



STATEMENT DS213

SWAMI YOGANANDA AND THE SELF-REALIZATION FELLOWSHIP A Successful Hindu Countermission to the West

by Elliot Miller

The earliest Hindu missionaries to the West were arguably the most impressive. In 1893 Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), a young disciple of the celebrated Hindu “avatar” (manifestation of God) Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), spoke at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago and won an enthusiastic American following with his genteel manner and erudite presentation. Over the next few years, he inaugurated the first Eastern religious movement in America: the Vedanta Societies of various cities, independent of one another but under the spiritual leadership of the Ramakrishna Order in India. In 1920 a second Hindu missionary effort was launched in America when a comparably charismatic “neo-Vedanta” swami, Paramahansa Yogananda, was invited to speak at the International Congress of Religious Liberals in Boston, sponsored by the Unitarian Church. After the Congress, Yogananda lectured across the country, spellbinding audiences with his immense charm and powerful presence. In 1925 he established the headquarters for his Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) in Los Angeles on the site of a former hotel atop Mount Washington. He was the first Eastern guru to take up permanent residence in the United States after creating a following here.

NEO-VEDANTA: THE FORCE STRIKES BACK

Neo-Vedanta arose partly as a countermissionary movement to Christianity in nineteenth-century India. Having lost a significant minority of Indians (especially among the outcast “Untouchables”) to Christianity under British rule, certain adherents of the ancient Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism retooled their religion to better compete with Christianity for the souls not only of Easterners, but of Westerners as well.¹

Historically, Advaita Vedanta, which was formulated by the Hindu philosopher Shankara (ca. A.D. 788–820), is the strictest monist (“All is One”) philosophy in India. It holds that God is an impersonal and formless Consciousness or Force, the world is an illusion (*maya*), and the path of devotion (Bhakti Yoga) to a personal god (Krishna, Shiva, Kali, etc.), though valid, is inferior to the more direct and abstract approach of seeking oneness with the impersonal Absolute (Brahman).

Following the lead of Ramakrishna, who embraced the devotional elements not only of Hinduism but of Christianity and other religions as well, a new movement of Vedantists added a warm devotional emphasis to their cold monistic tradition and extolled Christ as one of the greatest avatars. They also opened up the previously restrictive practice of Vedanta “to all regardless of caste, colour, or race”² and stressed the importance of balancing their contemplative life of worldly withdrawal with active social service.³

Adopting such distinctively Christian missionary practices as providing education and health care to the poor, they set up successful missionary organizations in India (e.g., Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna Order with its Ramakrishna Mission; Yogananda’s Yogoda Satsanga Society, established in 1917) that were complemented by strong sister organizations in Europe and the United States. Thus the Vedanta Societies and the Self-Realization Fellowship were the first — but far from the last — Hindu missionary works planted in the West.

The rationale offered for such efforts was that the West — though technologically advanced — was spiritually impoverished, while India — though technologically backward — was spiritually advanced. Just as the West had brought technology to India, India was now imparting its spiritual riches to the West. Furthermore, they maintained, since Vedanta is a naturalistic philosophy, and since its adherents pursue union with the Absolute through empirical, time-tested, and rigorously systematized disciplines (yoga), it is a scientific philosophy/religion that can bridge the growing gap between science and religion in the West.

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YOGANANDA'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

Born Mukunda Lal Ghosh in northeastern India in 1893, Yogananda was a devout, college-educated, personable man. He was acquainted with many dignitaries in his native India (he even initiated Mahatma Gandhi into his Kriya Yoga). After being initiated into the Swami Order, an ancient order of Advaita Vedanta monks, Yogananda was sent to the West by his guru, Sri Yukteswar, to preach the gospel of Kriya Yoga (see below) and to work for the spiritual unification of East and West.

Through public lectures, yoga classes, and published writings, Yogananda attracted a sizable following, which included famed horticulturist Luther Burbank. His best-selling *Autobiography of a Yogi* is a New Age classic and, perhaps, the most readable and fascinating introduction to Hindu spirituality in the English language.

Yogananda's autobiography is replete with accounts of the mystical and miraculous, including his own ecstatic visions as well as his encounters with legendary Hindu "saints." The latter allegedly displayed such powers as levitation, materialization of a second body, and the ability to live without such physical necessities as food and sleep. Most fantastic of all is his description of Babaji, the "yogi Christ of India," who — like the "Immortals" in the 1990s *Highlander* movies and television series — is believed to have retained the same 25-year-old appearance for hundreds or even thousands of years. Babaji allegedly initiated Sri Yukteswar's master, Lahiri Mahasaya, and thus got the SRF ball rolling. In the SRF visitor center, a drawing of Babaji, which had been sketched under Yogananda's supervision, accompanies photographs of Mahasaya and Yukteswar. Not surprisingly, although Yogananda supposedly met Babaji and his *Autobiography* is filled with pictures of the people (including Indian gurus and "saints") described in its pages, no known photograph of the "yogi Christ" exists.

Selling Yoga as Science. This emphasis on the extraordinary is accompanied by the repeated claim that yoga is a science, and that such "miraculous" feats as these Hindu supermen perform are, in fact, the natural results of a yogi's mastering the more subtle laws of the universe and the self. Indeed, Yogananda argued that yoga could prove to be the perfect counterbalance to the unique perils of our scientific age: "The Western day is nearing when the inner science of self-control will be found as necessary as the outer conquest of Nature....An indirect benefit of mankind's concern over atomic bombs may be an increased practical interest in the science of yoga, a 'bombproof shelter' truly."⁴ In *Autobiography* Yogananda cites an observation made by Swiss psychiatrist (and New Age forefather) Carl Jung that the guru obviously took quite seriously: "When a religious method recommends itself as 'scientific,' it can be certain of its public in the West. Yoga fulfills this expectation."⁵

Kriya Yoga, the distinctive system of yoga taught by Yogananda, is "an advanced Raja Yoga⁶ technique that reinforces and revitalizes subtle currents of life energy in the body, enabling the normal activities of heart and lungs to slow down naturally. As a result, the consciousness is drawn to higher levels of perception, gradually bringing about an inner awakening more blissful and more deeply satisfying than any of the experiences that the mind or the senses or the ordinary human emotions can give."⁷ Among other disciplines, the Kriya yogi manipulates this life energy (prana) through breath control and by mentally directing it around his or her spinal cord.

"Death Had No Power"? Yogananda's mission to the West can be viewed only as a success. SRF claims that Yogananda personally initiated 100,000 students into yoga. His *Autobiography* has undoubtedly influenced a much greater number toward embracing Eastern mysticism. Like Vivekananda, Yogananda won a good measure of acceptance and admiration from the cultural establishment. In 1927 he even received an audience with an enthusiastic President Calvin Coolidge. His 32-year mission in the United States helped pave the way for an unending cavalcade of Eastern gurus who have since found a ripe mission field on American soil.

Yogananda died of heart failure in Los Angeles on 7 March 1952. SRF cites a notarized letter from the director of the Los Angeles Forest Lawn Memorial Park that affirms that Yogananda's body exhibited "a phenomenal state of immutability." At the time of his burial 20 days after his death, "there was no reason to say that his body had suffered any visible physical disintegration at all."⁸ Thus SRF concludes that "death had no power of disintegration over this incomparable devotee of God."⁹

SRF AFTER YOGANANDA

After Yogananda's passing, "self-made business magnate" J. L. Lynn (renamed Rajas Jana Kananda by Yogananda) assumed the presidency of SRF. Less than three years later Lynn also died, and SRF's leadership passed to "the Reverend Mother Sri Daya Mata." It was in 1931 that Daya Mata — then a 17-year old Mormon girl named Faye Wright — met Yogananda in Salt Lake City. She says after he cured her of a blood disease that had forced her to leave high school, she became a nun in the SRF Order. She has continued as president of SRF to this day.

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Although three books bear her name and she regularly contributes to *Self-Realization* magazine, Daya Mata has maintained a low profile, faithfully promoting Yogananda's teachings and executing his wishes. Under her leadership, SRF has expanded and charted a steady course. SRF lacks the visibility of some of the newer Eastern movements whose colorful and controversial leaders are still living or only recently deceased (e. g., Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation and the cult of the late Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh). Nonetheless, SRF has demonstrated a staying power that most of the Eastern sects that have appeared on the Western scene since the mid-1960s can only envy (e.g., Guru Maharaj Ji's Divine Light Mission, P. R. Sarkar's Ananda Marga Yoga Society, and Swami Muktananda's Sidha meditation movement).

Religious Life. Devotion is a central component of SRF religious life. The birth and, in some cases, death (maha samadhi) anniversaries of the SRF gurus (not only Yogananda but also Jesus, Krishna, Babaji, Lahiri Mahasaya, and Sri Yukteswar) are adoringly observed each year ("Offerings of flowers and a donation should be brought"¹⁰). Yogananda is devotedly referred to as "Master," his spiritual presence is believed in and sought in a manner comparable to that of Jesus for the Christian, and virtually everything on which he left his mark at SRF's Mount Washington Mother Center has been turned into a shrine. All of this is standard within the Hindu tradition of the guru-disciple relationship.¹¹

Regular meetings are held at SRF temples, ashram centers, fellowship centers, and meditation groups in various locations around the world (with a preponderance of ashram centers and temples in Southern California). Local SRF ministers give the same lecture around the world on Sunday mornings, and Thursday evening services consist of chanting, meditation, and a talk by the minister, with the exception of the third Thursday each month, when a "satsanga" is held in which previously submitted written questions are answered.

Much of SRF's program, however, is conducted through the mail. The Self-Realization Fellowship Lessons indoctrinate the seeker in Yogananda's eclectic teachings and prescribe a regimen of "energization exercises" (e.g., breathing exercises, physical tension and relaxation exercises, and mental exercises to develop powers of will and concentration), meditation techniques (withdrawing from sensory awareness so that one can hear the Divine Cosmic Motor of the Universe — *om*), abstinence from meat and intoxicants, and so on.

Regardless of religious affiliation, all persons who sincerely seek spiritual advancement are welcome to study the Self-Realization Fellowship Lessons. These sacred teachings constitute the formal religion of students who make Self-Realization Fellowship their Church. Initiation in the highest technique of meditation, Kriya Yoga, is the spiritual baptism of this Church, and is given when students establish church-membership affiliation with Self-Realization Fellowship.

*Application for Kriya Yoga may be made after completing Steps I and II of the Lessons, a period of approximately one year if the Lessons are received weekly, as is the case with the majority of students. Initiation in Kriya Yoga signifies acceptance of the holy guru-disciple relationship between the student and Paramahansa Yogananda. Kriya Yogis pledge their spiritual loyalty to the Gurus and to Self-Realization Fellowship.*¹²

For men and women who are free of family obligations, the invitation is extended to join the SRF Order, a monastic community. Renouncing worldly pleasures and entanglements for a life wholly devoted to God and Yogananda's teachings, these monks and nuns abide by "vows of simplicity, obedience, chastity, and loyalty, persevering in meditation and humbly trying to improve."¹³ Yogananda told his devotees that after he left his physical body they would be his body: his hands, feet, and speech.¹⁴ It is their goal to "quietly [radiate] a peace and divine love"¹⁵ that will make them "living examples of Guruji's teachings and his spirit."¹⁶ Indeed, the monks and nuns whom one encounters at the Mother Center and other SRF monasteries and retreats generally do seem peaceful, perhaps a little too much so ("blissed-out" or "spaced-out"), after spending years in monastic seclusion and hours every day "persevering in meditation."

Bad Blood on the Mountain. Nonetheless, as *New Times Los Angeles* reports, a controversy over SRF's plans to bring Yogananda's corpse home to the Mother Center has lately hampered their endeavors to do credit publicly to their master.

In some ways it is as unlikely a squabble as can be imagined, involving a religious retreat known for its solitude, whose 100 or so monks and nuns, ever the quiet neighbors, devote many of their waking hours to prayer and meditation. Yet in attempting to get what it wants, the SRF has acted more like a heavy-handed real estate developer than the monastery next door. Besides trying to silence opponents by getting its slate of candidates elected to the neighborhood association, the church has turned to some of the most powerful influence peddlers in L.A. to spread its message at City Hall. With lobbying as well as with letter-writing and phone-call campaigns, the SRF tried to avoid producing an environmental impact report while naively seeking a quick rubber stamp of its preliminary plans. The tactic incensed many residents and galvanized the opposition. After long pretending not to have decided whether to even try to move the guru's body into the shrine the church hopes to build, SRF officials — to no one's surprise — announced last January their intent to do so. The public relations gaffe was soon compounded, however, when church

representatives acknowledged that transferring the body had long been a part of its plans, as the organization's literature for the last 40 years has implied. Since then, the SRF has struggled to convince critics that placing the body of a holy man, whose acolytes around the world conservatively number in the hundreds of thousands, atop crowded Mount Washington will have only a minimal effect on traffic. This, even though thousands of pilgrims flock to Forest Lawn to visit his crypt each year, with little promotion by the church and nothing comparable to the visitor center and 20,000-square-foot museum the SRF plans as part of its expansion.¹⁷

As to the exact size of Yogananda's following, SRF does not disclose its membership number, but my guide on a recent tour of the Mother Center did affirm that growth in recent years has been "exponential." This has necessitated the construction of a new administration building in addition to the 50-room former hotel building that has long served as SRF's administrative center. SRF has members in 54 countries.

Yogananda has many followers outside of SRF as well. About 5,000 are members of a sect called Ananda, whose controversial leader, Donald J. Walters, a.k.a. Kriyananda, was a direct disciple of Yogananda. A long-standing feud between SRF and Ananda over copyright to *Autobiography of a Yogi*, a sexual scandal involving Walters and several female disciples, a resulting lawsuit brought by one of those disciples against Ananda and allegedly financed by SRF, and the complications all of this creates for SRF's goal of moving Yogananda's body to the Mother Center — along with scandals involving high-ranking SRF officials as well — are all detailed in the 1 July 1999 *New Times Los Angeles* article.

THE TEACHINGS OF SRF

As with all systems of yoga, experience is the essential ingredient in Yogananda's religion. He orchestrated the regimen of exercises and techniques discussed above to produce particular experiences that he believed would result in self-realization. Nonetheless, Yogananda set forth a highly detailed and fairly consistent body of teachings that are preserved in numerous books and adhered to faithfully by SRF today.

God and the World. As we've seen, SRF's most basic supposition is pantheism. They believe that ultimately nothing is real but God; all things are a part of God, in whom they find their true identity: "The Eternal Father, God...is the only Real Substance...and is all in all in the universe."¹⁸

In keeping with neo-Vedanta tradition, Yogananda emphasized that God is both impersonal and personal. The impersonal is primary but the personal is also important: "Everything in essence is the ever-living Absolute who has become personal and visible to us for a time through this cosmos."¹⁹

If God is the only real Substance, then it follows that the world as we know it is illusion. What then is the purpose of the world? Yogananda does not hesitate to offer an elaborate answer:

This world is God's lila, or divine play. The Lord, it seems, like a little child, loves to play, and His lila is the endless variety of ever-changing creation.

I used to reason in this way: God was infinite omniscient Bliss; but, being alone, there was no one but Him to enjoy that Bliss. So He said, "Let Me create a universe and divide Myself into many souls that they may play with Me in my unfolding drama." By His magical measuring power of maya He became dual: Spirit and Nature, man and woman, positive and negative....

....Look upon life as a movie, and then you will know why God created it. Our problem is that we forget to see it as God's entertainment.

....Then this cosmic movie, with its horrors of disease and poverty and atomic bombs, will appear to us only as real as the anomalies we experience in a movie house. When we have finished seeing the motion picture, we know that nobody was killed; nobody was suffering.²⁰

Man. If God alone is real, it also follows that man (humanity) is an illusion. Man's illusory existence is based on God's own self-imposed ignorance:

Ignorance, which produces the idea of separate existence of self...is the source of Ego, the son of man.²¹

When the developments of ignorance are stopped, man gradually comprehends the true character of this creation of Darkness, Maya, as a mere play of ideas of the Supreme Nature on His own Self, the only Real Substance.²²

Furthermore, if God is the underlying essence of all creation, then man's true essence must also be divine: "Just as there appear many images of the one sun, when reflected in a number of vessels full of water, so is mankind apparently divided into many

souls, occupying these bodily and mental vehicles, and thus outwardly separated from the one universal Spirit. In reality, God and man are one, and the separation is only apparent.”²³

Christ. It is easy for SRF to confess that Jesus Christ is God, since they believe there is nothing that is *not* God. By the same token, however, it is impossible for them to grant that He is the *unique* incarnation of God, the *only* begotten Son of God. Rather, He is lauded as one of many yogis who achieved “Christ Consciousness” through a process of self-mastery:

*We are unique channels, for it lies within our power to make ourselves narrower or wider....Some choke the channel of their lives with the mud of accumulated ignorance....There are others who keep on digging, widening, deepening the channels of their lives by self-discipline and culture, thus inviting an ever larger volume of God-wisdom to pass through. Jesus the Christ was one of the greatest channels through which the cosmic wisdom flowed. We must remember that each channel is finite and has its limitations. I daresay there shall never be born a prophet who can contain or exhaust the whole ocean of truth in his short span of life. Other prophets shall always come to express truth anew. Though infinite truth must thus suffer measurement even at the hands of prophets, these great souls nevertheless serve to widen the channels of smaller lives....Jesus the son of man lifted himself to the state of being a son of God. That is, he rose above ordinary human consciousness and entered the cosmic Christ Consciousness, the pure reflection of God present in all creation. When St. John said that “as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God,” he meant that anyone who could receive that Christ Consciousness, who could increase the capacity of his consciousness to hold that infinite ocean of truth, would become, as did Jesus, a son of God — one with the Father.*²⁴

Salvation. Man is thus saved when he sheds his ignorance of his divine Identity and attains Christ Consciousness. Salvation equals self-realization:

*When all the developments of Ignorance are withdrawn...man becomes Sannyasi, free, or Christ the Savior.*²⁵

*Self-realization is the knowing on all levels of our being — body, mind, and soul — that we are now in possession of Divinity and therefore need not pray that it come to us; that we are not merely near God at all times but that His omnipresence is our omnipresence; and that He is just as much our essential life now as He ever will be. All we have to do is improve our knowing.*²⁶

As do virtually all Hindus, SRF believes that man’s progress toward salvation is determined by karma (the moral law of cause and effect) and reincarnation.²⁷

The Relationship of Hinduism to Christianity. One of the “Aims and Ideals of Self-Realization Fellowship — as set forth by Paramahansa Yogananda” is “to reveal the complete harmony and basic oneness of original Christianity as taught by Jesus Christ and original Yoga as taught by Bhagavan Krishna; and to show that these principles of truth are the common scientific foundation of all true religions.”²⁸ Although SRF stresses the unity of all religions, in its own words it “gives emphasis primarily to Christianity and to the Yoga teachings of India. The life of Jesus Christ receives special attention and devotion in Self-Realization Fellowship teachings. Many persons who have been skeptical of the divinity of Christ have had their doubts dispelled forever through SRF teachings.”²⁹

In the SRF visitor center, a red-letter King James Version of the Bible is on sale along with SRF and Hindu literature. In the Mother Center’s administrative building lobby, Hindu idols and religious imagery share decorative space with the Christian cross and images of Jesus and Mary. In keeping with its mission to bring yoga to the “Christian” West, SRF is — in outward appearance — a unique Hindu-Christian hybrid.

SRF IN LIGHT OF THE BIBLE

Although SRF’s attempts to promote unity between Hinduism and Christianity may appear commendable on the surface, such a goal can be achieved only by subtly glossing over critical, irreconcilable differences between the two. In the end, we find Hinduism unscathed by the transaction, while Christianity becomes stripped of its defining and distinguishing characteristics.

Yogananda and Yuktswar presuppose pantheistic esotericism in the Bible and then find it there, showing no respect whatsoever for historical context or the author’s intended meaning. They presume that their tradition of Advaita Vedanta mysticism is surely the esoteric core of all true religion and therefore do not allow the biblical tradition to prove to them otherwise.

This is certainly no less dogmatic and exclusive than orthodox Christianity. Unlike orthodoxy, however, it is untruthful and manipulative. By claiming an agreement that does not in fact exist, it simply redefines the biblical tradition out of existence, retaining the characters and terminology of Christianity while filling them with Hindu content.

Beware the “Other Jesus.” The most significant example of this is Jesus Himself. SRF claims affinity with Jesus, but this does not of itself prove that Jesus has affinity with them. It is crucial to note that the apostle Paul condemned those who preach “another Jesus whom we have not preached,” labeling them “false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:4, 13–14). Clearly, not all who speak reverently of Jesus are to be trusted, for there are counterfeit Jesuses manufactured by diabolical forces for the purpose of promoting spiritually lethal deception.

How then can we know the real Jesus from the counterfeit? Yogananda claimed to know “original Christianity as taught by Jesus Christ.” But the only historically reliable source of information on Jesus is in the New Testament documents. The portrayal of Jesus we find there is based on credible eyewitness accounts and not on legends that developed in subsequent centuries, such as we find in the Gnostic gospels or modern occult literature. The New Testament Jesus claims total continuity with the God of the Jewish people (e.g., John 4:22; 8:54), not just on some esoteric level as we find in SRF materials, but in a plain and straightforward (exoteric) manner, according to a faithful and literal (as context warrants) interpretation of the Old Testament text (e.g., Matt. 5:17–19; John 10:35).

While Jesus totally identified Himself with the God of Israel, the God of Israel completely dissociated Himself from the objects of worship in nonbiblical religions (e.g., Deut. 32:16–17, 21; 13:6–10; Ps. 96:5; 2 Kings 5:15; 19:15). Hinduism, with its pantheon of idols, most assuredly fits into that category.

Pantheism by definition is the identification of the creation with the Creator. This is the essence of idolatry and is an abomination in the sight of the biblical God (Exod. 20:2–5; Rom. 1:18–25), who created the world out of nothing, not out of Himself, by the irresistible power of His Word (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 33:6–9; 148:1–6; Heb. 11:3; Rom. 4:17). The world as God created it is therefore “good” (Gen. 1:31), not “darkness,” and what goes on in it is profoundly meaningful and significant. It is not a “play” (*lila*) that a pitiful solitary deity engages in his own mind to keep himself amused, as if it would be “enlightened” to view the Holocaust as “entertainment” in which ultimately “nobody was killed, nobody was suffering.”

Understood in their historical context, the teachings of Jesus bear no resemblance to Eastern mysticism. His claims were as exclusive as were those of the God revealed in the Old Testament (e.g., John 10:7–10; 14:6). Yogananda and Yuktswar’s attempts to handle these passages by separating the man Jesus from the “Christ Consciousness within creation” have no basis within the biblical text itself. From its first usage, the term *the Christ* (i.e., the Messiah) always referred to a specific prophesied Deliverer and King of Israel (e.g., Dan. 9:25–26; cf. Luke 2:11). In the first century A.D., the proto-Gnostics — drawing on the rich smorgasbord of pagan (including Indian) ideas available in the Roman Empire — sought in a similar esoteric manner and for similar mystical purposes to distinguish between Jesus and the “Christ.” The apostle John, who was Jesus’ “beloved disciple” (John 13:23; 21:7, 20–24) and who was commissioned by Jesus along with the other apostles to uphold the purity of His teachings (Matt. 28:18–20), labeled such teachers “antichrist” for so doing (1 John 2:22–23).

Let No One Take You Captive. Unlike any other world religion, Christianity is all about its founder. For the believer, the historic personage known as Jesus of Nazareth is not just a way-shower but the Way (John 14:6); not just a teacher of truth, salvation, and sanctification (the way to righteousness) but Truth, Salvation, and Sanctification themselves (John 14:6; Heb. 5:9; 1 Cor. 1:30); not just one who points the way to eternal life but Eternal Life itself (1 John 1:2). Indeed, to the Christian, Jesus Christ is nothing less than the Beginning and the End — the source, meaning, and goal of life (Rev. 22:12–13; Phil. 1:21). To have direct experience of God can only mean experiencing a vital relationship with this Person, and through Him with the unseen Father, through the agency of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7–15; 17:25–26). Oneness with God must be understood as a oneness of will and not of essence, since God is not only ontologically separate from His creation but also — unlike Brahman — personal and moral in His unmanifest as well as His manifest nature (Exod. 3:14; 34:6; Lev. 19:2; Ps. 86:5).

This overwhelming biblical evidence is supported both by reason (which must presuppose dualities and not Oneness even to operate) and by intuition (in that man cannot escape a personal and moral apprehension of reality — even Brahman is inconsistently spoken of in personal and moral terms). We must therefore conclude that the common mystical occurrence of supposed oneness with a Universal Consciousness in differing religions and cultures is not evidence of a divine spark within man and a common core to all religions. It rather speaks of fallen man’s profound capacity for spiritual delusion, which takes specific universal forms that were determined by its universal, primeval origin (Gen. 3:4–5). As the apostle Paul warned, “See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the *basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form*, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the Head over every power and authority” (Col. 2:8–10, NIV; emphases added).

Although Yogananda thought it impossible for Jesus or any other finite being to contain the fullness of God, he did not recognize the infinite Person with whom he was dealing. Since *all* the fullness of deity dwells in Christ, the believer finds *everything* he or

she needs (“you have been made complete” — v. 10, NASB) in a relationship with Him. There is no need or reason to look anywhere else. It is no more possible to go “beyond Jesus” than it is possible to go “beyond God,” and thus Yogananda’s statement that other prophets would come to add to the truths that Jesus taught is biblically false (Heb. 1:1–3).

Whether or not Yogananda’s body showed signs of decay at the time of his burial, he is still in his crypt. The tomb of Jesus, on the other hand, is empty. Sin (moral guilt), not ignorance, is the cause of our separation from God (Isa. 59:1–2), and the resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that His sacrificial death on our behalf was efficacious for removing that guilt and thus restoring our relationship with God (Rom. 4:25; 1 Cor. 15:17). It further demonstrates that He is the One on whom God has set His seal of approval (Acts 4:10–12; 17:31; cf. John 6:27). By conquering man’s ultimate enemy, death, He has shown He is capable of effectively dealing with all of our most basic and fundamental problems (1 Cor. 15:54–57; Rom. 8:31–39). As Simon Peter replied when Jesus asked the disciples if they too would forsake Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). No one else can make that promise good, including Yogananda.

1 An interesting account of how conditions in nineteenth-century India gave rise to neo-Vedanta can be found in R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), ch. 7.

2 “Neo-Vedanta,” International Forum for Neo-Vedantists (<http://members.xoom.com/drcsshah/neovedanta/aboutsite.html>).

3 For an informative, albeit highly technical, discussion of Vedanta and neo-Vedanta distinctives, see “Dasanami Sampradaya — The Monastic Tradition,” on The Advaita Vedanta Home Page — Advaita and Advaitins Today (www.advaita-vedanta.org/avhp/ad-today.html).

4 Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1972), 265.

5 *Ibid.*, 264. For a critique of the claim that Eastern meditative practices are scientific see my book, *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), ch. 2.

6 Raja (“royal”) Yoga was “formally systematized in the second century B.C. by the Indian sage Patanjali.” (Undreamed of Possibilities: An Introduction to Self-Realization Fellowship [Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1982], 8.) Raja Yoga incorporates disciplines of body, will, and mind and thus is considered a comprehensive path to union with the Absolute. Many yogis teach Raja Yoga, whereas Kriya Yoga is specifically associated with Lahiri Mahasaya.

7 *Ibid.*, 9.

8 Yogananda, 575.

9 *Ibid.*, 571.

10 “Self-Realization Fellowship Church of All Religions Calendar of Services: January — February — March 1978” (flyer).

11 Yogananda expounds on this in his *The Divine Romance* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1986), 377.

12 “Introduction to Self-Realization Fellowship Lessons,” *Self-Realization Fellowship Lessons*, vol. 1 (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1956), 2.

13 Mrinalini Mata, “A Life of Consecration,” *Self-Realization*, Fall 1999, 64.

14 *Ibid.*, 63.

15 “The Monastic Journey,” *Self-Realization*, Fall 1999, 63.

16 Mrinalini Mata, 64.

17 Ron Russell, “Return of the Swami,” *New Times Los Angeles Online*, 1 July 1999 (newtimesla.com).

18 Swami Sri Yukteswar, *The Holy Science* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1984), 21.

19 Yogananda, *Divine Romance*, 375.

20 Paramahansa Yogananda, *Journey into Self-Realization: Discovering the Gifts of the Soul* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1997), 31–33.

21 Yukteswar, 94.

22 *Ibid.*, 41.

23 Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Science of Religion* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1982), 20–21.

24 Yogananda, *Divine Romance*, 335–36.

25 Yukteswar, 42.

26 Paramahansa Yogananda, quoted in *Why a “Church of All Religions”?* (SRF pamphlet, n.d.), 6.

27 See, e.g., Yogananda, *Divine Romance*, 372; Yogananda, *Autobiography*, 199.

28 *Ibid.*, 573.

29 *Why a “Church of All Religions”?* 4.