

I Saw Swamiji on TV Last Night

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Well, not in the sense that you might think. Once in a while you can spot a picture of a figure known to Vedantists, such as when there was a picture of Sri Ramakrishna in the background when John Dobson was interviewed for the PBS series *The Astronomers*, or the picture of Sri Sarada Devi, Holy Mother in a scene from *The City of Joy*, or the time when Sri Ramakrishna was mentioned by name in an episode of the TV series *Northern Exposure*. This was different. Let me give a little background first.

Some years ago I was doing research utilizing the microfilm libraries of newspapers from the time of the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. That research eventually led to an article in *The American Vedantist* regarding certain discrepancies between the accounts of the Parliament that appeared in books published by the Order, and the newspaper reports published at the time. After the article was published a swami, who is head of a Vedanta center in America, wrote to me to say that he appreciated the article but asked, perhaps out of a sense of balance, that I write another article on the enduring impact of Swami Vivekananda on America. I started to think about how to approach the subject (but I didn't have to think for long).

That very night I was getting over a cold and was working on my laptop computer in bed. As the night progressed, I considered getting up and going to the shrine room for my nightly meditation. But the idea of getting out of bed, bundling up, leaving my warm bedroom, to go downstairs (which is cold) to meditate was taking second place to staying put (even though the shrine room itself is heated, for the Lord's comfort). Like most people (I hope like most people), I have an inner dialog, and that night it went something like this:

I really should get down there and meditate.

Oh just stay put, you're still sick.

I'm not that sick, I could go down there.

It's already too late. There's always tomorrow, stay in bed and get well.

You get the idea. I decided to stay in bed, but felt bad that I had stayed up so late working, instead of resting, and now I wasn't even going to meditate. Quite late in the night I finally put the computer away and turned on the TV to see if anything interesting was on. As I surfed the channels, I came across a program on C-SPAN showing Dr. Huston Smith giving a lecture. This was a very pleasant surprise. I had met Dr. Smith several times at the retreats in Olema, which are sponsored by the Vedanta Society of Northern California, and had greatly enjoyed his talks. This lecture was recorded at a college back East and the topic was religions' view of good and evil.

The show lasted just over an hour and Dr. Smith delivered a forceful, humorous, and insightful talk that touched on each of the World's religions' views of the subject. I heard him draw on many of the teachings and parables of Vedanta, Thakur, and Swamij, though without ever mentioning their names. As I listened I had a powerful emotional reaction, on two fronts:

- I felt that Mother was making a house call. If I wouldn't go to the shrine room, she would come to me. I felt comforted and touched by Her grace.
- Here was an example of the true effects of Swamiji's influence on America.

I was stunned that the answer of how to approach the subject of Swami Vivekananda's impact on America had landed in my lap, within hours of posing the question. It seems to me that Dr. Smith is a perfect example of that influence: here is a Westerner, raised by missionary parents, who felt an attraction to Eastern Religious thought, who was influenced by Gerald Heard and Aldus Huxley (both students of Swami Prabhavananda), and had sought instruction from Swami Satprakashananda in St. Louis. It was through this direct line of influences of Vedanta, which was introduced to America by Swamiji's appearance at the Parliament of Religions, that Dr. Smith came to know and understand Sri

Ramakrishna's message of universal Truth and the validity that the different religions of the world are just so many paths leading to the same God.

Dr. Smith is not, of course, the only example. In addition to Heard and Huxley, there is also Christopher Isherwood, Joseph Campbell, and J.D. Salinger; just a few of the more famous people whose public work and personal philosophy can be traced directly to the influence of Swamiji's founding of Vedanta in America. How many countless others were influenced by these people and were unknowingly touched by Swamiji?

I believe this is the legacy of Swami Vivekananda's impact on America: to have influenced the very fabric of philosophical and religious thought, but in a way that is hidden to most people. That a speaker can expound on the themes which were expressed by Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar, using his same parables, and yet the audience not knowing the source, is the unseen, but undeniable impact of Swamiji. It may seem sad that Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna are not often mentioned by name, but Swamiji himself was reluctant to talk openly about Holy Mother and Sri Ramakrishna - yet the message got through, loud and clear. Houston Smith's old teacher, Swami Satprakashananda was once asked if the principles of Vedanta would take root in America, he answered, "Yes, but the source will not be recognized".