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Hindu-Christian Dialogue on the Afterlife: Swami Vivekananda, Modern Advaita Vedānta, and Roman Catholic Eschatology

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Abstract This article compares modern Advaita (nonduality) Vedānta and Roman Catholic afterlife beliefs, with special attention to the dialogue of Swami Vivekananda, formal Roman Catholic teachings, and Edith Stein. It draws also on other commentators and includes some brief reference to other forms of Vedānta. It analyzes significant congruences, parallels, differences, and critical issues. The article begins with a focus on essential similarities and contrasts in theological anthropology, situates these within the spiritual ideals of modern Advaita Vedānta *mokṣa* and Catholic Christian redemption, and relates them to conceptions of heaven, purgatory, hell, and reincarnation, between the two traditions. It also draws into the dialogue a view of rebirth espoused in the modern Christian Hermeticism of Valentin Tomberg.

Keywords Swami Vivekananda · Hindu-Christian comparative theology · Hindu-Christian dialogue · heaven · hell · purgatory · reincarnation · Christian eschatology

Introduction: Swami Vivekananda and Interfaith Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is now a prominent global phenomenon that includes a wide diversity of traditions and denominations and numerous participants from all walks of life. Perhaps initiated in its modern form at the Chicago 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions, it is now experiencing in the twenty-twenties what Thomas Albert Howard aptly characterizes as "a booming heyday" (2021), following a century of relatively quiet activity that occurred mainly at the level of professional academia and literary circles. Recently complicated by questions related to method

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and decoloniality issues, some scholars have argued that the global interfaith movement is grounded in "false categorizations" of "what constitutes religious thought and practice"—conceptions fabricated by Western colonialist scholars and forced upon an "alien cultural phenomena" (Milbank 1990: 176).

Certainly, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902)—who was educated under Western curricula and became a famous participant at the 1893 Parliament—was an influential proponent of such categories of thinking, and they framed his passion for interfaith dialogue. However, I should note at the outset, even if such "categorizations" of religious phenomenon are in some form or fashion "false" (which I doubt), this article will show that Vivekananda's incorporation of them in his "religious" perspective was and still can be quite stimulating and fruitful in illuminating similarities and differences among essential beliefs and practices that are significant for people from varied faith traditions. As a Hindu devotee of Kālī and a follower of Ramakrishna (1836–86), Vivekananda was able to integrate theistic approaches with traditional Advaita Vedānta, drawing on both Western and Asian philosophical categories and concepts in his creative expositions. His Vedāntic perspective also included dialogue especially with certain Christian contexts within his exposition of a novel and influential religious experiential pluralism. In clarifying some aspects of Vivekananda's ground-breaking dialogue, this article explores the interfaith topic of the afterlife in modern Advaita (nonduality) Vedānta and Roman Catholicism.

One can find many common comparative dialogue themes among Roman Catholic and Hindu belief and practice—for example, views of divine Reality, contemplative prayer, monastic life, saintliness, and ritual—to name but a few vibrant parallels. But the topic of the afterlife perhaps marks the most significant contrast between the two traditions, a conflict which dates to the sixteenth century, with an account from Fernão Mendes Pinto about a dialogue Saint Francis Xavier had on reincarnation around 1548, albeit with a Buddhist monk.[1] Also, attributed to Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656), a critical text, *Punarjanmākṣepa* ("Refutation of Metempsychosis"), existed in three Indian languages and Sanskrit by the early eighteenth century (Colas and Colas-Chauhan 2017). It provides a systematic and relatively detailed critique of rebirth. Vivekananda introduced the topic in his 1893 Parliament speech and lectured on it in his subsequent tour of the United States. In his exposition of modern Vedāntic belief in reincarnation he was bluntly critical of Christian afterlife beliefs, insisting on the superiority of reincarnation doctrine on several grounds.

At that time in North America and Europe there were certain religious groups that espoused views of reincarnation, such as Kabbalists, Hermeticists, Theosophists, and a few other esoteric associations (Irwin 2017: 6–7, 2–4). However, the doctrine of reincarnation was speculation that was explicitly rejected by mainline Christian denominations and condemned as early as the second and third centuries by influential Fathers of the Church, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and even Origen, who himself would be censured for his theorizing on the preexistence of souls. The history on this topic has always been harshly conflictual on both sides of the dialogue. Some of these differences will be outlined and discussed in this article.

[1] Clooney (2016) sketches the critical dialogue historically that Jesuits had on the topic of reincarnation, with special reference to Alessandro Valignano, Matteo Ricci, Roberto de Nobili, Jean Venance Bouchet, and Joseph Betrand.

However, the major thrust of the article is to focus on actual or potential similarities, correspondences, and mutual influences on afterlife speculation in modern Vedānta and Roman Catholicism, with special attention to the dialogue of Vivekananda, certain other related modern Vedāntic theorists, formal Roman Catholic teaching, and Edith Stein, though drawing also on other commentators.

My approach here is stimulated in part by Vivekananda's own admonitions related to interreligious dialogue, which prefigure and perhaps influenced current methods now championed by "new" comparative theologians.[2] On his tour of America in 1894, he remarked: "The Hindoo's view of life is that we are here to learn; the whole happiness of life is to learn; the human soul is here to love learning and get experience. I am able to read my Bible better by your Bible, and you will learn to read your Bible the better by my Bible" (*CW* 2: 499).[3] "The dark prophecies of my religion become brighter when compared with those of your prophets" (*CW* 1: 329). This article approaches the topic of modern nondual Vedāntic and Roman Catholic afterlife beliefs from a comparative theological perspective: what are significant congruences, parallels, differences, and critical issues among the dialogue partners? It uses Vivekananda's viewpoint as its core context, but also refers to other modern commentators for illustrative clarification of—or contrast to—specific Advaita Vedāntic tenets. These thinkers obviously differ and agree with Vivekananda's thought on certain matters. Also, given limitations of space and the complexity of the issue, the article does not delve deeply into the contemporary debate about the degree to which Vivekananda's Vedānta differs from Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, but it does begin to explore possible influences of Ramakrishna's Vijñāna (ultimate harmonizing consciousness) Vedānta on Vivekananda's thought and the questions surrounding his views on religious diversity. As much as possible, the article attempts to focus on Vivekananda's actual claims and reflections on specified afterlife themes relevant to the comparative dialogue.

The article also includes some brief reference to Catholic parallels with Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified nonduality) Vedānta on the themes of *mokṣa* and *ātman* and with Madhva's Dvaita (duality) Vedānta on ideas of hell and eternal *māyā*. But the main intention is to focus comparatively on afterlife beliefs in modern Advaita Vedānta and contemporary Roman Catholicism, with special attention to Vivekananda's point of view. Although the comparative study touches on some significant related issues of theodicy, it does not approach such questions thoroughly or systematically, given limitations of space and the main comparative focus of the article. The article begins with an analysis of essential similarities and contrasts in theological anthropology, situates these within spiritual ideals of modern Advaita Vedānta *mokṣa* and Catholic Christian redemption, and relates them to conceptions of heaven, purgatory, hell, and reincarnation, between the two traditions. In line with Vivekananda's claims about the

[2] See Clooney (2010: especially 3–19) which lucidly summarizes key features of this comparative method, including the advocacy of participatory engagement in aspects of other traditions, which might then enrich the understanding and appreciation of features of the theologian's own tradition. While new comparative theologians typically remain neutral with respect to truth claims concerning themes or issues of comparative dialogue, Vivekananda was a passionate critic and apologist for Vedānta.

[3] Throughout this article, citations to Vivekananda's *Complete Works* follow this format: *CW* volume number: page number.

positive effects of dialogue quoted above, it will become apparent how such comparative study stimulates, deepens, and helps to extend my thought in this area—especially in reflecting (i) on important common threads in theological anthropology in connection to afterlife conditions, (ii) on the significance of conceptions of Vedāntic heaven and hell in reflecting creatively on Catholic purgatory, (iii) on critical issues related to the extreme sufferings in traditional accounts of Catholic hell and Vedāntic retributive rebirth, and (iv) on substantial parallels between ideas of Catholic sanctifying purgatory and Vedāntic soul-making rebirth.

Vedānta and Roman Catholic Anthropology

Both the Hindu and Christian traditions agree on the reality and finality of bodily death—that the human person at some point in life on earth ceases permanently to live in material nature. Our bodies stop existing—material nature "dies"—it loses its mental functioning, ability to will and to act, vital energy, and eventually decomposes. There are also essential parallels between traditions concerning the aspect of the person that survives bodily death: the soul. Vivekananda recognizes that Hindus posit an uncreated soul (or a soul which has no *initial* creation or which is beginninglessly created) while Christians claim the creation of the soul by an uncreated God out of nothing, which, as we will see, Vivekananda criticizes. But he observes a general and common transformative dynamic at the core of these traditions: "We find that all religions teach the eternity of the soul, as well as that its lustre has been dimmed, and that its primitive purity is to be regained by the knowledge of God.…The end of all religions is the realising of God in the soul" (*CW* 1: 322, 324).[4]

While most contemporary philosophers define the soul as the mind or the ego of the person,[5] Vedāntic and Roman Catholic philosophers and theologians regard it differently. Vivekananda refers to the eternal soul as the "real Self" of the person—the *ātman*—whose essence is absolute existence, consciousness, and bliss and which gives to the physically embodied person her or his "powers and luminosity" (*CW* 2: 216). The soul animates the "subtle body" (*sūkṣma-śarīra*) and the physical body (*sthūla-śarīra*), and it is that to which they are ultimately orientated. But those aspects of the *jīva* (vital, living being) are not the soul (*ātman*). He writes: "Behind the intelligence is the Self of man, the Purusha, the Atman, the pure, the perfect, who alone is the seer, and for whom is all this change" (*CW* 2: 438). The subtle body—what Vivekananda calls the "finer body of man" (*CW* 2: 438)—is the source of the mind and ego. In reference to Sāṃkhya anthropology, he writes: "The mind, the self-consciousness, the organs, and the vital forces compose the fine body or sheath…that incarnates and reincarnates" (*CW* 2: 456). The subtle body is substantially affected by the intellectual and moral thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and actions of the embodied person. It is molded by the quality of life experiences and energies that a person

[4] No doubt Vivekananda is aware that Buddhism does not fit this rhetorical generalization of his lecture here, though the *Pudgalavādin*s were an exception—a popular tradition for about the first thousand years of Buddhism that posited a soul.

[5] For example, Swinburne speaks of "immaterial subjects of [pure] mental properties. They have sensations and thoughts, desires and beliefs and perform intentional actions" (1997: 333).

undertakes—by *karma* (action and its effects)—as she or he moves forward in freedom towards the religious ideal of *mokṣa*—final spiritual liberation.[6]

Most modern Vedāntins would seem to agree on this general anthropological outline. This subtle body is the container of the uncompounded essence of the person (*jīva*), which provides the life powers of the physical body: vital energy, sensory awareness, will, and lower and higher mind functioning, including a person's intellectual, moral and spiritual qualities.[7] The core or seed of the subtle body is the causal body (*kāraṇa-śarīra*), the kernel of one's personal traits and tendencies. Swami Abhedānanda speaks of it as "nothing but a minute germ of a living substance. It contains the invisible particles of matter which are held together by vital force, and it also possesses mind or thought-force in a potential state" (1902: 3). In Vedānta and Hinduism in general, the *ātman*—enveloped or sheathed by the subtle body—survives physical death. Moreover, the moral/spiritual condition of the subtle body provides the compass for the direction of afterlife contexts. Anantanand Rambachan writes: "At the time of death, the essential self (*ātman*), clothed with the subtle body, embarks on a journey, the destiny of which is determined by its acquired merits and demerits, its desires, tendencies, and capacities" (1997: 84, also 72–74). No doubt Vivekananda would agree with this statement—at least in the sense of our current nonliberated and provisionally limited conceptions of the process.

As we will see, similar conceptions of afterlife dynamics are present in Roman Catholic teachings, despite some differences in ideas concerning the makeup of the person. Figure A provides an outline of this comparative anthropology, which highlights correspondences and variants. Roman Catholic theology also espouses a tripartite anthropology, depicting the person as constituted by a corporeal body, soul, and spirit. The 1992/1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the soul as the "innermost aspect" of a person or "the depths of one's being" (1994: 363, 367), so we can see clear parallels with the Vedāntic subtle body, as the essential character or core of the personality. Roman Catholic perspectives also stress the soul's primary role as an instrument of "spirit." Spirit is the divine element or energy that underlies human nature, so it seems to parallel, at least structurally, the Vedāntic *ātman*, which is enveloped by the subtle body. But there are significant divergences. The *Catechism* characterizes spirit as indicating how a person is ordered towards a supernatural ideal, as that power which raises the soul gratuitously "to communion with God" (1994: 367). So we can speak of spirit as that aspect of the Divine that touches, affects, and colors an individual soul, insofar as a person becomes open to its influence, unites with it, and appropriates the divine energy into her or his consciousness and activity. But, as we will see in the next section, in contrast to the ideal integrative union of soul/body/God in Christian doctrine, in Vivekananda's hierarchical nondual Vedānta, the soul (*ātman*) ultimately transcends the subtle and physical bodies.

[6] The *Vedāntaparibhāṣā* states: "[The subtle body] helps (the soul's) passage to other worlds and lasts till liberation.…The subtle body…is called the ego" (Mādhavānanda 1972: 164).

[7] Abhedānanda writes: "This center is called in Sanskrit *Sûkshma Sarîra* or the subtle body of an individual. The subtle germ of life or, in other words, the invisible center of thought-forces, will manufacture a physical vehicle for expressing the latent powers that are ready for manifestation" (1902: 78).

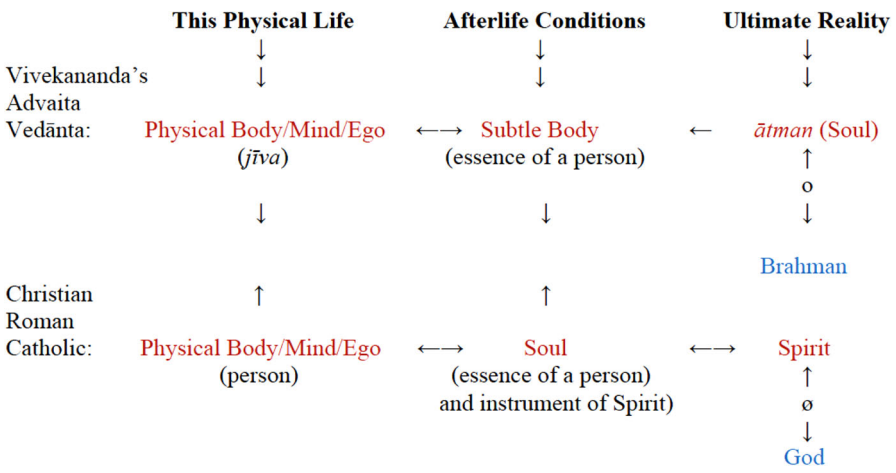

Figure A Comparative Anthropology

Schooled in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein (Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) (1891–1942) was a Jewish-Christian philosopher-theologian who immersed herself in the scholasticism of Saint Thomas Aquinas in the nineteen-twenties and wrote extensively on Christian anthropology after her baptism in the Roman Catholic Church (Stein 2000).[8] She is roughly contemporary with Vivekananda and her anthropological views are clearly developed and very helpful in illustrating the formal teachings of the *Catechism* on the soul, comparing them with modern Vedāntic thought, and relating them to eschatology and to modern hereditary theory. She is an ideal figure for this comparative study. She characterizes the soul as a "vessel into which flows the spirit of God (i.e., the life of grace) if the soul by virtue of its freedom opens itself to the vital influx" (Stein 2002: 445). She differentiates a "*body-soul* power" (Stein 2002: 425; emphasis in the original), which forms matter into a living body and provides the "life-force" and movement energy for living organisms, and those instantiated qualities that give the soul its uniqueness or "*personal particularity*," beyond its universal spiritual essence—that is, its psychic components (432 [emphasis in the original], 370–71). These core vital and psychic elements correspond in ways with the Vedāntic subtle body, but they are derived from and are ideally influenced by the soul's connection with spirit. Stein writes, "The soul is spirit [*spiritus*] in its innermost essence or nature, and this spirit nature underlies the actual deployment of all its *powers* (faculties)" (2002: 460; emphasis in the original). Spirit for Stein is that aspect of the person which brings value and meaning to one's existence. Spirit connects the soul to God—at least the soul is potentially ordinated by

[8] Stein's published works include substantial sections on Thomistic scholasticism, and she translated his *Quaestiones Disputatae Veritate*. Although she shows deep respect for this tradition, her philosophical theology is also colored by her phenomenological background and she disagrees with Thomas on some matters—for example, she claims that memory is a faculty of the soul, that creation is an image of God and not just a vestige, that angels are not pure forms, and that matter is not the principle of individuation (Maskulak 2007: 10–11, 75, 81, 20n64). I note also that Pope John Paul II, who promulgated the *Catechism* in 1992, was influenced by phenomenology.

spirit towards God, and so the *Catechism* speaks of the soul as the "*spiritual principle*" in a person (1994: 363; emphasis added).

In Stein's Roman Catholic perspective, the soul is a unique center of freedom, consciousness, and intentionality. It is the underlying self of the person that is associated with spiritual realities that pertain to values, meaning, and moral feeling. This corresponds closely to characteristics given to the Vedāntic subtle body, even if the sense of the source of personal spirit is different in the Christian context and the subtle body is not eternal. The soul is stimulated and moves towards its redemptive fruition insofar as a person instantiates these values through her or his sensation, thought, feeling, will, and action in the world. Although pure spirit does not undergo change, in interaction with matter the soul attains to its essential form—"attains to its final structural formation and firm contour" (Stein 2002: 429). She speaks of an unfolding and "formation" of the soul (429): "the life of the soul compels a constant reckoning and coming to terms (*Auseinandersetzung*) with the external world. And body and soul are being formed in these encounters" (425, also 432). Again, this corresponds to the way in which the individual character is molded spiritually in modern Vedāntic thought, in terms of karmic action and fruits, which I will say more about below. Integrated with the subtle body, the physical body situates people in a social environment where they can learn and develop—intellectually, morally, and spiritually—in positive movement towards ultimate liberation.

Similarly, the values of the soul in Roman Catholic theology are instantiated and transform and grow through a person's positive life choices and experiences in the world—as the soul unfolds and is formed (Stein 2002: 432, 425). At the end of life, the body, given its physical constitution and the laws of nature, dies and decomposes—it ceases to exist in a radically final way. However, like the *ātman* in modern Advaita Vedāntic thought (which is clothed with the subtle body), the Christian soul is also eternal; and, as the essence of the incarnated person—like the Advaita Vedāntic subtle body—it provides the compass for the direction of afterlife contexts. Revised to reflect Roman Catholic anthropology, we can perhaps accurately echo Rambachan's depiction of the course of the Vedāntic afterlife, which I quoted above: "At the time of death, the [Christian soul in spirit or the Vedāntic] essential self (*ātman*), clothed with the subtle body, embarks on a journey, the destiny of which is determined by its acquired merits and demerits, its desires, tendencies, and capacities."

Afterlife Possibilities: Vedāntic Heavens, Hells, and *Mokṣa*

Both religious traditions claim that the underlying spiritual core of the person continues to exist in afterlife contexts that are determined by the desires, intentions, and actions of the person in her or his previous life (or lives). Vivekananda writes of *devayāna*—the path of the deities of nature and heaven (what he calls "solar regions")—where existence takes a "Deva form" and the subtle body does not accumulate karmic effects, but experiences only heavenly pleasures and powers as a consequence of the prior merit (*CW* 1: 397–400). Hindu tradition includes fantastic speculation on such regions, as well as paths and realms of ancestors (*pitṛyāna*) and of both good and evil spirits (*bhūta*s) which influence one's experience. The Purāṇas

also imagine conditions of various kinds of intense suffering in many regions of hell (*naraka*), which Vivekananda also mentions in his account of dualistic Vedānta (*CW* 2: 319), corresponding to a wide variety of specific misdeeds, such as disrespecting elders, stealing, arms making, drinking alcohol, and mass murder. In the *Bhagavadgītā* (16.21), Kṛṣṇa speaks more generally of "Desire—Anger—Greed" as the "triple gate of hell" (Zaehner 1969: 99).

In most Vedāntic speculation concerning various regions of the afterlife, both of suffering and pleasure, the subtle body of the person is destined to return to our physical world in a corporeal reincarnation, once these effects of negative and/or positive *karma* are exhausted, except in the orthodox view of Dvaita Vedānta, where *jīva*s who are utterly evil are "cast" into eternal *naraka*s, to experience "untold misery for all time" (Tapasyānanda 1990: 177). This is a view also referenced in the *Agni Purāṇa*, and which clearly resembles traditional Roman Catholic teaching on this topic, as we will see below. Also, dualistic Vedānta teaches that there is no rebirth from the "highest heaven" (*brahmaloka*)—the world of Brahmā the creator—"where," Vivekananda writes, "the Jiva lives eternally, no more to be born or to die" (*CW* 1: 398). Some traditional Advaita Vedāntins conceived of this realm as supportive of further spiritual insight of devotees, where this theistic afterlife context leads them eventually to experience nondual liberation. Rambachan writes of "a path of gradual liberation (*krama-mukti*)": "Such individuals abide in the world of *brahmaloka*, where they continue their spiritual journeys and come to understand God as the sole reality that transcends all human definitions and characteristics and ultimately non-different from the fundamental human self (*ātman*)" (1997: 81). Vivekananda suggests rather that, for the dualist Vedāntin, the person simply "goes to Brahmaloka and comes back no more" (*CW* 1: 400). "The only deathless place is Brahmaloka, where alone there is no birth and death" (*CW* 1: 399). But he insists in this lecture that this dualistic perspective is transcended by the "Advaitist or the qualified Advaitist": "Next comes the higher Vedantic philosophy which says, that this cannot be" (*CW* 2: 253, 1: 400). Vivekananda goes on to outline the hierarchical movement of Vedānta, from dual to "qualified monism," which "represents a higher stage of religious development," where, he writes, the "real…Vedanta philosophy begins" and moves forward to culminate in the ultimate form of nondual *moksa*: "These are the three steps which Vedanta philosophy has taken, and we cannot go any further, because we cannot go beyond unity" (*CW* 1: 401, 355, 403, also 2: 245–49, 252–53, 413–14, 430–31).

Here Vivekananda is explicitly maintaining a traditional Advaitic hierarchy, where the person experiences freedom from all egocentric characteristics in liberating intuition, as her or his subtle body "merges into the subtle elements," and the personal individuality of the subtle body is transcended in Self-realization of *ātman* as Brahman (Rambachan 1997: 82). Vivekananda writes of this nondual *mokṣa*: "You, as body, mind, or soul, are a dream, but what you really are, is Existence, Knowledge, Bliss. You are the God of this universe. You are creating the whole universe and drawing it in. Thus says the Advaitist" (*CW* 1: 403). Although there is evidence in his later thought of a shifting to an egalitarian Vedāntic pluralism under the influence of Ramakrishna's integral Vijñāna Vedānta, which I will discuss below in the conclusion of this article, Vivekananda here espouses philosophically "the highest Advaitic ideal of 'bodilessness'—that is, the total

dissolution of one's individuality in the impersonal nondual Brahman" (Medhananda 2022: 88, also 87).[9] Clearly, Vivekananda characterizes Advaita Vedānta (associated with *jñāna yoga*) as a condition of nondual identity which transcends the individual person, even if he eventually claims that other forms of Vedānta (associated with *rāja*, *bhakti*, and *karma yoga*) also have their own salvific force. In theistic Christianity, in contrast to *mokṣa* in modern Advaitic *jñāna*, the religious ideal is the transformation, and thereby the *fulfilment*, of the person as body, mind, and soul, and not transcendence. The current life of people—fragmented by past, present, and future in time—is *completed* and *perfected* in the beatific vision of eternal life.[10] Life, given as a "gratuitous gift" from God, provides the redemptive context for people to recover and heal from sin—from their isolation and separation from God—and develop towards a condition of final and permanent blessedness in joy, love, and wisdom.

Afterlife Possibilities: Catholic Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell in Dialogue with Vedānta

In experiencing Catholic heaven, the soul first enters eternal life in an intermediate state, separated from the body which has died and ceased to exist and which, because of the absence of the body, is regarded as being in an unnatural state. Ultimately, at the end of time, with the general resurrection of the dead, the soul will

[9] Malkovsky argues that Vivekananda advocates an Advaitic goal of nondual experience within a hierarchical framework of spirituality that situates what I would call nonmystical and doctrinally focused "Christianity alongside [Madhva's] Dvaita" (1998: 224). Nevertheless, Vivekananda acknowledges that, experientially, Christian devotionalism can lead to Advaitic realizations and he sees Jesus as "God incarnate" and as advocating a nondual ideal (Malkovsky 1998: 227). Mahadevan (1967: 73), Rolland (1970: 219–20), and other scholars agree with this assessment of Vivekananda's Advaitic inclusivism. Gregg insists that, within his framework of types of *yoga*, Vivekananda "valorised *Advaita* (a non-dualist Hindu tradition) and devalued aspects of Hinduism that were associated with what Vivekananda perceived to be 'low levels' of spiritual awareness, such as *Gauni Bhakti* (theistic devotion)" (2019: 1). In his inclusivism, Gregg argues that "Vivekananda understood his formulation of *Vedanta* to be universal, applying it freely to non-Hindu traditions" (2019: 1, also 18, 126). More recently, Medhananda (2022) has proposed a very interesting thesis that there was a diachronic "*evolution* in Vivekananda's thinking about the harmony of religions" (129; emphasis in the original), wherein he moved from an inclusivist Advaitic hierarchical stance, which he held only for a brief time from 1894–95, before reconceiving "the Vedāntic universal religion as a pluralistic framework based on the four Yogas" (129), each of which—"Yoga, Bhakti, Jnana, or–selfless work" (*CW* 6: 182)—is equally conducive to the salvific realization of "Infinite Divine Reality in some form or aspect" (Medhananda 2022: 123). Long also reads Vivekananda this way—as holding that none of these spiritual paths are superior to each other—where the apparent inconsistencies on this issue are "a function of the audience that each master was addressing at a given time" (2008: 62). Medhananda associates this egalitarian pluralistic framework with the influence of Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta on Vivekananda's thought, which I will discuss below in the conclusion of this article.

[10] This view of spiritual development of the soul in Christianity would seem to parallel somewhat Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita perspective. Medhananda writes: "For Rāmānuja, the soul is 'contracted' (*saṅkucita*) in a state of ignorance but gradually expands through spiritual practice and God's grace. For Śaṅkara by contrast, the soul is always identical with nondual Brahman in its essence but fails to realize its divine nature due to ignorance (what Vivekananda here calls 'delusion')" (2022: 70). See also footnote 12 below.

be reunited with the body, which will be recreated or resurrected, in the completion and fulfillment of all persons. Meanwhile, the soul in heaven—even apart from the body—enjoys the "perfect" and "full beatitude of the intuitive vision of God" (International Theological Commission 1992: Section 5.4). Indeed, it is this soul—which has been transfigured in spirit—that will transform the individual's recreated body in the final resurrection into a spiritual and "glorified" body, as they are reunited together. At Christ's *parousia*—His second coming—the resurrected body will be an incorruptible and eternal body that is transformed or shaped by spirit, in an integrated and wholly fulfilled person, living communally in a spiritually infused and transformed material world.[11]

This Christian ideal reflects in interesting ways both certain aspects of the sense of *brahmaloka* mentioned above and even an account that Vivekananda gives of the spiritual ideal of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta—qualified nondualism.[12] In Vivekananda's hierarchical account of Advaita Vedānta, however, the subtle body is transcended in

[11] Stein observes: "We can conceive of a bodily corporeality [*Leiblichkeit*] which does not weight down the spirit but rather serves it as an absolutely pliable instrument and medium of self-expression. In such a way we picture the state of the first human beings prior to the fall and the state of the blessed after the resurrection of the body" (2002: 392).

[12] Vivekananda writes: "Similarly, the whole universe, comprising all nature and an infinite number of souls, is, as it were, the infinite body of God. He is interpenetrating the whole of it. He alone is unchangeable, but nature changes, and soul changes.…All these souls were pure, but they have become contracted; through the mercy of God, and by doing good deeds, they will expand and recover their natural purity.…There are God, soul, and nature, and soul and nature form the body of God, and, therefore, these three form one unit" (*CW* 1: 401). So Vivekananda's account of Viśiṣṭādvaita parallels the sense of the spiritual development of the soul in Roman Catholicism. However, there seem to be three major differences between Viśiṣṭādvaita and Roman Catholic anthropology, along with some significant correspondences. According to Viśīṣṭadvaita (1.3.4.a–b), (i) all *ātman*s are ultimately "the equal of God" and have "the same form" as each other (Van Buitenen 1968: 95). Tapasyānanda (1990) writes, they "all are of the same nature of consciousness and bliss" (58), and in liberation they share in God's inward consciousness, "blissful nature," "soul-nature," and "agency" (55); (ii) the ideal condition of *mokṣa* transcends the physical and subtle bodies—in *mokṣa* the "body will fall"; and (iii) the "liberated ones" will receive "the new spiritual body of Śuddha-sattva [pure light]" (59). Still, I should note that, despite those elements of "qualitative sameness" between God and liberated *jīva*s, the *ātman*s also differ from God in their monadic nature or individual "centre of consciousness"—"Aṇutva"—and in their role as subordinate mode and "dependant accessory" of God (Tapasyānanda 1990: 58), becoming God's "instruments of service" or remaining "absorbed in the bliss of Brahman" (59). Moreover, it does appear that new spiritual bodies are intimately connected or related to the previous subtle bodies—where "their atomic nature (Aṇutva) remains, distinguishing them from the Infinity (Anantam) that God is" (Tapasyānanda 1990: 59). In Roman Catholic eschatology, the discarnate soul, transfigured by the unitive vision of God, will be reunited with the body, which will be recreated or resurrected into a spiritually transformed and glorified body. Does this recreated body/soul parallel the "new spiritual body of Śuddha-sattva"? Moreover, the thoughts, will, and actions of the incarnate *jīva* clearly play a significant role in the movement to religious liberation. So there seem to be interesting correspondences between the two traditions concerning (i) the transformative movements to the spiritual ideal, (ii) the nature of the liberated soul-body, and (iii) the devotional service of it, in union with God, even if Viśiṣṭādvaita claims the reception of a "new" soul-body and an ideal merging with God that goes beyond the sense of Christian union, as well as the transcendence of the physical body in spiritual liberation. Moreover, there are (iv) interesting similarities in the relation between God and nature, especially with certain mystical streams in Christianity. For example, Van Buitenen comments that "the prakriti is a prakāra [aspect] of the Supreme Brahman who pervades, directs and animates it" (1968: 35), while Stein "broadens…the mystical body [of Christ] to embrace all of creation," and not just people and angels, where "grace flows from Christ into all creatures," as Maskulak observes (2007: 119). See also footnotes 10 above and 26 below

a Self-realization *identified* with ultimate Reality; in Christian redemption, the soul participates intimately in the divine nature—is united with God in "an intuitive vision" of "the divine essence," "without the mediation of any creature" (*Catechism* 1994: 1726, 1023). But the soul is not identical with God, even if Christ is said to have come to live "in" the person who has been crucified with Him (Galatians 2:20). I will return to these topics of *mokṣa* and the Christian ideal of heaven in dialogue with *saṃsāra* (cycle of rebirth) below. Moreover, as I said, Vivekananda's view of *mokṣa* is complicated by the influence of his teacher Ramakrishna concerning *vijñāna* experiences of both personal and impersonal Brahman, beyond that of traditional Advaitic *jñāna*, which I will also draw into discussion in the conclusion. However, in creative comparison with the Hindu senses of heaven and hell mentioned above, we should turn to highlight the Christian doctrines of purgatory and hell.

The ideal of Christian heaven is only understood as the culmination of the transformative dynamic begun and undergone in this lifetime—through various spiritual practices and by learning and growing in the Christian virtues and becoming open to the redemptive power of Christ and the Holy Spirit, which applies to everyone, with the exceptions of Jesus and Mary, including the saints. The fact that so many people appear to fall short and seem unable to fulfil completely the transformative ideal in this life has led in Roman Catholicism to the postulation of "purgatory," with its common traditional practice of praying for the dead and ideas of spiritual intercession. This is from the Latin *purgatorium* ("purifier")—in reference to an interim afterlife realm for people who at death still require further integral purification. By the late twelfth century, theologians began to stress in the depictions of purgatory a very harsh retributive punishment in a temporary realm where extreme suffering cleanses one of the effects of sins that remain at death. Contemporary theologians call this the "satisfaction" model of purgatory (Walls 2012: especially 59–91).

There is no danger of regression to an eternal hell in purgatory—the person has experienced redemptive transformation but remains unable to surrender fully or to participate perfectly in the eternal union—so Christian purgatory would seem to correspond closely to the typical Hindu senses of temporary *naraka*, outlined above. Traditionally the idea was simply that the experience of extreme suffering prepared one for heaven. It was illustrated in vivid and influential ways by writers such as Dante Alighieri in the thirteenth century, who structures the dynamic in a wildly imaginative narrative around extremely severe punishments specific to the seven deadly sins—pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust (Alighieri 1955). This corresponds with the imaginative account of varied punishments in the Purāṇas briefly mentioned above, in proposing similar realms of deep affliction ideally suitable for the exhaustion of negative *karma*. Through profound suffering, one experiences and eventually clears the effects of the demerit accrued in her or his previous life, while some traditional Christian contexts speak of a debt satisfaction theory of sin.

The current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tends to downplay such stresses on painful avenging retribution in purgatory, in emphasizing a dynamic of reformative and transformative maturation or purification, to become fully receptive to the

divine Presence. It seems to have shifted more to a "sanctification" model of purgatory. Contemporary theologians tend to depict it as a *process* of transforming purification, rather than a *place* of strictly retributive punishment (Malkovsky 2017; Rahner 1978: 431–47).[13] Concerns have also been raised by some theologians with regards to the absence of free will and contributions of the person to the sanctifying dynamics of purgatory. I like also to think of it as a realm most suitable for the compassionate healing of very traumatic destructive suffering that many people undergo in this life, a possibility that was not mentioned in traditional accounts, given the emphasis on very harsh retributive punishment as somehow making up for past misdeeds. Hindu beliefs concerning various temporary heavenly spheres perhaps support such compassionate directions in afterlife speculation—where we can imagine in Christian purgatory periods of rest, rejuvenation, positive support, and even pleasure, in response to incredibly debilitating traumas undergone in this life, depending on a person's life experiences, qualities, and conditions. I will return below to issues related to the emphasis on harshly retributive punishment in traditional eschatology, in dialogue with Hindu conceptions of rebirth. But I will now turn to the idea of hell in Roman Catholic contexts, where traditional conceptions parallel ideas in Madhva's Dvaita Vedānta, which I briefly mentioned above.

Traditionally in Christian conceptions, certain perversely and obstinately evil persons will be punished eternally, existing forever in a realm of extreme suffering for their misdeeds, over and against those in purgatory and heavenly beatific union. So we see an immediate contrast with conceptions in modern nondual Vedānta, which I also described above, where hells are always temporary realms for expiating evil *karma* via suffering experiences—functioning like traditional Christian conceptions of purgatory. Mentioned a few times in the synoptic gospels as "*Gehenna*," the sense of an eternal hell has always been a controversial concept in Christian theology—with scripture itself ambiguous about its temporary or permanent condition (Hart 2019: 93–102, 119). Though formally pronounced, it was rejected by some early and later theologians because of its apparent contradiction of divine compassion and for implicating God as callous or cruel or even sadistic.

There have also been concerns raised about eternal conditions of retributive suffering being determined by temporal contexts. Ankur Barua summarizes the rejection of eternal damnation in modern Advaita Vedānta: "no aggregation of finite human errors can be commensurate with everlasting punishment" (2017: 5). In

[13] Ratzinger writes: "Purgatory is not, as Tertullian thought, some kind of supra-worldly concentration camp where man is forced to undergo punishment in a more or less arbitrary fashion. Rather is it the inwardly necessary process of transformation in which a person becomes capable of Christ, capable of God, and thus capable of unity with the whole communion of saints" (1988: 230). Malkovsky stresses the more "personalist" and "mystical" focus of the sanctification model: "The satisfaction model has, until recently, been the one more emphasized by Roman Catholicism, but nowadays Catholic theologians, including the late Pope John Paul II, have begun articulating the doctrine of purgatory in more personalistic terms, describing the spiritual transformation that takes place after death when the human person finds herself in the unmediated presence of a personal God of infinite purity, love, mercy, and truth. This more personalistic or even mystical understanding of purgatory is, then, the position expressed by the sanctification model" (2017: 8–9).

contrast, some Christian theologians have advocated universal salvation (*apocatastasis*)—the idea that all people and even fallen angels would experience the beatific vision in union with God at the end of time.[14] As we will see, universal salvation is the popular position in modern nondual Vedānta. The main supporting argument in Christian contexts is that God's infinite goodness, love, and power will ensure the redemption of all creation. Typically, in such views, traditional ideas of purgatory become extended to include multiple planes and complex possibilities of transformative dynamics—further "soul-making" opportunities in other afterlife realms of existence—to ensure our redemptive conversion and union with God.

The problems with scenarios of universal salvation are that they seem to deny the ultimate authenticity of human freedom and even to introduce a coercive element to eternal beatitude or liberation. In Christian anthropology, freedom is one of the most essential components of human nature, which brings tremendous dignity to the person. By supposing that God's grace will secure the spiritual conversion of *all* of humanity, one seems to be undermining hard truths about the nature of freedom and God's respect for human autonomy. David Bentley Hart disagrees, arguing that "freedom" in Christian anthropology is always contextualized "according to a divine design, after the divine image, [and] oriented toward a divine purpose," where fulfillment requires human perfection "in union with God" (2019: 172). So, for Hart, choosing against God in a *permanent* fashion is a logical contradiction—given the very nature of the person in created relation to God—where individual freedom functions within what he calls a "divine determinism toward the transcendent Good" (2019: 178). However, some theologians have suggested that human freedom is more radical—where God allows even for a freedom where a person can actually "will" her or his own created destiny (however destructive to self and others that might be)—overriding their natural fulfillment in the divine life.[15] This would give human beings a more substantial cooperative role in their redemptive *theosis* (deification) than Hart seems to have in mind, accentuating the inherent dignity of the person and the profound gravity of the ideal. Why cannot a person freely choose against God forever? Does not authentic freedom mean that a person might choose permanently to participate in evil? So, apologists argue, one must postulate at least the possibility of hell.

[14] For example, Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389 CE), Gregory of Nyssa (330–395 CE), and Ambrose (339–397 CE), following the influential lead of Origen of Alexandria (184–253 CE). See influential contemporary developments by Hick (1976) and Hart's (2019) more recent analytic critique of the traditional Christian doctrine of hell and his passionate apology for universal salvation.

[15] Jakob Böhme (1648) provides a detailed account of the nature of this radical freedom in his treatment of human participation in the primary divine creative "will"—the mysterious and magical source of creation's vitalism, which arises in the theogonic movements of the first person of the Trinity from the *Ungrund* of the Divine Essence. Boehme suggests that human beings are able in their fundamental freedom that is associated with this primary creative will to refuse to participate in the redemptive movements of the second and third Persons of the Trinity, in creating and working towards extremely self-oriented and self-isolating ideals, quite apart from what would bring them spiritual fulfillment and ultimate happiness (Stoeber 1992: 143–64). Also, at a vividly practical level, Dostoevsky (2011) illustrates the radically free human movement towards hell through certain characters in his novels, most fully and powerfully with Pavel Fyodorovich Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov* (Stoeber 2015: 257–62).

Along this line of thinking of hell as possible, some contemporary Christian theologians have pointed out that we do not actually know if anyone has or will permanently remove themselves to such a condition. Karl Rahner (1978: 435) speaks of eternal heaven as a statement of fact and permanent hell as a statement of possibility. Hans Urs Von Balthasar writes of an "obligation" to hope for universal salvation—that love "cannot do otherwise than to hope for the reconciliation of all [people] in Christ," regardless of the possibility of hell (1988: 213; Denny 2013: 555). Certainly, God initially wills all people to be saved—while Hart emphasizes further how creation *ex nihilo* means that "the moral destiny of creation and the moral nature of God are absolutely inseparable" (2019: 69). As Peter Phan characterizes this "renewed theology of hope" in contemporary eschatology: "Such a hope is not an idle posture but constitutes a moral imperative to act in such a way that all will be saved" (1994: 531, 532). Although the nature of radical freedom means that a truly autonomous being might permanently choose against God, we need to hope, think, and act as if all will be saved in God's healing power. This seems quite a significant qualification to traditional Christian views of hell.

Despite the significance of freedom in supporting the possibility of a permanent hell, we still have concerns about conceiving of God as actively inflicting very extreme pain of an eternal nature. I will return to issues surrounding traditional conceptions of such radical affliction in relation to doctrines of rebirth below. But in this case, if hell is eternal, then there are no further opportunities for the kind of restoration and transformation that is associated with the reformative punishment that occurs in purgatory. Again, the problem is that God appears to be callous or cruel or perhaps even sadistic, insofar as God is overseeing a context of eternal suffering for some people that is depicted as most extreme. This has led some theologians to hypothesize what they have called "extinction," "annihilationism," or "conditional immortality." Rather than a state of eternal punishing by God, this eschatological terminalism postulates a return to the state of nonexistence, thus ending their suffering (Gregg 2013: 12).[16] In such views, "eternal punishment" means extinction rather than permanent suffering—a position also espoused in Dvaita Vedānta.[17]

However, some Christian theologians have qualified the traditional notion of an eternal hell in ways that view afterlife suffering as self-imposed, rather than something continuously inflicted by God forever. That is to say, if a person were truly destined to an eternal hell, it is a condition that she or he would create for her or himself—in steadfastly refusing to be open to others and to God in love. Hell requires that one willfully, permanently, close oneself off from the transformative movement in communal love. Such a person chooses to remain in an isolated

[16] It is interesting how some interpretations of scriptural passages would seem to support the belief in such conditional immortality, for example, Matthew 10:28: "be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna"; and Romans 2:12: "All who sin outside the law will also perish without reference to it" (*New American Bible* 1987: 1076, 1265).

[17] Tapasyānanda writes: "The Tamo-yogyas [*jīva*s who become essentially evil]…wallow in sin until whatever capacity of consciousness and bliss there is in them is completely effaced and they are reduced to inertness characteristic of material substances.…[This means] the complete effacement of the specific characteristics of the Jīva" (1990: 177).

condition of radically distorted narcissistic self-absorption, disconnected from all positive values and actions which would bring to them healing, meaning, and self-fulfillment. The *Catechism* describes it as a "state of…self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed…[where the] chief punishment…is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs" (1994: 1033, 1035). From the perspective of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, in the second century Saint Irenaeus (1994: 556) conceived of hell in this way, as a bringing upon oneself this sense of self-exclusion—of permanently refusing in one's radical essential autonomy to surrender oneself to healing, transformative light and love. Drawing on the theology of Nicolas A. Berdyaev, Valentin Tomberg summarises this fundamental choice: "no one 'sends' us anywhere—freedom not being a theatre. It is we ourselves who make the choice. Love existence, and you have chosen heaven; hate it, and there you have chosen hell.…For to live without love—this is hell. And to live without love in the region of eternity—this is to live in eternal hell" (Anonymous 1985: 83, 180).

These qualifications to Roman Catholic conceptions of hell show how God might be distanced from traditional criticisms, which accuse God of overly vengeful or sadistic actions. The suffering is largely self-induced and perhaps not as intensely incapacitating as the immense tortures envisioned by Dante and other influential writers on the theme. Given the significance and scope of human freedom, there is the possibility of a person choosing permanently against the spiritual ideals of divine love, light, and goodness, a condition of radical self-isolation that is permitted by an all-powerful Being out of respect for a person's essential dignity, even if one genuinely hopes for universal salvation. Moreover, I am wondering if such qualified visions of hell perhaps begin to parallel more Hindu claims of an eternal condition of *māyā*—rather than creative accounts of the incredible horrors of traditional *naraka*—where one imagines some *jīva*s in their essential freedom never experiencing *mokṣa*, choosing in their ignorance forever to deny their essential nature as absolute existence, consciousness, and bliss, in permanently enduring the sufferings of *māyā*. This is the perspective of Dvaita Madhvites, who speak of the destiny of certain "*nitya-samsāri*s" ("worldlings"), who in their freedom remain "ever entrenched in their sense of independence and worldly attachments," so are forever engrossed in *māyā* (Tapasyānanda 1990: 177). And in cases of modern Vedāntic philosophers who advocate universal liberation, like Vivekananda, Abhedānanda, and Ramakrishna,[18] one might raise the question of the authentic status of freedom in such conceptions of *karma-saṃsāra*. Why could a *jīva* not choose forever to remain suffering in ignorance in *māyā*? Perhaps it is possible that all *jīva*s might develop sufficiently for liberation through prolonged life experiences—and surely a Vedāntin ought to hope for such an ideal—as in the case of Christians who hope for universal heavenly beatitude. But it also seems possible to

[18] Vivekananda claims: "Maya is eternal both ways, taken universally, as genus; but it is non-eternal individually"; "every soul must eventually come to salvation" (*CW* 5: 317, 2: 242); Abhedānanda writes "[Vedānta] holds that each individual will become perfect like Jesus or Buddha or like the Father in heaven and manifest divinity either in this life or in some other" (1902: 81); Ramakrishna insists: "All will surely realize God. All will be liberated.…All, without any exception, will certainly know their real Self" (cited in Maharaj 2018: 264).

me that some might never experience the religious ideal, given the radical nature of human freedom.

Reincarnation: Memory and Destructive and Innocent Suffering

This brings us to our final comparative afterlife theme: *saṃsāra*—the cycle of rebirth. Traditionally in Vedānta, rebirth is depicted as a moral system of punishment and reward between different life incarnations that is determined by a principle of causation with respect to moral thoughts, attitudes, and actions. The idea follows from the obvious sense in which we recognize how our moral character develops or regresses through the way in which our valuative choices are conscientiously considered and acted upon in our social life experiences. In karmic theory, ethical attitudes and doings of past lives have "residues" that are played out either in one's present life (*prārabdhakarman*) or remain latent until a future incarnation (*sañcitakarman*), while an individual's current moral contexts and movements will accumulate further effects (*sañcīyamāna* or *āgamin karma*), positive or negative.

Karl H. Potter describes the technical dynamics, which would seem to reflect Vivekananda's view: "As karmic residues mature they are influenced by what are called 'impressions' (*vāsanā*s) to determine the way in which the karmic potentials will in fact be worked out, the kind of experience (*bhoga*) that will accrue to the agent in consequence, and the future karmic residues that will be laid down by the act(s) so determined" (1981: 23). Vivekananda writes of *samskāra*s—impressions that flow from action, where "the sum total of the Samskaras is the force which gives a man the next direction after death" (*CW* 2: 255). This is the sense that the universe is systematized in a way that our future lives become colored and structured according to our moral thoughts, attitudes, and actions. Evil done leads to the manifestation of life contexts involving suffering-filled experiences at some point or another for that specific individual, while goodness that is generated and expressed brings pleasurable experiences and positive spiritual movement towards *mokṣa*, though Vivekananda insists even positive *karma* ultimately needs to be transcended.[19] In this conception, the world is bereft of chance happenings—all of one's suffering and pleasurable experiences are a consequence of past action.

Unlike Christian conceptions of the person, there is no beginning in Hinduism for the *jīvā*—no *initial* or *first* creation, so extremely harsh and difficult life conditions can never be blamed on anything but one's own past thoughts and actions. Vivekananda writes: "There is no other way to vindicate the glory and the liberty of the human soul and reconcile the inequalities and the horrors of this world than by placing the whole burden upon the legitimate cause—our own independent actions or Karma" (*CW* 4: 270). God is not the source of our current life conditions, be they immensely brutal and difficult or extremely happy and easy, but our past thoughts and actions—which are without a first beginning—bear the sole responsibility for

[19] Vivekananda writes: "Mukti means…freedom—freedom from the bondages of good and evil.…The good tendencies have also to be conquered" (*CW* 5: 317).

our current lot. Vivekananda considers the Western theistic idea "of an infinite existence beginning in time" to be impossible; it "inevitably leads to fatalism and preordination, and instead of a Merciful Father, places before us a hideous, cruel, and an ever-angry God to worship" (*CW* 4: 268, 270). Although, as we will see, Vivekananda also situates rebirth within teleological or soul-making contexts, he defends the Vedāntic sense of rebirth on the grounds of theodicy, in proposing the theme of what might be called "retributive" rebirth to explain the harsh realities and experiences of evil and suffering. Human free will is the source of all evil in the world, and human suffering is always deserved as just punishment according to strict processes of *karma*.

Although Vivekananda is neither comprehensive nor carefully systematic in his development on this theme, he also refers to other arguments in support of rebirth, such as the uncreated nature of the soul, the human passion for life experience, and the specific dispositions, leanings, and gifts with which people are born, which, he insists, cannot be adequately explained by hereditary theory within single-life worldviews. He also begins to defend the view against traditional criticisms (*CW* 4: 257–71, 1: 317–21). I have neither the space nor narrative context here to explore the many complex issues discussed by philosophers related to the theoretical dynamics, coherence, or evidence supporting belief in rebirth and I point the reader to excellent overviews of these debates by Barua (2017) and Medhananda (2023). Rather, I will simply question the claim of the actual "justness" of the doctrine of retributive rebirth, emphasize key ideas related to views of "soul-making rebirth," and briefly explore issues connected with genetic heredity and personal identity.

First, is this retributive punishment truly "just" if a person does not have memories of their past lives? Vivekananda (*CW* 4: 269) insists that past-life memories are irrelevant to the truth or falsity of the doctrine, analogous to the way in which our lack of memory of many of our childhood experiences in this life does not mean we were not that child. This seems true. However, modern conceptions of just punishment typically require that a person remembers or be informed of their specific misdeeds, which merit a certain kind and length of punishment and enables some type of reformative context for such suffering. In response to such concerns, it seems possible that a theory of retributive rebirth might be true, even in the absence of specific memories. One might reasonably presume on the authority of venerated others or of scripture, as Vivekananda does, that "this memory does come…in that life in which [a person] will become free" via liberating insight (*CW* 2: 219, also 1: 9). Ramakrishna is cited as such an authority (Maharaj 2018: 278). Moreover, there might be good reason that most people do not remember past lives, given the confusion it might stimulate or the distraction from this-life callings, responsibilities, and moral and spiritual growth (Anonymous 1985: 93; Medhananda 2023).

However, it seems to me much harder to see how the question of just punishment can be confidently maintained in retributive rebirth given what Whitley R. P. Kaufman (2005: 21, 2007: 557) has clarified as the problem of "proportional suffering," where one wonders how extremely painful afflictions of individuals can possibly be merited by past misdeeds. Barua illustrates succinctly how Hindu apologists frame the issue around the question of perception: human beings might think that certain torments are "cruelly disproportionate," but "from the eternal

vantage-point of God…they are exactly proportionate" (2017: 6). However, there is no credible or plausible modern theory of punishment which would suggest that the savage gang rape and brutal murder of a young girl is *just* punishment for *any* misdeed in her past life, to cite just one specific counter example of "torturous" punishment. Indeed, to claim that this little girl was a rapist and torturer in her past life—hence was receiving a commensurate "eye for an eye"—which has been suggested to me by some apologists of retributive rebirth—does not reflect modern attitudes towards "torture" juridically, where typically all prisoners are treated humanely, with emphasis towards possible reformation. There is much psychological, social, and physical suffering in our world that simply must be classified as torture in theories of retributive rebirth—very brutal and extreme suffering inflicted as punishment—given the incredible destructive severity of it, yet torture is currently prohibited by international and most domestic laws, which bring into question the justice of retributive rebirth. How can torture be currently proscribed from sociomoral and political standpoints, yet justified theologically?

Vivekananda remarks that God's "infinite mercy is open to every one, at all times, in all places, under all conditions, unfailing, unswerving" (*CW* 2: 225). Christian theology tends to emphasize the infinite compassion of God as the core of Jesus's teaching. But it is hard to see how such conceptions of God are compatible with strict mechanist doctrines of retributive rebirth that advocate torture—where extremely severe pain is inflicted on someone as punishment. We have a parallel issue with that of traditional depictions of hell in Roman Catholic literature, mentioned above, which raises the specter of a kind of divine Sadism.[20] This is a troubling afterlife issue across traditions. Perhaps it is possible that a rigid and hardline system of retributive *karma* constitutes the moral fabric of our universe, but I have a hard time accepting that such extreme torture is essential to it. Much of the suffering in our world seems to be utterly destructive—where there would appear to be no positive effect from it in terms of reformation and where to understand it as punishment would require categorizing it as torture, given the amazing depth of its horror. Think of Ivan Fyodorovich Karamazov's brutalized and murdered children in his "Rebellion" in *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky 2011: 204–13). Even if we are required to presume that they are getting their *just deserts* for misdeeds done, what incredible tortures these poor children are experiencing! And think of the massively cruel maltreatment in the Jewish holocaust of the Second World War and the long history of other attempted and completed genocides.

I suspect similar concerns surrounding compassion and divine cruelty led French Jewish philosopher Simone Weil (1909–43) to articulate a principle of contingency built into the framework of creation, what she calls "necessity"—"a blind mechanism" related to the laws of the natural world and the apparently random effects of social interactions—which can impact upon people arbitrarily in deeply painful ways. Weil suggests there is a substantial "element of chance" to our lives that contributes to meaningless suffering—what she calls "affliction" (*maleur*)—extremely destructive suffering that is not associated with punishment. Affliction

[20] My argument on this theme is influenced by Soelle's development of "theological sadism" (1975: especially 22–32; Stoeber 2005: 37–39, 81–82, 100–102).

serves no positive purpose in relation to God's providence and, in the human experience of it, God appears to be wholly absent, though Weil insists that one can be rescued from these horrors by opening oneself to Christ's mystical, healing love (1998: 47, 43, 55). This sense of "necessity" gives voice to the seemingly indiscriminate nature of natural disasters, diseases, sociomoral mishaps, and radically evil actions of others that so harshly intrude upon and devastate people's lives. Is it not more plausible to think that extremely atrocious sufferings that show no apparent signs of reformative significance are chance accidents rather than torturous retributive punishments? Does such an understanding not correspond to the horror and deep sympathy that the poor victims of such immense affliction inspire in many empathetic observers? It is hard to see how one can feel genuine compassion towards a child who is slowly, mercilessly, tortured to death, when one is forced to insist that she or he is getting the punishment she *deserves* for past misdeeds, even though Hindu *dharma* clearly calls one to help those in such immense distress, no matter how viciously appalling their past behavior might be to merit such deeply profound suffering (Sharma 2008: 573).

This issue applies also to Christian theology that insists that *all* human suffering is to be understood as just punishment—theology that claims there is no utterly destructive suffering in the world. This would clearly mean that God coordinates a moral system which includes torture as punishment, which parallels exactly this issue for retributive rebirth. To cite an influential traditional example, Thomas Aquinas writes: "Augustine says, 'There are two evils of the rational creature: one by which it is voluntarily alienated from the supreme good, the other by which it is punished against its will.' Punishment and fault are expressly stated by these two [evils]. Therefore evil is divided into punishment and fault" (1995: 28). Thomas's reading has been interpreted to suggest that there is no destructive suffering—that *all* suffering is a consequence of sin (the misuse of free will) or the justified retribution for sin (punishment). However, given the incredible severity and intensity of some human suffering, this would mean that God tortures some people. In contrast, as far as I can tell, the current *Catechism* does not depict all human suffering as punishment for sin. Moreover, the *Catechism* insists that punishment always "has a medicinal [reformative] scope: as far as possible it should contribute to the correction of the offender" (1994: 2266).

I am suggesting here with Dorothee Soelle and Simone Weil that some suffering in our world might be pointless and unjustified—wholly unrelated to punishment—a matter of "necessity"—of chance happening in a soul-making environment that permits people in their freedom to commit radically destructive harm onto others and allows for phenomenon of the natural world to impact arbitrarily upon people in immensely devastating manners, such as deadly typhoons, earthquakes, and diseases.[21] From the perspective of theodicy, as I have argued in earlier writings,

[21] Weil's view here concerning "necessity" seems consistent with Jesus's apparent insistence that not all personal suffering can be attributed to punishment for the sins of an individual or for the sins of her or his ancestors: "As [Jesus] passed by he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him…'" (John 9:1–3; *New American Bible* 1987: 1203). See also Matthew 5:45 and Luke 13:1–5.

there might be no transformative dynamic which would justify such pointless or meaningless suffering for these victims, but Christians can still hope that God, spirit beings, and other people will provide healing contexts for such affliction, in this lifetime or some afterlife context, as in the case of the savage rape, torture, and murder of the little girl mentioned above. The emphasis needs to shift to reformative and redemptive restoration. "Justice has rather to do here with opportunities for healing and spiritual growth or regression within the freedom of a distinctive person in relation to the religious ideal" (Stoeber 2005: 95). From the standpoint of theodicy, in such a scenario God is not actively torturing people for their misdeeds, though it would seem God is permitting such destructive suffering for the sake of the integrity of human freedom and the dynamic interaction of natural phenomena or perhaps for reasons that we simply cannot know in our current lives.

This is not to say that much suffering in our world might not be reformative punishment and it does not mean that much very severe suffering does not have transformative effects on people. I argue that some suffering in our world is transformative, some suffering is destructive, and discerning the two in specific cases can be difficult and unclear. Sometimes apparently destructive suffering turns out much later in a person's life to have been ultimately beneficial for the person—and not meaningless at all. Certain kinds of suffering might be transformative for some people, even as it is destructive for others, depending on their individual characteristics, gifts, and responses to it (Stoeber 2005: 18–32, 60–79). Moreover, Christian faith can hope and strive for powerful healing contexts for such profound suffering, in this life and afterlife contexts, so that such meaningless suffering does not finally defeat the redemptive ideal. But some suffering appears to be utterly destructive—and serves no possible purpose we can imagine. Indeed, Arvind Sharma argues provocatively along parallel lines, that "the Indic religious tradition was not unaware" of the reality of this kind of innocent suffering within a framework of rebirth—where it was suggested that extreme affliction that happens to someone "could have *natural* causes," quite apart from the victim's previous actions (2008: 574; emphasis in the original). Sharma quotes the famous Buddhist text *Milindapañha* (100 BCE–200 CE) to illustrate this point—where the Buddha's death by dysentery must obviously be understood apart from karmic effects, as arising from natural causes in the "bile," "phlegm," "change of season," or even "stress of circumstances" (2008: 574). As Nāgasena observes, "not all feelings are born of the maturing of kamma" (Sharma 2008: 574). To what degree might modern nondual Vedāntins agree with this Buddhist account of the apparently destructive or innocent suffering of Siddhartha Gautama? Is there a place for Weil's theory of "necessity" in modern Hindu doctrines of rebirth? This seems to be the case in the *Milindapañha*.

Moreover, these concerns raised for hardline theories of retribution in both Christian and Hindu contexts with respect to torture do not mean that rebirth might not be true as a vehicle of further moral and spiritual transformation, functioning rather like the sanctification model of Roman Catholic purgatory, where the qualities of the subtle body determine the moral and spiritual situation and direction of the future incarnation, even if some life circumstances are not determined by one's past actions—where certain extremely brutal and atrocious sufferings are not

deserved. Drawing especially on the thought of Sri Aurobindo, in earlier writings I distinguished "retributive" from "teleological" doctrines of *karma*, in criticizing extreme forms of retributive rebirth, given their dangerous "social ramifications" (Stoeber 1992: 172–82). In its claims of very harsh and apparently destructive suffering as just punishment for past-life misdeeds, retributive rebirth seems disconnected from reformative punishment and "justifies inequality and inaction, and it blurs the line between compassion and condemnation" in its treatment of extreme and apparently destructive suffering (Stoeber 1992: 179).[22] Although he does not seem to advocate Weil's sense of "necessity," Aurobindo (1998: 268, 346–50, 382) speaks of rigidly mechanistic retributive views of rebirth as "superficial," in clarifying what we might call a model of "soul-making rebirth," where the crucial role of the dynamic secures that future life experiences provide opportunities for further positive movement towards the religious ideal. Along this line, Vivekananda, who influenced Aurobindo, remarks:

> 'There is another beauty in this theory—the moral motor (motive) it supplies. What is done is done. It says, "Ah, that it were done better." Do not put your finger in the fire again. Every moment is a new chance.'…The infinite future is before you, and you must always remember that each word, thought, and deed, lays up a store for you and that as the bad thoughts and bad works are ready to spring upon you like tigers, so also there is the inspiring hope that the good thoughts and deeds are ready with the power of a hundred thousand angels to defend you always and forever.…The world is a grand moral gymnasium wherein we have all to take exercise so as to become stronger and stronger spiritually (*CW* 7: 423, 2: 225, 1: 80).

Although Vivekananda grounds his theodical critique of Christianity by reference to retributive rebirth, it seems possible that one might argue that, like Aurobindo, fundamentally he is proposing a teleological framework, especially given that he espouses a view of universal salvation. Ramakrishna perhaps provides the influential root of such reflections for modern Vedānta, in what Ayon Maharaj (Swami Medhananda) calls his "saint-making theodicy," which depicts the world as "a spiritual gymnasium," including "the law of *karma*" and soul-making rebirth, within an ideal of universal salvation (2018: 257, 259). Ramakrishna even claims that retributive *karma* might be overridden through the grace of God: "The effect of *karma* wears away if one takes refuge in God" (cited in Maharaj 2018: 263).

Certain contemporary versions of soul-making rebirth in Vedānta would seem to parallel the sanctification model of purgatory in Roman Catholic eschatology described above, in providing further opportunities to complete the spiritual ideal within the context of an appropriate environment. The fact that the vast majority of people do not have past-life memories does not defeat the theory, for the reasons cited above; and the empirical research by Ian Stevenson (1987) and Jim Tucker (2015) regarding purported past-life memories and related physical phenomena of

[22] Some of my concerns here (Stoeber 1992) for retributive rebirth were also raised by Kaufman (2005). Ward (1998) also describes a "soterial model" of soul-making rebirth which he reads in Vaiṣṇava devotionalism.

children would seem to provide some evidence for the belief.[23] Indeed, it seems to me that if a person actually has past-life memories that are as vivid, coherent, and detailed as typical childhood memories from this life, then she or he would have to accept the doctrine as true. That is, rebirth would then appear to one as a "fact," analogous to the apparent reality of one's own childhood experiences—where memory would also provide a continuity of personal identity between lives (Anonymous 1985: 93). However, in the absence of past-life memories, philosophers tend to reject the postulation of personal reincarnation or rebirth given conceptual issues surrounding personal identity. The modern reality of genetic heredity theory complicates the dynamic.

Reincarnation: Heredity and Personal Identity

How can one connect a person to a previous incarnation when there is no bodily continuity and no memory connection between different life spans? Moreover, modern genetics and neuroscience presume that a person is dependent on inherited physiology from biological parents, where these transforming physical structures cannot be linked to a person's previous life if they derive solely from one's ancestors. But how can we speak of the same person within the context of a different body and mind—elements which are dependent upon one's ancestors? How are karmic connections maintained between lifetimes, if a person's body, individual consciousness, and ego come from one's ancestors? Vivekananda rejects the solely materialist theory of protoplasm transmission as insufficient to explain individual consciousness. He asks: "How can mental qualities of experience be condensed and made to live in one single cell of protoplasm?" (*CW* 9: 212). He writes: "We have the gross bodies from our parents, as also our consciousness. Strict heredity says my body is a part of my parents' bodies, the material of my consciousness and egoism is a part of my parents'….The seed must come from the parents. Our theory is heredity coupled with reincarnation. By the law of heredity, the reincarnating soul receives from parents the material out of which to manufacture a man" (*CW* 2: 440, 441). Vivekananda speaks of "mental impressions" surviving the dissolution of the body and of the mind "fitting" with an appropriate body in a new incarnation: "The theory then comes to this, that there is hereditary transmission so far as furnishing the material to the soul is concerned. But the soul migrates and manufactures body after body, and each new thought we think, and each deed we do, is stored in it in fine forms, ready to spring up again and take a new shape" (*CW* 2: 223).

Presumably Vivekananda is suggesting here that the essence of the individual's subtle body integrates with the genetic material of our ancestors in each incarnation:

[23] Since the nineteen-seventies Stevenson and Tucker have provided a body of systematic investigative research that has explored descriptions by children (aged 2 to 8 years) of memories of past-life happenings, unusual behavior, and birthmarks or other disfigurements that correspond to specific deceased individuals, which they have been able to verify. Although these children normally lose such memories as they age, Stevenson and Tucker have found remarkable correspondences in several cases that provide some empirical support for the theory, even if other explanations have been proposed by sceptics, such as paramnesia, unconscious deception, and clairvoyance.

"For the explanation to be sufficient, we have to assume a hereditary transmission of energies and such a thing as my own previous experience. This is what is called Karma, or, in English, the Law of Causation, the law of fitness" (*CW* 9: 210).[24] Christian theology too must give an account of the individual soul within the context of genetic heredity. Edith Stein provides helpful clarification related to Christian anthropology that seems to parallel Vedāntic conceptions of the person in rebirth, outlined earlier in the article. She claims that physical and certain psychic and affective characteristics are determined in part by one's genetic inheritance. For example, Stein (2000: 238, 228–29) suggests that one's physical and intellectual capabilities and processes, such as power of memory, intellectual pace or breadth, and sensorial strengths or tendencies, are basically given in one's physical, genetic makeup, apart from one's soul or essential character, with which it becomes integrated in conception. We might add to this list of possible genetically given abilities and tendencies also species-driven instincts that are associated with human survival and procreation, which correspond to Sigmund Freud's idea of the id and Carl Gustav Jung's sense of archetypes of the collective unconscious. The psychological manifestations of archetypes are universal patterns of energy that act to shape consciousness and influence the development of the human personality. Presumably, archetypes too would be derived through physical heredity, though these are thought to be of universal character, beyond the specificity of one's ancestors (Anonymous 1985: 254–55).

But as we mentioned above, Stein characterizes the soul as the basic qualities of the embodied person—the specifically constellated vital energy and the dispositions, habits, and desires flowing from the psychic essence. In embodied life in this world, "souls are on the way to the ultimate formation and perfection of their being" (Stein 2002: 440). This essence is integrated with the physical body—hence in creation formed in conjunction with one's genetic inheritance, which together find their manifestation and expression through the embodied mind or psychic ego, which "takes its stand on the surface" of the soul (Stein 2002: 339). For Stein, a person is a soul-body fusion who continuously transforms morally and spiritually through her or his stimulating interaction in various environments of life experience. The ideal is redemptive transformation, where the body within its given genetic context becomes wholly integrated and harmonized with and infused by the soul immersed in spirit—the full and continuous manifestation of embodied spirit—in union with Christ.

Vivekananda's Vedāntic sense of the essence of the reincarnating subtle body—the causal body—seems to be conceived in conjunction with heredity in a fashion similar to Stein's proposal, which would allow for an integration of past lives with heredity, insofar as the specific "subtle parts" of the previous incarnation "are the seeds of the new body," as Śaṅkara describes it (Rambachan 1997: 76), a body which includes also genetic, inherited qualities of one's ancestors. The difference would be that this essential individual character has evolved and developed over

[24] Medhananda (2023) also discusses this question of reincarnation and heredity for Vivekananda, suggesting with Christopher (2017) that the failure "to identify the genetic basis of intelligence, physical illnesses, psychological disorders, and personality traits" actually provides indirect support for "the theory of reincarnation."

infinite previous lives, whereas in Stein's Christian anthropology it is created by God at the beginning of this single life. Of course, such processes of reincarnation presume an overriding moral power at work in the universe—a creative and intelligent process which would parallel the complex dynamics in Christian conceptions of the new creation of a person.[25] Indeed, Vivekananda suggests that the causal body will be attracted karmically to "parents who have been transmitting a certain peculiar influence for which" the reincarnating *jīva* is fit by her or his "previous actions" (*CW* 9: 211). He writes, "it is my past experience that joins me to the particular cause of hereditary transmission" (*CW* 9: 211). "For instance, if my previous actions have all been towards drunkenness, I will naturally gravitate towards persons who are transmitting a drunkard's character" (*CW* 9: 211). Moreover, such a conjunction of the subtle body with an appropriate corporeal body would secure continuity between lives, even though a reincarnated person would never be identical with her or his past incarnation.

Given influences of heredity, one might be born with the basic physical, emotional, and intellectual potentials of a specific kind of athlete, a physicist, or a visual or musical artist, as well as those that might make one more prone to alcoholism, bipolar disorder, physical robustness, or exceptional life longevity. Over a lifetime, these biologically inherited aspects of a person are creatively fused with the cognitive, moral, and spiritual qualities of a person's subtle body and affect it substantially. Basic qualities and inclinations ground and connect the human person physically and psychically to her or his ancestors, even if they are colored fundamentally by the cognitive, moral, and spiritual conditions of the subtle body that have become associated with the person in a particular incarnation—with the karmic effects of one's past lives. Because of the influences of heredity, we could not speak of the reincarnated person as *identical* to the person of the previous life in such a dynamic. However, the subtle/causal body would ensure personal identity connections between lives, so neither could we speak of the reincarnated person as a "completely different" person. Could we speak accurately of the reincarnated person as "akin to" or "close to" the previous person, or perhaps even "much the same" person involved in constant transformation? I will return to this question below, in the concluding section of the article.

Concluding Reflections: Christian Criticisms, a Christian Account of Rebirth, and Nonpersonal and Personal Eschatological Hierarchies

Reincarnation is explicitly rejected in the Catholic *Catechism*: "Death is the end of man's earthly pilgrimage, of the time of grace and mercy which God offers him so as to work out his earthly life in keeping with the divine plan, and to decide his ultimate destiny.…There is no 'reincarnation' after death" (1994: 1013). The International Theological Commission (1992: Section 9.1–9.3) criticizes the

[25] As Swinburne observes: "no human knows how to move a soul from one body and plug it into another; nor does any known natural force do this. Yet the task is one involving no contradiction and an omnipotent God could achieve it; or maybe there are other processes which will do so" (1997: 310–11).

doctrine in more detail, presuming that rebirth is always associated with religious traditions that (i) preclude the possibility of eternal damnation; (ii) can be had by an individual's own self-effort, without the assistance of divine grace; and (iii) claims such liberation involves a higher Self that does not include the body and the soul, all of which are counter to Roman Catholic teaching. Bradley Malkovsky suggests insightfully that the core issue is the immense value granted to each embodied person: "What has been the general underlying conviction of…the different [Christian] critiques is the incompatibility of reincarnation with the dignity, unity, and irreplaceable uniqueness of the human person" (2017: 2, also 3).

This highlights the contrast between Roman Catholic anthropology and modern Advaita Vedānta theory: neither any particular reincarnating person—nor even the subtle body—is of unique value, insofar as they will be ultimately transcended in *mokṣa*. In traditional Advaita Vedānta, which Swami Vivekananda espouses in his hierarchical account of Vedānta, the spiritual goal turns on the insight of the absolute identity of *ātman* as Brahman, an ultimate condition of infinite existence, consciousness, and bliss that does not include a distinctive physical body or subtle body.[26] This marks a radical difference from Roman Catholicism, which claims a final and permanent union with God and personal loved ones—indeed with the "whole communion of saints" and the material universe—of specific souls, in spiritually transformed and recreated bodies. Concerning the other two issues mentioned by the International Theological Commission, Vivekananda makes some strong comments about the possible significance of grace in a person's final awakening to ultimate Reality, quite apart from self-effort, even if grace is dismissed by other influential figures in modern Advaita Vedānta and traditional Advaita;[27] but Vivekananda's position on universal salvation would rule out the possibility of even the qualified view of hell that I outlined above.

Yet, it is crucial to point out that these various issues between modern nondual Vedānta and Roman Catholicism center on themes in spirituality and theology, quite apart from the doctrine of rebirth. To illustrate this point, I close with a brief outline of how ideas of rebirth have been drawn into dialogue with Roman Catholic eschatology in modern Christian Hermeticism. Christian Hermeticism is a tradition that began in the sixteenth century, when Christianity and Hermeticism came into substantial dialogue. Prayer, meditation, and sacramentalism were integrated with Hermetic ideas, where Jesus Christ is understood as the source and impetus of an embodied transformative redemption within a framework of Christian practices and beliefs. In 1967, Valentin Tomberg (1900–1973) completed a significant and influential commentary on Christian Hermeticism, drawing into critical and creative dialogue modern philosophy and psychology, certain Asian religions, Kabbalah, and other esoteric traditions with his Roman Catholic orientation: *Meditations on the*

[26] In *mokṣa*, the physical body is also transcended completely in Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, though the subtle body—which includes specific individual characteristics developed in embodied experience—does seem to contribute to or participate in the liberation experience of the new spiritual body (*śuddha-sattva*) that replaces it in liberation (see footnote 12 above). See also below, the view of Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta, where final liberation includes not only the manifestation and integration of the subtle body, but also the physical body.

[27] For example, *CW* 6: 107–9.

Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism. The book includes some provocative reference to rebirth.[28]

In this perspective, rebirth functions rather like the dynamics of the sanctification model of purgatory, outlined above, providing further opportunities for spiritual transformation in this world, within a framework of Christian creation and anthropology. Tomberg emphasizes: (i) the significance of one's self-opening to the redemptive power and movement of Christ and the Holy Spirit; (ii) the sense of reformative punishment in understanding certain obstacles and struggles as conducive to such positive transformation towards the spiritual ideal; (iii) that a person might permanently reject God's redemptive love; and (iv) the Christian anthropology which I also outlined above—with the additional sense that the person has been transformed through the life experiences of previous embodiments. Tomberg postulates disembodied intermediate afterlife states of purgatory that are linked with future re-embodiments in this world, supposing that this redemptive process of ongoing purification is directed by the divine wisdom of an omnipotent and personal God.

Tomberg's Christian Hermetic perspective also includes the eschatological hope in a final embodied resurrection. He articulates it in terms of an essential "power" or "will" of the body that ordinates and harmonizes each body with the soul which it incarnates. The essence of the body is a fundamental will that underlies the body's matter and energy. It is a divine "principle" that coordinates the integration of the new physical body with the soul in every specific reincarnation. Tomberg writes: "It is the 'philosopher's stone' [that is, Jesus], which arranges the matter and energy given by Nature [the corporeal body] in such a way that it is adapted to the individuality—so that it becomes an imprint of it" (Anonymous 1985: 579). This formative will-energy is a given disposition of the body to manifest an individual's soul at a certain depth and level of spirit, which expands and grows (or declines) through each incarnation. The nature of the new body will directly reflect the level of fundamental "willingness" of the embodied person to surrender to spirit that is passed on from the body of the previous incarnation. In the final resurrection, this level of openness will be fully developed and mature, and the person will be able to manifest spirit from a very wide variety of forms or bodies, what Tomberg calls "organs of action."[29] According to

[28] Highly regarded by some major figures in modern Christian spirituality, including Hans Urs von Balthasar (who wrote a Foreword to the French edition), Thomas Keating, and M. Basil Pennington, *Meditations on the Tarot* is a substantial treatment of various themes in Christian Hermeticism, one that is rooted in Roman Catholic teachings. Although the book was published anonymously, Tomberg's authorship is so well known today that I refer to him here. Faivre writes "There is perhaps no better introduction to Christian theosophy, to occultism, to any reflection on esotericism than this magisterial work, not that of a historian but of an inspired theosopher and—a rather rare occurrence—one who is careful to respect history" (1994: 98).

[29] Citing scriptural references to Jesus' resurrection body, which was strangely difficult for people to recognize, as well as Saint Paul's account of its nature (2 Corinthians 4:16–5:15), Tomberg supposes that the fully mature "resurrection body will be absolutely mobile and will create for each action the 'organ' which suits it. At one time it will be radiant light—such as Paul experienced on the way to Damascus—at another time it will be a current of warmth, or a breath of vivifying freshness, or a luminous human form, or a human form in the flesh. For the resurrection body will be *magical will*, contracting and expanding. It will be—we repeat—the synthesis of life and death, i.e. capable of acting here below as a living person and at the same time enjoying freedom from terrestrial links like a deceased person" (1985: 577; emphasis in the original).

Tomberg, in the final resurrection the person will be a perfect instrument of spirit, able to express it to its fullest through many different organs of actions—from various spiritual bodies, as well as corporeal bodies, "without impediment" (Anonymous 1985: 576, also 573–83).[30]

This Christian Hermetic account of the transforming person over many lifetimes responds intelligibly to the concerns raised by the International Theological Commission with respect to hell, redemptive grace, and the redemptive anthropology. When treated simply as a medium of spiritual transformation, rebirth seems congenial with major Christian theological threads that Tomberg develops in *Meditations on the Tarot*: a first creation and a Fall from a primordial paradisiacal state of union with God and other creatures; a linear view of time which is conceived in terms of eschatological purposes that are grounded and embraced by eternity; a view of a creative, personal, and all-powerful God who is omnipresent and supportive of creation and towards which humanity is oriented in the hope for a redemptive mystical communion of a personally transformative nature, including final resurrection bodies; and an orientation that involves a this-worldly responsibility for the social and political welfare of all people and the natural world and their redemption in Christ. However, though his version includes resurrection bodies, it still cannot capture the special uniqueness of an individual human person *in each lifetime*, which Malkovsky suggests is crucial to Roman Catholic eschatology. In this view of rebirth, a "single" and unique human person spans many lifetimes—hence many corporeal embodiments.

Although we can speak of the "same" (constantly transforming) person over many lifetimes (given the continuity of the soul and the principle of body-soul integrations), the *ultimate* value of *each* embodied life is lost in the extended narrative, even though each embodied life contributes essentially to the ongoing transformative movement towards the resurrection ideal. That is to say, it is not the case that each person in each incarnation will be resurrected—though the fundamental aspect of each body will be manifested in the resurrection body. What is "irreplaceably unique" in this view is the person who has undergone many fully integrated incarnations, not the person in each incarnation. Moreover, as in other Catholic soul-body dualistic anthropologies which give priority to the soul, the *corporeal* body is depicted as secondary to the soul. But in Tomberg's account, the soul not only provides the core elements of the person, but it also secures the transforming personal continuity over various lifetimes in conjunction with only the underlying "will" of the body. So I would say there is perhaps a way in which rebirth in Christian Hermeticism downplays and neglects the significance of our ultimate *corporeal humanness*, both in its depiction of the body as a secondary "instrument" of the soul in spirit and also in its over-spiritualizing of the material body in the final resurrection, even if it does maintain the "irreplaceable uniqueness

[30] Note the striking correspondence to Stein's depiction of the resurrection body, quoted in footnote 11 above: "We can conceive of a bodily corporeality [*Leiblichkeit*] which does not weight down the spirit but rather serves it as an absolutely pliable instrument and medium of self-expression. In such a way we picture the state of the first human beings prior to the fall and the state of the blessed after the resurrection of the body" (2002: 392).

of the human person" (who spans many lifetimes).[31] Although our corporeal bodies are not completely transcended in this afterlife conception, the soul is the primary core of the person and can function with other "organs of action" in the resurrection ideal, within various planes of existence, which perhaps suggests theologically what many would consider an imbalanced or incomplete body-soul integration and vision of the corporeal body.

However, Tomberg's reflections on rebirth are provocative and highlight nicely the creative dialogue and significant theological influence that can occur across religious traditions. Moreover, it illuminates what I take to be perhaps the most essential difference between modern Advaita Vedānta and Roman Catholic eschatology: in the latter, the spiritual essence of the person, and not just the subtle body, is transformed by life experiences, in the movement to the religious ideal. In Vivekananda's account of hierarchical nondual Vedānta, the *ātman* is ultimately disconnected from the moral and spiritual development of the subtle body —which it transcends in final liberation from *saṃsāra*. Moreover, Tomberg's mystical theology is theistically focused, reflecting a Roman Catholic sacramentalism and ecclesiology that stands in marked contrast to Vivekananda's Advaita Vedānta. Tomberg criticizes traditional and modern nondual Vedānta on certain issues, though also explicitly praises Vivekananda for his "faithfulness to the task of cultivating and guarding" an authentic stream of mystical spirituality which he thinks needs to find its integration in Christian theistic mysticism (Anonymous 1985: 441, also 545). No doubt Vivekananda would say the same about Tomberg's unitive theistic mystical ideal, in relation to what he considers higher-level nondual Vedānta, perhaps framing it in discussions of a lower level *brahmaloka* or Viśiṣṭādvaita ideal, as mentioned above. This is an interesting parallel—how, from a mystical/spiritual standpoint, both traditions tend to situate themselves at a higher level, while nevertheless acknowledging the authentic spirituality of the Other.

Medhananda argues that Ramakrishna proposes a resolution of this apparent conflict between theistic and nontheisitic religious ideals, grounded in a harmonizing spiritual experience which he calls *vijñāna*: "From Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's expansive spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna*, God is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent in the universe and beyond it" (Maharaj 2017: 25). These kinds of *vijñāna* realization are also key features of Aurobindo's "Integral Yoga," suggesting the influence of Ramakrishna on his spirituality. Provocatively, Medhananda claims also that Vivekananda, despite clear tensions with his assertions of an Advaitic hierarchy of spiritual experience, which I illustrated below, moves in this direction of his teacher, in advocating an inclusion of the personal Brahman with the impersonal, in contrast to Śaṅkara, who "*excludes* personality" in ultimate

[31] In regard to Tomberg's perspective on the resurrection body, Donald D. Evans commented to me in 2006: "I have strong reservations concerning [Tomberg's] metaphysics here, which seem to me closer to 'Eastern' thought than Christian. The reduction (for me) of matter to condensed energy and will is a way of spiritualizing the human body in particular so that the very notion of 'incarnation' is distorted into shape-shifting appearances. I remember bio-energetics founder Alexander Lowen exploding at me when I said, 'we're all just energy.' 'NO, we're flesh and blood. What you're saying has led too many to try to stop being human by climbing Jacob's ladder into heaven'." See also footnote 30 above, to compare with Stein's sense of the body in the resurrection ideal.

Brahman (2022: 52; emphasis in the original). In *vijñāna* realizations, "perfect *jñāna* and perfect *bhakti* are combined" (Maharaj 2017: 35). Like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda frames this view in reference to the "Divine Mother" as ontological reality: "God is Mother and has two natures, the conditioned and the unconditioned. As the former, She is God, nature, and soul (man). As the latter, She is unknown and unknowable" (*CW* 7: 27).

I have argued and illustrated that this perspective of God—as both static and active, transcendent and immanent, nonpersonal and personal, noncreative and creative—is also present in certain Christian mystical theology, exemplified in various degrees by Meister Eckhart, Jan Van Ruusbroek, Teresa of Avila, Jakob Böhme, and Abhishikananda (Henri Le Saux), as well as the Hindu context, including, for example, Rāmānuja and especially Aurobindo (Stoeber 1994). Moreover, the experiential dynamics of what I call "Theo-Monistic" mysticism includes a moral/spiritual transformative movement, where the mystic becomes open to a fundamental unity at some basic level of her or his being. But this condition of radically passive nonduality does not constitute the whole of divine Reality, and it is not the final eschatological goal. Rather, such mystical immersion in the divine Source enables a deeper openness to and connection with active personal, creative, and moral dynamics—which are also aspects of God, and then stimulates the mystic to draw these energies and experiential insights into one's social life and work, as a unique medium or expression of the Divine, which constitute the "theistic" elements of the Theo-Monistic dynamic.

For Ramakrishna, the impersonal Brahman grounds and "*preserves*" the personal Brahman but does not ultimately transcend it; and "everything in the world is God Himself in various forms," in "a panentheistic oneness," as Medhananda describes it, where the world is "deified" rather than transcended (2022: 58, 59, 60, also 63; emphasis in the original). So there are striking parallels between Vijñāna Vedānta and Theo-Monistic Christian mysticism. Moreover, this integral Vedānta certainly moves beyond Vivekananda's hierarchical Advaitic ideal and stands in tension with it, edging—at least in general ways—more towards images found in Roman Catholic eschatology, which envision spiritually transformed beings and all of nature in unity with the divine Source, where "God will then be 'all in all' in eternal life" (*Catechism* 1994: 1050). The ultimate salvific condition is radically different from Vivekananda's characterization of modern Advaita Vedānta, in the way it includes the natural world and embodied life and involves some kind of overriding diversity-in-unity. Medhananda writes "Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa repeatedly contrasts '*jñāna*,' the Advaitic realization of the impersonal Ātman, with '*vijñāna*,' a vaster, richer, and more intimate realization of God as at once personal and impersonal, at once with and without form" (2017: 28). The "impersonal-personal Infinite Reality is not only transcendent but also immanent in the world, manifesting in endless forms," where we are "all living manifestations of God" (2022: 75). So, in this integral view of Vijñāna Vedānta, in contrast to Vivekananda's account of modern Advaita Vedānta, it would appear that the physical/subtle/causal bodies do become integrated with and manifested in its account of final liberation, thus paralleling Roman Catholic depictions of the resurrected body and the spiritually transformed natural world in its redemptive ideal.

Medhananda explains (citing Ramakrishna): "The *vijñāni* or *īśvarakoṭi* [divine person], in contrast to the ordinary *jīva*, is able to commune with God on various planes of consciousness: 'The gross, the subtle, the causal, and the great cause.… They climb up, and they can also come down.'…The *vijñāni* or *īśvarakoṭi*…accepts all four planes of consciousness as true, since the *sthūla* [gross], *sūkṣma* [subtle], and *kāraṇa* [causal] planes belong to the realm of God's *līlā*, which is also real" (2017: 46–47). The nature and significance of these correspondences between Vijñāna Vedānta and Roman Catholic eschatology are very intriguing indeed and call for more careful illustration and detailed elucidation. They are complicated by other differences between these traditions, many of which are mentioned in this article, as well as by the disagreements among scholars about Vivekananda's position on religious diversity. Vivekananda's depiction of Vijñāna Vedānta stands in tension with his claims about a nondual Vedāntic hierarchy and the superiority of *jñāna yoga*. Moreover, his account of modern Advaita Vedānta, which we have been focusing on in this article, is quite different from Vijñāna Vedānta.

Regarding the religious ideals of Advaita Vedānta and Roman Catholicism, I quoted Vivekananda at the beginning of my article: "We find that all religions teach the eternity of the soul, as well as that its lustre has been dimmed, and that its primitive purity is to be regained by the knowledge of God.…The end of all religions is the realising of God in the soul." At a very general level, what Vivekananda says is perhaps true. However, there are major differences in conceptions, expectations, and hopes between the spiritual narrative of these faith traditions. In modern Advaita Vedānta, the eternal soul (*ātman*) is uncreated, and hence beginningless. In Roman Catholicism, the eternal soul is created out of nothing by God. While the soul is considered the essence of the person in both traditions, in modern Advaita Vedānta it is ultimately unaffected by and disconnected from life experiences, while in the latter it is intimately integrated with the corporeal body and redemptively transformed by life experiences. Roman Catholic teaching insists that the ideal includes the individual soul and the resurrected physical body, transformed spiritually in union with God and all of creation, whereas *mokṣa* in modern nondual Vedānta excludes the individual subtle and physical bodies. With respect to personal life, the subtle body (*sūkṣma-śarīra*), which clothes or envelops the *ātman*, provides the essential core in one's moral and spiritual movement through corporeal life experience towards the spiritual goal, so it parallels the Christian soul in that respect. But in modern Advaita Vedānta, this transformative movement of the subtle body in integrative union with corporeal bodies is finally transcended in *mokṣa*, in the intuitive realization of *ātman-brahman*.

Both faith traditions tend to characterize the religious ideal in analogical superlatives which will always fail to depict adequately a timeless and ineffable condition of ultimate transcendence or fulfilment. Yet, within this context, we find contrasting spiritual goals: Roman Catholic descriptions officially maintain personalist unity with moral referents and ontological distinctions in a material universe that is transfigured by Christ and the Holy Spirit, including a resurrected body and the fulfilment of the person in communal contexts, which obtains over a single lifetime and transformative purgatorial process; while Vivekananda's account

of modern nondual Vedānta speaks of a transpersonal Advaitic condition with no distinctions, one that transcends subtle and material bodies, and which can require many, many purgatorial contexts and lifetimes to be realized.

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