be consistent with the Śūtrakāra’s broad views on the \textit{jīva}’s ontological relation to Brahman expressed in 1.1.19 and 1.4.22. In other words, the Śūtrakāra seems to be consistently open-ended and broad-minded on the doctrinal issue of the \textit{jīva}’s relationship with Brahman.

\section*{Conclusion}

The next step in developing a non-sectarian interpretation of the \textit{Brahmaśūtras} would be to investigate the ontological basis for the Śūtrakāra’s broad conception of the \textit{jīva}’s relationship with Brahman. Arguably, if the Śūtrakāra conceived Brahman as exclusively \textit{saguna} or \textit{nirguna}, then he would not be able to grant equal validity and salvific efficacy to the different modes of the \textit{jīva}’s unity with Brahman. From the hermeneutic standpoint of Śrī Rāmakrishna and Vivekananda, the Śūtrakāra’s broad understanding of the \textit{jīva}’s relationship with Brahman presupposes that Brahman is not only \textit{nirguna} but also \textit{saguna}. As we have seen, the non-sectarian Vedāntic philosophy of Śrī Rāmakrishna and Vivekananda is based on a maximally expansive ontology of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. Accordingly, they maintained that we can achieve absolute Advaitic identity with the \textit{nirguna} aspect of the Infinite Reality, but we can also enter into loving communion with the real \textit{saguna} aspects and forms of the same Infinite Reality. Since all these forms of divine union refer to one and the same Infinite Reality, they are all equally true and salvific. Scholars would do well to explore further how the non-sectarian approach of Śrī Rāmakrishna and Vivekananda can help motivate a non-eisegetical hermeneutic framework for interpreting the Vedāntic scriptures.

\section*{Notes}

1. See my discussion of this issue in Part I of this chapter. For some of Vivekananda’s relevant statements about the \textit{Gītā} and the \textit{Brahmaśūtras}, see his statements compiled in Madhurananda (2009, 12–14).
2. Throughout this chapter, I use the words “sect” and “sectarian” in a strictly non-normative sense. The words “sect” and “sectarian” correspond roughly to the Sanskrit words “\textit{saṃpradāya}” and “\textit{saṃpradāyika}” respectively.
3. For an extensive discussion of Śrī Rāmakrishna’s harmonizing Vedāntic philosophy and its basis in the Upaniṣads and the \textit{Gītā}, see Maharaj (2018, 13–50).
4. Similarly, Svāmī Śraddhānanda (1994) describes the philosophy of Śrī Rāmakrishna and Vivekananda as “Samarājya Advaita.”
5. Vivekananda’s references to the \textit{Brahmaśūtras} at CW III: 396 and CW V: 141 indicate that he was aware not only of the commentaries of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhava but also those of Nimbārka and Vallabha, among others.
6. For a somewhat inaccurate English translation of the passage, see Abjajana (2003, 25).
8. See, for instance, Śaṅkara’s distinction between Brahman with and without upādhis in his commentary on \textit{Brahmaśūtra} 1.1.12.
9. A number of modern scholars—including Thibaut (1890: cxii-cxxvii), Radhakrishnan (1923, 106–220), and Radhakrishnan (1960, 256)—similarly argue that the Upaniṣads conceive Brahman as both nirguna and saguna, both immanent and transcendent.

10. For other references to the impersonal-personal God, see CW II:319, CW II:323, CW III:37, CW III:183, CW VI:90, and CW VIII:188.

11. Both Radhakrishnan (1923, 149–60) and Thibaut (1890, cvv–cxvi) support Vivekananda’s view that the Upaniṣads do not teach the unreality of the world. The former adds that it is Chethanambara’s view that the Upaniṣads do not teach the unreality of the world.

12. For detailed justification of this claim, see chapters 1 and 3 of Maharaj (2018) and Chatterjee (1995).

13. For an in-depth account of Sri Ramakrishna’s víraḥāna-based philosophy, see chapter 1 of Maharaj (2018). See also Tapasyananda (1990, 359–64) and Tapasyananda (2008, 60–74).


15. See, for instance, CW I:4 and CW IX:420.

16. For a detailed reconstruction and defense of Sri Ramakrishna’s víraḥāna-based religious pluralism, see chapter 3 of Maharaj (2018).

17. Anantanand Rambahan (1994, 55–56), among others, succumbs to this temptation.

18. For detailed justification of this claim, see chapter 1 of Maharaj (2018).


21. For modern commentators who take 1.4.22 as the Śrītrākura’s siddhānta, see Ghaṭe (1981 40), Śrinivasachar (1934, 177–78), and Thibaut (1890, 50). By contrast, Swami Harshananda (1995, 20) claims, “Though the views of these teachers [Asimarthya, Aṣūlomno, and Kāśkātstra] are stated, Bādāyaṇa does not give his own opinion or preference.” Even if we adopt Harshananda’s view that 1.4.22 does not represent the Śrītrākura’s siddhānta, 1.4.20–1.4.22 would still support Vivekananda’s approach to the Brahma-sūtras, since the sūtrān express three quite different conceptions of the jīva’s relation to Brahman, all of which the Śrītrākura would accept.

22. Indeed, numerous modern scholars have pointed out that the Śrītrākura nowhere adopts the Advaitic distinction between pāramārtha and vyavahārika standpoints. See, for instance, Thibaut (1890, 484–86), Ghaṭe (1981, 160–66), and Adams (1993, 40).

23. Thibaut (1890, lxxxvi–vii) provides trenchant criticism of Śaṅkara’s eisegetic appeal to the Advaitic pāramārtha-Vyavahārika distinction.

24. For criticisms of Śaṅkara’s interpretation of 2.1.22, see Radhakrishnan (1960, 260) and Thibaut (1890, xlix).
Writing in the 1960s, Roman Catholic Jesuit Fathers Pierre Fallon and Robert Antoine were well aware of the immense significance of Swami Vivekananda for the modern renewal and revitalization of Indian culture and spirituality. In responding effectively to the long tradition of Western criticism of Hindu beliefs and practices, Vivekananda, along with Professor Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, provided apologetic foundations that were key to a momentous spiritual reawakening and affirmation that occurred in the twentieth century, as various Hindu traditions were then able to meet their Jewish, Christian, and Muslim neighbors on equal footing, at least from their perspective.

Professors Fallon and Antoine claim that Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan were able to provide this foundation in large part because of Western education and influences, where their "neo-Vedantic" ideology was inspired by Liberal Protestantism and Western philosophy—especially by the Positivism of Auguste Comte. They are critical of the Vedānta disseminated by the Ramakrishna Mission, which Fallon (1964, 288) describes as "to a large extent, a spurious doctrine amalgamating diverse elements, many of them foreign to authentic Hinduism." Their main concern is Vivekananda’s religious “essentialist” perspective, one that is grounded in personal religious experience that overrides and radically transcends history and revelation. Fallon (290) claims that such a stance is, “from the Hindu point of view, a very ingenious and tactically successful way of establishing the superiority of Hinduism as interpreted by neo-Hindus.” This viewpoint is further expressed in terms of a critique