

## **The East in the West: the New Thought Movement**

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**New Thought** or New Age is a growing spiritual movement in the West. It derives many of its principles from Hinduism, Zen Buddhism, Paganism, and Native American traditions. New Thought promotes the idea that "Infinite Intelligence" is ubiquitous, present everywhere. Its truth statements may be summarized as:

- spirit is the totality of real things
- true human selfhood is divine, rather than sinful
- divine thought is a force for good,
- sickness originates in the mind, and positive thinking creates healing

New Thought churches and communities come under different names: Unity Church, Religious Science, Center for Spiritual Living, the Church of Divine Science, Metaphysical Living. The link below provides a useful international directory: <http://findacenter.com/new-thought-usa.htm>

The present essay traces briefly the link between New Thought and Hinduism. Tens of millions meditate and practice yoga; 25 million eat a vegetarian diet; a quarter believes in reincarnation, and some 40 percent in the US now choose cremation over burial.

The short essay is based on a couple of talks I gave in Florida.

### **Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)**

Ralph Waldo Emerson may be regarded as the founding father of New Thought. He was much influenced by his reading of the Hindu scriptures. He wrote:

In all nations there are minds which incline to dwell in the conception of the fundamental Unity. This tendency finds its highest expression in the religious writings of the East, and chiefly in the Indian Scriptures, in the Vedas, the Bhagavat Gita, and the Vishnu Purana.

...

I owed a magnificent day to the Bhagavat-Gita. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.

Emerson delivered a lecture on “The Oversoul,” at the Harvard Divinity School in 1844. He talked of a ‘divine presence’ that permeates the whole creation and all living things. The close parallel between Hindu scripture and Emerson’s enunciation here is unmistakable. I give a summary:

Behind the appearances in the universe, there is a Reality of a Being and Consciousness which is One and Eternal. This One Reality is the Self of all things. God could best be found by looking inward into the core of one’s being, into one’s Soul. By living according to the dictates of an Inner Will, one could transcend the materialist world of sense perception, the world of cause and effect.

Emerson was settled in Concord, Massachusetts, which now boasts an impressive Emerson Museum. Leading Transcendentalists in Massachusetts included Henry David Thoreau, Phineas Quimby, Margaret Fuller, Palmer Peabody, James Freeman Clark, and Mary Baker Eddy. Charles and Myrtle Fillmore founded the Unity Church in 1889 with headquarters in Missouri.

Ralph Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and others were known as “transcendentalists.” They believed that intuition rather than reason is the higher faculty. A mystical union with the Divine is the goal. The process of seeking unity with the Divine is inherently individualistic.

Contemplative solitude is necessary. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) lived in a small 10 x 15 ft cabin on the banks of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. He lived 'deliberately' in the tradition of ancient Hindu Rishis or seers. His observations are recorded in a short book, *Walden* (1854). Thoreau wrote:

In the morning I bathe my Intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavad-gita, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial.

Madam Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant may also be mentioned. The duo founded the Theosophical Society which attracted many followers in the West. The Society derived many of its teachings from Hinduism and Buddhism. The Society is headquartered in Chennai, South India.

### **Swami Vivekananda and Other Teachers Travel to the West**

Swami Vivekananda was a pioneer in bringing East to the West. He was a Hindu monk, and a chief disciple of the 19th-century Indian mystic Sri Ramakrishna. Vivekananda lectured at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. The lecture gained immense popularity. Later, he travelled throughout the US, speaking at numerous gatherings, East and West. He attracted a large following. His followers established a number of religious centers dedicated to his teachings. The centers are known by various names: Ramakrishna Centers, Vivekananda Centers and Vedanta Societies.

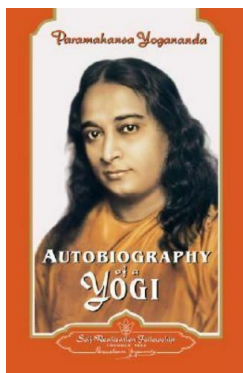


The Swami said: "All power is within you; you can do anything and everything. Believe in that, do not believe that you are weak; do not believe that you are half-crazy

lunatics, as most of us do nowadays. You can do anything and everything, without even the guidance of anyone. Stand up and express the divinity within you.”

Swami Vivekananda wrote extensively. Visit the following useful link: <https://gladreaders.com/swami-vivekananda-books/>

**Parmahansa Yogananda** was another luminary who traveled to the US in 1920. He founded the Self Realization Fellowship (SRF), which has centers in a number of cities in the US and Europe. Yogananda published in 1946 his life story, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, which has been translated into 50 languages and continues to sell in large numbers. It has been designated as one of the "100 Most Important Spiritual Books of the 20th Century" by a panel of spiritual authors.



The *Autobiography* has been an inspiration for many people including George Harrison, Bill Gates, Mahatma Gandhi and the Apple Founder Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs first read the *Autobiography* as a teenager. It is reported that he downloaded it on his computer and then re-read it once a year every year.

The 1960s was a turbulent period. The youth were disgruntled and revolted against traditional authority figures. Teachers from India filled the gap. A large retinue of teachers from India came to the US and the West. Important names include: Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Muktananda, Swami Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, Swami Rama, Swami Vishnu Devananda, Swami Sacchidananda, Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Dayananda, and Swami Kripalvananda. “Swami” is a title given to a sage, a seer, a mystic.

Deepak Chopra is a popular new age writer and speaker.



**Sri Aurobindo** did not travel to the US, but his philosophy of “integral yoga” is taught at numerous study centers in the US, including one in Pensacola, Florida. Sri Aurobindo’s collective writings appear in 37 volumes and may be downloaded free at: <https://www.sriarobindoashram.org/sriarobindo/writings.php>

## **My Participation in New Thought**

Over the past 20 years, I have attended off and on Sunday services of the Unity Church of Christianity in Pensacola, Florida and also once served on its Board of Directors. The following truth principles describe Unity Church at Pensacola:

- Unity emphasizes the divine potential in man, rather than the “sinfulness of man.”
- Unity embraces non-dualism. At every Sunday service, members recite: “There is only one power and one presence in the Universe and in my life, God.” This statement is similar to Isha Upanishad opening line: *Isha vasyam idam sarvam*—All this is for the habitation of the Lord.
- Unity de-emphasizes traditional Christianity’s emphasis on dualism: God versus Satan.
- Unity teaches that Jesus was a great Teacher, a way-shower, an example-setter, not the only begotten Son of God.
- Belief in Karma and re-incarnation is held among many members.
- Emphasis is placed on self-discovery rather than on being “saved.”
- Meditation and mindfulness are incorporated in Sunday services.

- The Pensacola Unity Minister Rev Jamie Sanders signs off his monthly newsletter with a “Namaskar.”

Ekhart Tolle is a popular New Thought teacher. His two best-selling books are: *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (2004), and, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose* (2008). His 2008 TV conversations with Oprah Winfrey attracted some 9 to 11 million viewers. This is a remarkable number. Eckhart Tolle derives his message from Vedanta and Zen Buddhism, although he is miserly in fully acknowledging the source. Google for his conversation with Oprah.

New Thought members have been weaned from traditional Christianity. Being “saved” from sin is not a preoccupation with them. Jesus is held-up as a great Teacher, not worshiped as a Savior.

During my interactions at Unity and elsewhere, I have found that a number had adopted Sanskrit email user names, such as shakti, shanti, taruni, kamala, radhe, devdasi, and so on. Women are more likely to adopt Sanskrit names. Sanskrit is the ancient language of Hinduism.

The source of New Thought teachings in Hinduism is not always acknowledged or even known. New Thought’s non-acknowledgement of Hindu sources may represent a case of **digestion**, using a term coined by Rajiv Malhotra. Digestion occurs when Western writers ignore the original source in Hinduism or Buddhism and pass the ideas as their own. See Malhotra’s two books: *Being Different* (2011) and *Indra’s Net* (2014).

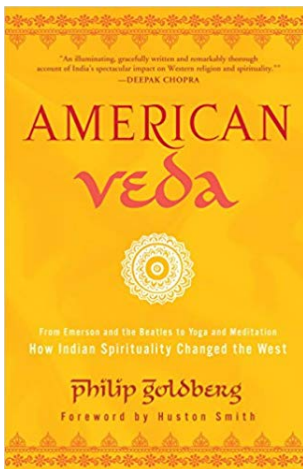
The world is experiencing a flux in matters of religion. The Islamic world is being radicalized, as we speak, and Europe is largely de-Christianized. New Thought spirituality is on the rise. Simultaneously, Born-Again Christianity is on the upswing in America. Born-Again Christians are passionate about their faith, and often have an activist

missionary agenda. President George W. Bush was said to be a Born-Again Christian.

The world we knew is in a state of flux. With some exceptions, that is a good thing.

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**Reading:** The following two publications add to the argument presented here.



**Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation. How Indian Spirituality Changed the West***

Paperback , 2013. From the jacket:

A fascinating look at India's remarkable impact on Western culture, this eye-opening popular history shows how the ancient philosophy of Vedanta and the mind-body methods of Yoga have profoundly affected the worldview of millions of Americans and radically altered the religious landscape.



The following short article in Newsweek by Lisa Miller further elaborates the argument in this essay.

**We Are All Hindus Now**

By Lisa Miller | NEWSWEEK  
Published Aug 15, 2009

"The Rig Veda, the most ancient Hindu scripture, says this: 'Truth is One, but the sages speak of it by many names.' A Hindu believes there are many paths to God. . .

The most traditional, conservative Christians have not been taught to think like this. They learn in Sunday school that their religion is true, and others are false. Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.'

Americans are no longer buying it. According to a 2008 Pew Forum survey, 65 percent of us believe that 'many religions can lead to eternal life'—including 37 percent of white evangelicals, the group most likely to believe that salvation is theirs alone.”

Read Lisa Miller’s full article at: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/212155>

Douglas Todd adds an interesting twist: <http://blogs.vancouversun.com/2010/11/04/we-are-all-hindus-now-revisited/>