Getting off the Wheel: A Conceptual History of the New Age Concept of Enlightenment

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Abstract

Although many new agers believe that enlightenment is the end goal of spiritual development, the importance of this concept has largely been overlooked by scholars until now. This article contextualizes the concept of enlightenment historically. After a detailed description of what the new age concept of enlightenment entails, it traces the origin of the concept to the late 19th-century “Oriental reaction” to Theosophy, when “missionaries from the East” like Vivekananda and Suzuki drew on transcendentalism, Theosophy, and recent innovations in psychology to articulate a paradigmatic expression of Asian soteriology. It highlights the importance of models of enlightenment in the transmission of Asian ideas and follows the trajectory that starts with Vivekananda and Suzuki to figures and currents like Aldous Huxley, 1960s counterculture, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and neo-advaita. Thereby, it provides an account of the formation of the new age concept of enlightenment.

Keywords

enlightenment – transcendentalism – Theosophy – Vivekananda – Suzuki – Huxley – Osho

What is enlightenment? In January 1992, spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen (b. 1955) published a journal dedicated to clearing up the confusion surrounding the concept — appropriately titled *What is Enlightenment?* — and in the first issue he tried to answer that very question. He tells us that

Enlightenment is a condition in which there is a conscious knowing that one has come to the end of becoming. To be *fully* Enlightened means to come to the end of evolution, the end of the possibility of any evolution. Even people who glimpse what Enlightenment is for a brief period have intimation of the kind of finality that I'm speaking about. It is the element of finality that makes that kind of knowing that I am speaking about so extraordinary and so difficult to describe to people who haven't tasted it ... It is Absolute.

A. COHEN 1992: 1

What will be apparent to anyone who frequently visits new age settings is how important the concept of enlightenment is to the new age.¹ Many new agers believe that enlightenment is the end goal of spiritual progress. They believe that specific individuals have attained enlightenment and that an association with these individuals is desirable, beneficial, and inspiring. Most have a vague notion that practices such as meditation, in addition to the worldly benefits they offer, aim at enlightenment. A small subgroup will actively seek to attain enlightenment, a process for which the association with an enlightened "master" (who is not only enlightened but also guides others to enlightenment) is essential.² Many new agers will keep a few pictures of masters they feel a special connection to in their living spaces, and they will own at least a few books with teachings from enlightened masters procured from a local esoteric book store, a spiritual center, or, nowadays, the internet. Although these enlightened masters will often belong to specific lineages and religious traditions, the specifics rarely concern the new ager, who draws inspiration from masters of different traditions. Olav Hammer (2010) has argued that the new age is more uniform than scholars sometimes assume. If so, enlightenment is certainly one of its central ideas — even though Hammer does not mention it. Why, then, has the new age concept of enlightenment received so little attention from scholars?

To begin with, a concept that is so ubiquitous as enlightenment is often not seen for how alien and foreign it is. The concept will seem so natural and obvious to anyone who frequents new age circles that it does not require elaboration. At the same time, the concept is notoriously opaque, which is why you can find popular literature with the sole purpose of articulating the meaning of the term. This ambiguity presents problems for scholars. Although we may be

¹ I am referring to the new age *sensu lato* (Hanegraaff 1996).

² A directory of enlightened masters is provided by Rawlinson 1997.

unable to provide a clear definition of enlightenment, we can, however, know something about it.

It should be clear, first, that the sort of ultimate soteriological attainment described here is not the enlightenment of *the* Enlightenment (German: *der Aufklärung*, French: *les Lumières*), but the “spiritual” enlightenment referred to in German as *Erleuchtung* and in French as *illumination*. Second, note that, although these terms are related to the Christian concept of divine illumination (Latin: *illuminatio* or *illustratio*; Greek: *Phôtismos*), the emphasis on a final and complete state of liberation that can be attained within the confines of earthly existence suggests that we are dealing with a concept mostly foreign to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.³ Therefore, we must distinguish between divine illumination and what we might call the “new age concept of enlightenment;” nevertheless, based on fieldwork in the new age community and the reading of popular works, it is possible to identify six characteristics of the latter. It was thought best to state these at the outset to facilitate comprehension, although much of the supporting evidence will be discussed below.

- (1) Enlightenment is described as a *final* release — a *state* rather than an (necessarily finite) experience. It is the be-all and end-all: the goal of spiritual practice and the completion of spiritual growth and progress. It is the end of all striving and a release from reincarnation and cyclic existence. Often, practices that provisionally aim at physical or psychological healing are seen as part of a path that culminates in enlightenment. Of course, some schools argue that there is no path and that you are already there — the trick is knowing that you are. The latter view is mainly found in the neo-advaita movement (Frisk 2002: 66).
- (2) Enlightenment is available to all, and is not the exclusive territory of the religious specialist. Techniques that aim at bringing about enlightenment — among which “meditation” always figures prominently — can be learned from courses, seminars, books, audio, and video recordings.⁴
- (3) Enlightenment is described as the end of an evolutionary development.
- (4) On a psychological level, enlightenment is described as a modification, transformation, or alteration of consciousness.⁵ The state of enlightenment

3 For a historical introduction to the concept of divine illumination, see Pasnau 2015.

4 On his personal website, www.andrewcohen.com, Cohen offers a twelve-part self-study course in what he calls “evolutionary enlightenment,” consisting of eleven one-hour teaching videos and one live question-and-answer session, which promises the applicant “a thrilling journey of awakening,” at US\$ 250. The advertisement was posted on May 16, 2018.

5 See, e.g., Rawlinson who speaks of a “spiritual psychology” underlying interactions between enlightened masters and their followers (1997: xvii, 96). Enlightenment is also an important, albeit contested, concept in the transpersonal psychology of Ken Wilber (b. 1949); see

does not preclude the normal functioning of other human faculties, which, even in a transformed state, remain functional (Ullman and Reichenberg-Ullmann 2001: xv).

- (5) The experience of getting enlightened is described in narratives that paint a picture of enlightenment and authenticate the enlightened master and his or her experience.⁶ Here, enlightenment is described as a mystical experience, i.e., as an encounter or merger with a transcendent reality.⁷ This requires some elaboration. By mysticism, I mean, in the non-technical sense, “a specific religious system or practice, deliberately undertaken in order to come to some realization or insight, to come to unity with the divine, or to experience the ultimate reality directly” (Webb 2017). Mysticism is distinct from what Ernst Troeltsch referred to as “mystical religion” — the idea that all genuine religiosity is mysticism.⁸ New agers conceive of enlightenment as a mystical experience on the lines of the “common core thesis” in the comparative study of mysticism. The common core thesis holds that mystical experience is a universal phenomenon that is essentially the same for mystics from different traditions, even when it is interpreted differently. This position, also known as “perennialism,” is associated with, among others, William James, Aldous Huxley, and Walter Stace.⁹ The common core thesis has been challenged by scholars who argue that interpretation is an essential part of any experience, so that mystical experiences from different traditions are dissimilar and distinct.¹⁰ Now, as far as the new age concept of enlightenment goes, enlightenment is conceived in the same way pe-

Wilber 2006. For a critical perspective on Wilber’s understanding of enlightenment, see Ferrer 2015.

- 6 For a popular collection of such narratives, sometimes generated by questionable cut-and-paste methods, see Ullman and Reichenberg-Ullmann 2001. The introduction (xv–xx) encapsulates much of new age thinking on enlightenment at the start of the new millennium.
- 7 As does Ken Wilber who writes that “Enlightenment is the realization of oneness with all states and structures that are in existence at any given time” (2006: 95).
- 8 For a discussion of Troeltsch’s concept and its relevance to the new age, see Campbell 1977 and 1978.
- 9 The trajectory of perennialism is usually traced from William James (1842–1910) through Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) and Walter Stace (1886–1967) to contemporary proponents such as Robert K. C. Forman (b. 1947) and Ralph W. Hood (b. 1942); see Sharf 1995. Also see Hood 2016, who suggests distinguishing the common core thesis from a “perennialism” he primarily associates with Huxley.
- 10 This constructivist position, less relevant to our discussion, is associated with, among others, Steven Katz (b. 1944) and Wayne Proudfoot (b. 1939), and comes into prominence in the late 1970s and 1980s.

rennialists conceive mystical experience, i.e., as a universal encounter or merger with a transcendent reality. Often enlightenment is also part of a mystical religion, which argues that the goal of all genuine religion is enlightenment. In that case, religion is understood as the corruption of the teaching of enlightened masters, who only wanted to bring others to enlightenment. Religious figures like Jesus are, for instance, said to be enlightened, and mystically inclined texts (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount, not the Pauline corpus) are cited as evidence of these claims, while there is a general disdain for organized and institutionalized religion (as will become apparent below). Enlightenment, therefore, figures in a set of beliefs about religion, which interprets all genuine religiosity as an attempt to spread and perpetuate enlightenment. I propose to call this broader set of beliefs, which understands enlightenment as the common core of all religions, “enlightenment perennialism.” Although it is possible to imagine a new age concept of enlightenment without enlightenment perennialism, the two are almost always linked. Enlightenment perennialism is like Troeltsch’s mystical religion, except that the goal of genuine religion is not considered mystical experience but enlightenment. The difference between mystical experience (as conceived by perennialists) and enlightenment (as conceived by new agers) is that mystical experience is temporary whereas enlightenment is final. Therefore, I will argue that although the trajectories of perennialism and enlightenment perennialism partially overlap, it is important to distinguish between the two.

- (6) Socially, enlightenment is a change of *status*. Once you convince others that you are enlightened, there are benefits to be had. Attractive young followers and money being some of the primary perks and these liberties sometimes lead to abuses.¹¹

To a scholarly mind, the elements that make up the new age concept of enlightenment may not look coherent. For instance, one can argue that enlightenment cannot be both a mystical experience and a permanent state, and yet it is usually considered both. What enlightenment represents is a final and complete salvation, upon which new agers can heap whatever they consider of ultimate value. To look for a logic beyond that may prove frustrating. When we put the new age concept of enlightenment in a historical perspective, we can, however, understand how this particular concept of enlightenment was shaped by history.

11 On the egregious example of Adi Da Samraj (born Franklin Jones, 1939–2008), see Lowe and Lane 1996.

The new age concept of enlightenment has not yet received a diachronic treatment. Only Arthur Versluis (2014) has tentatively sketched the history of a movement he calls “immediatism,” which revolves around a spontaneous experience of enlightenment. Immediatism, according to Versluis, is the “claim that one can achieve enlightenment or spiritual illumination spontaneously, without any particular means, often without meditation or years of guided praxis” (2014: 2).¹² Versluis argues that immediatism is characteristic of American spirituality but does not sufficiently distinguish between spontaneous and temporary mystical experience and a permanent state of enlightenment. Consequently, Versluis traces the roots of immediatism to 19th-century American transcendentalism, even though the concept of a permanent state of enlightenment is absent there. Furthermore, Versluis’s focus on American roots causes him largely to ignore the contributions of “missionaries from the East” such as Daisetz T. Suzuki (1894–1966) and Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902).¹³ Vivekananda is not even mentioned, and Suzuki only appears as an inspiration to the literary movement of the Beats (Versluis 2014: 92–108). Overall, Versluis overestimates the importance placed, in new age milieu, on the spontaneous occurrence of enlightenment. As will become apparent below, the notion that enlightenment is spontaneous and uncontrived did not become prominent in new age till the early 1990s and, in that sense, “immediatism” is a comparatively recent phenomenon.

The origin of the term enlightenment and its synonyms provides a vital clue to the history of the concept. As a term for spiritual attainment, “enlightenment” was popularized by the German philologist and Orientalist Max Müller (1823–1900), who translated the Sanskrit *bodhi* as enlightenment — although “to be awakened” would have been a more accurate translation (R. Cohen 2009: 1). *Bodhi* is what makes Gautama “the Buddha” (awakened one), because he is understood to have “awakened,” i.e., become enlightened under the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya. In new age, enlightenment is understood as synonymous with terms such as liberation (*mokṣa*), *nirvāṇa*, and self-realization (*ātma-* or *brahma-jñāna*).¹⁴ All these terms have an Asian, or more specifically, Indian origin. Furthermore, the idea of an ultimate release is largely foreign to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, where a creature cannot fully overcome its created nature and remains subordinate to God even at the heights of mystical attainment. Because enlightenment is largely conceived in Indian terms diffused

12 The notion that enlightenment is sudden is also known as “subitism,” which is opposed to “gradualism;” see Buswell 1987 and below.

13 Versluis’s discussion of Asian influences is found on pp. 81–91.

14 See, e.g., Ullman and Reichenberg-Ullmann 2001: xv.

throughout Asia, it is reasonable to assume that its origins lie in the influx of Asian religion that molded alternative spirituality in the USA and Europe in the 20th century. The question then becomes: how did the new age, a movement located mainly in Europe and North America, come to adopt aspects of an “Oriental soteriology”?

When the idea of ultimate release was introduced into the European and North American context, it assumed a new guise in the form of “enlightenment” and became part of a new network of assumptions. It is outside the scope of this article to examine how this new shape related to earlier ones. Instead, the article attempts, first, to determine when and in what context representations of the concept of ultimate release were introduced, and, second, how ideas present in that context contributed to the formation of a new age concept of enlightenment. The focus is not on the processes of translation, adaptation, and transmission that affected Asian religion, but on the intellectual history of new age thought.¹⁵

1 The Idea of Ultimate Release and Its Reception

New agers tend to equate conceptions of ultimate release that have different origins, conceptual links, and historical trajectories. While the idea of a release from the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra* or “transmigration”) is a persistent theme in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, ideas about what this ultimate release looks like, what it should be called, and what is expected to bring it about, differ widely.¹⁶ *Nirvāṇa* (from the verb-root *vā* “to blow” and *nir* “out”) was used to indicate the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice, while *mokṣa* (from the verb-root *mokṣ* “to liberate”) plays a similar role in Hinduism. The term “self-realization” derives from the concept of *ātma-* or *brahma-jñāna*, which was mainly used in the Vedānta school of Hindu philosophy that, through figures like Vivekananda, had a profound influence on the new age concept of enlightenment. Adherents of different religions, or different schools within religions, may deny that adherents of other schools or religions are able to attain ultimate release. Take the following statement by the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Terzin Gyatso (b. 1935):

15 An approach pioneered by Hanegraaff 1996, Hammer 2001, and Partridge 2004–2005.

16 For an overview of the different conceptions of ultimate release in Hinduism, Sikhism, and Jainism respectively, see Zydenbos 1983, Pramod 1984, and Chakravarthi 2001.

Questioner: So, if one is a follower of Vedānta, and one reaches the state of *satcitananda*, would this not be considered ultimate liberation?

His Holiness: Again, it depends upon how you interpret the words, “ultimate liberation.” The *mokṣa* which is described in the Buddhist religion is achieved only through the practice of emptiness. And this kind of nirvana or liberation, as I have defined it above, cannot be achieved even by Svatantrika Madhyamikas, by Cittamatras, Sautrantikas or Vaibhasikas. The follower of these schools, *though Buddhists*, do not understand the actual doctrine of emptiness. Because they cannot realize emptiness, or reality, they cannot accomplish the kind of liberation I defined previously.

TENZIN GYATSO 1988: 23–24

Such a statement would surprise a new ager who would like to think that all Asian religions are in harmony, although it is hardly unorthodox. A recently translated text by Sadyojyotiḥ (675–725 C.E.) with a commentary by Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha (950–1000 C.E.) refutes as many as twenty conceptions of *mokṣa* from the perspective of Śaiva Siddhānta (Watson, Goodall, and Sarma 2013), illustrating the diversity of opinion surrounding this one concept.¹⁷ The new age approach to these materials, however, is marked by concordance and syncretism.¹⁸ When were these concepts first introduced in Europe and North America and how did they become linked?

The introduction of the concept of *mokṣa* precedes that of *nirvāṇa*. The first mention of *mokṣa* in the English language occurs in 1785 in the first complete translation of the *Bhagavad-gītā* by Charles Wilkins (1749–1836). In an endnote, he explains that the Hindus believe that they can, through “repeated regenerations,” attain “a degree of perfection as will entitle them to what is called *Mōṁktēē*, eternal salvation, by which is understood a release from future transmigration, and an absorption into the nature of the Godhead who is called *Brāhm*” (Wilkins 1785: 139–140). Wilkins’s description of *mokṣa* is accurate from a Vedāntic standpoint. It is representative of a trend in long-19th-century Orientalism that elevates Vedānta, in either its theistic or non-dual form, to the quintessence of Hinduism (King 2013: 118–142). Although the concept was known to Hegel (Halbfass 1990: 92), and Wilkins’s translation was

17 An overview of the twenty conceptions can be found in Watson, Goodall, and Sarma 2013: 16.

18 Starting in the middle ages, Hinduism developed a similar tendency towards concordance and syncretism; see, e.g., Nicholson 2010 and Madaio 2017.

read by the transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, the Hindu *mokṣa* did not capture the European and North American imagination to the same extent as the Buddhist concept of *nirvāṇa*.

In a lecture “On Indian Sectaries” delivered to the Royal Asiatic Society in London on February 3, 1837, Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1847) gave what may be the earliest description of *nirvāṇa* in a modern European language.

The term which the Bauddhas, as well as Jainas, more particularly affect, and which however is also used by the rest, is *nirvāṇa*, profound calm. In its ordinary acceptation, as an adjective, it signifies extinct, as a fire which is gone out; set, as a luminary which has gone down; defunct, as a saint who has passed away: its etymology is from *vá*, to blow as wind, with the preposition *nir* used in a negative sense: it means calm and unruffled. The notion which is attached to the word, in the acceptation now under consideration, is that of perfect apathy.

COLEBROOKE 1873: 425

Colebrooke adds that *nirvāṇa* cannot mean annihilation, because the individuality persists, but he struggles to explain why *nirvāṇa* is desirable. Drawing on a traditional metaphor, Colebrooke insinuates that *nirvāṇa* is similar to profound sleep. Like deep sleep it is considered pleasant not because it is consciously experienced, but because the refreshment felt upon awakening is projected back to the state of rest (Colebrooke 1873: 425). What sort of further refreshed awakening may follow *nirvāṇa* is not explained.

Colebrooke's statements are fairly typical. To a mind trained in the European philosophical traditions, the putative etymology of “extinction” or “annihilation” suggested that the end of suffering was also the end of existence. To his credit, Colebrooke, however, realized that *nirvāṇa* was a desirable state, which is attained by living individuals, and therefore he came up with the concept of apathy. Colebrooke was criticized by the founder of the academic study of Buddhism, Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852), who, in 1844, argued that *nirvāṇa* did mean “extinction.” To support his claim, Burnouf offered a translation of a verse from the *Avadānaśataka*, a Sanskrit anthology of Buddhist legends:

Until finally Vipasyin, the completely perfect Buddha, after having performed the totality of obligations of a Buddha, was, like a fire of which the fuel is consumed, entirely annihilated in the elements of *nirvāṇa* in which nothing remains of that which constitutes existence.

BURNOUF 1876 [1844]: 525

Conceived in such a way, *nirvāṇa* is a grim prospect. Although Burnouf probably misconstrued the original meaning of the text, his account was extremely influential. His *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (1844) was read by Schelling, Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche (Lopez 2008: 170). Only with Max Müller (1823–1900), a student of Burnouf, does the more positive appraisal of *nirvāṇa* begin, and we will come to this development in a moment.

It is clear that the concept of enlightenment came from Asia. What is not clear is when it was imported and by whom. As noted by Wouter J. Hanegraaff in his history of new age religion, “if modern Theosophy was one major factor in the Western occultist reception of Oriental religions, transcendentalism was the other” (1996: 456). It may be fruitful to explore whether the concept of enlightenment can be found in transcendentalism or Theosophy, because both movements typify what was perceived as the turn toward the East.

2 Enlightenment in Transcendentalism and Theosophy

There is no denying the importance of transcendentalism for the new age. The transcendentalists were the first popular movement to treat non-Christian scriptures as genuine revelation and they were the first to treat the founders of non-Christian religions as genuine prophets. Transcendentalism embraced mysticism as the heart of religion. All prophets were thought to have the same direct and unmediated experience of what Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) called the “Oversoul.” With transcendentalism, perennialism can in some ways be said to start.¹⁹

The Indic concept of enlightenment is almost entirely absent, however. In all the works of the major transcendentalists, Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott, there is only one direct reference to *nirvāṇa*. In his translation of “The Lotus of the Good Law” in *The Dial* (July 1844), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) follows the French of Burnouf and translates *nirvāṇa* as “nothingness” (quoted in Versluis 1993: 23).²⁰ Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880) is also fairly typical in this regard; in her openminded study of the world religions, *The Progress of Religious Ideas* (1855), she devotes a long chapter to the religions of Hindustan. The concepts *ātman* (Self), *nirvāṇa*, and *mokṣa* are not mentioned, and a

19 Perry Miller first highlighted the religious aspect of transcendentalism in an article published in 1940. He later published a still useful anthology with a strong doctrinal focus (Miller 1950). K. P. van Anglen (2008) provides an overview of more recent scholarship.

20 Versluis's *American Transcendentalism* (1993) is still the standard work on transcendentalism and Asian religion.

short biography of the Buddha omits the story of his *nirvāṇa* in Bodh Gaya (Child 1855: I, 83–87). The emphasis is on *Brahmā* as a stand-in for the Oversoul.

Although Versluis emphasizes the influence of Asian religion on transcendentalism, the latter conceives of mysticism in Neoplatonic Christian/Romantic/idealist terms. It is, accordingly, not Asian (Versluis 2014: 17–18). What distinguishes the Asian enlightenment from similar concepts of mystical attainment in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is that *mokṣa* is a permanent state of liberation, not a momentary transcendence. *Mokṣa* is not a transitory event or a peak experience, but a complete transformation. By contrast, Emerson writes:

There is genius as well in virtue as in intellect. 'T is the doctrine of faith over works. The raptures of goodness are as old as history and new with this morning's sun. The legends of Arabia, Persia and India are of the same complexion as the Christian. Socrates, Menu [Manu], Confucius, Zertusht [Zoroaster], — we recognize in all of them this ardor to solve the hints of thought ... I hold that ecstasy will be found normal, or only an example on a higher plane of the same gentle gravitation by which stones fall and rivers run.

EMERSON 1904 [1875]: 275

While the concordance of religious founders under the rubric of a mystical experience is representative of an early perennialism, “inspiration,” “rapture,” and “ecstasy” are not *mokṣa*.²¹ Even though the concept of enlightenment cannot be found in transcendentalism, transcendentalism did contribute to the new age concept of enlightenment, because it effectively introduced mysticism as a universal construct. It was from here that one of the founders of the modern discipline of psychology, William James (1842–1910), drew inspiration for his common core thesis (Schmidt 2003). Later theorists of enlightenment similarly drew inspiration from transcendentalism and saw enlightenment as the universal mystical core of religion.

Although few mentions of *nirvāṇa* can be found in the writing of the transcendentalists, *nirvāṇa* is often mentioned in the corpus of Theosophy. A more positive appraisal of *nirvāṇa* had started with Max Müller. Hindu scriptures were available in translation long before Buddhist ones, and Müller would begin to remedy this situation with his famous *Sacred Books of the East* (1879–1910). In an article published in 1869, Müller observed that *nirvāṇa* conceived

21 A recent special issue of *Religions* (Sacks and Koch 2017–2018) contains a wealth of information on transcendentalism and religious experience.

as annihilation and nothingness — a “Metaphysical Nihilism” — was confined to the scholastic Buddhist *Abhidharma* texts, while a popular understanding of *nirvāṇa* was that of a kind of paradise. The true teaching of the Buddha, however, was that *nirvāṇa* was “the extinction of many things — of selfishness, desire, and sin, without going so far as the extinction of subjective consciousness” (Müller 1902: 303). It is also “the entrance of the soul into rest, a subduing of all wishes and desires, indifference to joy and pain, to good and evil, and absorption of the soul in itself and a freedom from the circle of existences from birth to death, and from death to new birth” (306).²²

H. P. Blavatsky, the intellectual founder of Theosophy, was well aware of these developments and references Müller’s 1869 article in her *Isis Unveiled* (1877: I, 346). Against Müller, she argues that *nirvāṇa* means “the certitude of personal immortality in *Spirit*, not in *Soul*” — the soul being a “finite emanation” (II, 320). Here Blavatsky is synthesizing Hindu and Buddhist doctrines with a generic Neoplatonism derived from Western Esotericism but also present in her Christian Eastern Orthodox background. Even so, the theosophical *nirvāṇa* had some unusual features. It seems to be based on an interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhism of which the sources are not clear.

The Theosophical Society (henceforth “TS”), founded in New York in 1875 by Blavatsky together with Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and others, supposedly was guided by representatives of what was later called the “Great White Brotherhood.” These *Mahātmās* or Masters used Blavatsky as their emissary. After the headquarters of the TS moved to India in 1879, the Masters, through Blavatsky’s mediation, started a correspondence with A. P. Sinnett (1840–1921), the editor of *The Pioneer*, one of the leading English newspapers in British India. In a letter received by Sinnett in 1882, Maha Chohan, a senior Master, writes:

For as everyone knows, total emancipation from authority of the one all pervading power or law called God by the Theists — Buddha, Divine Wisdom and Enlightenment or Theosophy by the philosophers of all ages — means also the emancipation from that of human law. Once unfettered [and] delivered from their dead weight of dogmatic interpretations, personal names, anthropomorphic conceptions and salaried priests, the fundamental doctrines of all religions will be proved identical in their esoteric meaning. Osiris, Chrishna [Kṛṣṇa], Buddha, Christ, will

22 A detailed discussion of Müller’s views on *nirvāṇa* can be found in Welbon 1968: 101–127.

be shown as different means for one and [the] same royal highway to final bliss, *Nirvana*.

CHIN 1998: 478

Here we are very close to what I have described as enlightenment perennialism. *Nirvāṇa* is conceived as the goal of all religion, which is contrasted with the secondary accretions of dogma and salaried priests. Nevertheless, *nirvāṇa* is only “an exalted and glorious *selfishness*” and, in the opinion of the Master, the true Theosophist is marked by his or her desire to help others (Chin 1998: 477). Here, Theosophy adopts a Mahāyāna (great vehicle) Buddhist polemic against the individual attainment valorized by what from its perspective is a Hīnayāna (small vehicle) Buddhism.²³

Sinnett further expands on *nirvāṇa* in his *Esoteric Buddhism* of 1883, which, together with his earlier *The Occult World* (1881), introduced audiences to the teachings of the Masters. The goal of Theosophy (or “Esoteric Buddhism”) is to bring about a kind of collective *nirvāṇa*, or a state very close to it, in the seventh round of humanity (Sinnett 1883: 160–170).²⁴ This collective *nirvāṇa* comes at the end of an evolutionary development, but it does not come easily or naturally. It is the result of sustained effort on the part of more developed individuals, who attempt to lift humanity to a higher level. To remain in contact with struggling humanity, these individuals have attained but renounced *nirvāṇa*: “The great end of the whole stupendous evolution of humanity, is to cultivate souls so that they shall be ultimately fit for that as yet inconceivable condition” (167). The ideas introduced by Sinnett were further explored in H. P. Blavatsky’s *The Voice of the Silence* of 1889: “To reach Nirvana’s bliss but to renounce it, is the supreme, the final step — the highest on Renunciation’s Path” (Blavatsky 1889: 33). Theosophy, in other words, is taking up the *bodhisattva* ideal (Williams 2009: 55–62).

Although the element of evolution is now clearly present, we are not dealing with a mature new age concept of enlightenment yet. With a memorable metaphor, Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein described the TS as a double funnel; for a brief moment, the TS and its spokespersons were able to unite much of 19th-century esotericism under a single banner (“the narrow passage of the funnel,” Hammer and Rothstein 2013: 1). But the uneasy alliance could not hold and out of the other end old and new movements emerged, changed

23 From a scholarly perspective these are extremely problematic categories; see R. Cohen 1995.

24 The details of the Theosophical cosmology do not concern us here, but see Warcup 1986 for an excellent summary.

and affected by their association with Theosophy. The process of splitting off was already underway by the mid-1880s.

Around 1882, the TS changed direction. Where previously it had been preoccupied by practical occultism, it now declared the Western constitution unfit for practical occultism and asked its members to be content with the pursuit of universal brotherhood and theoretical understanding (Deveney 1997, 2016). This development was accompanied by a greater emphasis on the Eastern origin of Theosophy, which was presented as an Eastern occultism, and a parallel devaluation of Western (Hermetic, Christian, and Kabbalist) models (Godwin 1994: 333–379; Pasi 2010). The devaluation of the Western models led to a countermovement that Joscelyn Godwin has described as an “Hermetic Reaction” (1994: 333), but which John Patrick Deveney, perhaps more accurately, describes as an “anti-Blavatsky/anti-Buddhist ‘Christian Theosophy’” (2016: 107).

Later that decade, we also see signs of what might be called an “Oriental reaction,” in which figures like Müller and Vivekananda responded that Theosophy had little to do with authentic Asian religion. Representatives of the Oriental reaction argued that Asian religion did not revolve around claims to higher knowledge jealously guarded by a secretive elite, but was, at least originally, averse to dogma and institutions, and centered on a personal and direct experience of the divine.²⁵ In hindsight, what representatives of the Oriental reaction claimed was authentic “Eastern” religion, was little more than the imaginative construct of a mystical East — a remodeling of Asian religion on a pietistic basis (King 2013) — but, in the intellectual climate of the 19th century, their claims seemed credible enough.

What gave both the Hermetic reaction and the Oriental reaction an advantage over the TS was the fact, already mentioned, that the TS, after 1882, discouraged practical occultism. The absence of practical instruction in the TS was evidently a concern for many would-be adepts, because we find Blavatsky again and again responding to requests for practical instruction in the pages of Theosophical journals.²⁶ R. A. Gilbert (1987: 7) suggests that this led to a turnover in membership from the TS to rival organizations such as the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor and the Golden Dawn. Others felt more attracted to the practices of the mystical East, which became available as “missionaries from the East” began to arrive on America’s shores. It is in this “Oriental reaction” and the introduction of what was presented as authentic Eastern religion that we find the inception of the new age concept of enlightenment.

25 On the revealing interactions between Olcott and Müller and Sinnet and Müller, see Lopez 2008: 154–159, 177–180.

26 See, e.g., Blavatsky 1950–1985: VI, 331–337 [1885]; IX, 155–162 [1888].

3 Models of Enlightenment

Enlightenment is admittedly a vague term. What gives it currency is not the presence of a transparent definition, but its concrete embodiment in individuals who are said to be enlightened, practices that are said to aim at enlightenment, and experiences that are said to be representative of enlightenment. It is relatively easy to make sense of enlightenment if you live in a culture that tells stories about enlightened holy men and women and their quest — men and women whose statues you pass on the way to work, and whose contemporary representatives are still around. What was needed to introduce the concept of enlightenment in Europe and the USA more than anything were models of enlightenment; these begin to appear by the late 19th century.

Sir Edwin Arnold's (1832–1904) poetic rendering of the life of the Buddha in *The Light of Asia* (1879) marks a turning point. Arnold's poem was the most popular of three epic poems about the Buddha published in English in 1870s and 1880s. It was the reason why “thousands of late-Victorian Britons went about with images of the Buddha floating in their heads” (Franklin 2005: 941). It inspired Ananda Metteyya (1872–1923), associate of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and the first British Buddhist monk, to travel to India and Ceylon. It inspired the character of the Teshoo Lama in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and left an impression on W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot (Franklin 2005: 941–942). Arnold's book was where Victorians turned for information about the Buddha, and, not coincidentally, it was very popular in the occultist milieu, which would inspire much of the new age (Fields 1992: 67–69, 114–116). In her last will, Blavatsky famously asked Arnold's poem to be read on White Lotus Day, the anniversary of her death, which occurred on May 8, 1891 (Blavatsky 1950–1985: VI, 322).

The Light of Asia presented a popular account of a seeker in search of enlightenment. It introduced a genre that Hermann Hesse would bend to great effect in his *Siddhartha* of 1922, and it adopted and popularized Müller's suggested translation of *nirvāṇa*. Most importantly, it presented a model of enlightenment. Here was someone who did it, someone who attained it, and his experience is described in detail, so that people could form an impression of it. These hagiographies captured the public imagination in a way that contemporary scholarship could not.

Even so, that was not enough. It is one thing to know that some distant religious founder *did* it; another to know that contemporary men and women *are doing* it. Stories of living holy men reached the occultist milieu through the Oriental reaction. In 1896, Max Müller introduced Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa (1836–1886) to the English-speaking public. Rāmakṛṣṇa was a Bengali mystic who captured the imagination of members of the Bengali intelligentsia

(Kopf 1979, Chaṭṭopādhyāy 1983). Müller's article is not very informative: it identifies Rāmakṛṣṇa as a Mahātmā, reproduces a number of his sayings, and provides a short, sanitized biography.²⁷ Its provocative title is a slight at Theosophy. It calls Rāmakṛṣṇa a *real* Mahātmā and implies that the Theosophical Mahātmās are not. In a monograph devoted to Rāmakṛṣṇa published in 1898, Müller further clarifies his intent:

My object [in writing the 1896 article, "A Real Mahātman"] was twofold: I wished to protest against the wild and overcharged account of Saints and Sages living and teaching at present in India which had been published and scattered broadcast in Indian, American, and English papers, and I wished to show at the same time that behind such strange names as Indian Theosophy, Esoteric Buddhism and all the rest, there was something worth knowing, worth knowing even for us, the students of Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, in Europe.

MÜLLER 1901 (1898): 1–2

Müller wanted to correct sensationalist claims, and he toned down the claims of divinity that surrounded Rāmakṛṣṇa, but he also made it clear, in an authoritative way, that real holy men could still be found in India.

At the same time as Müller published his article in England, Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of the real Mahātmā, was teaching in the USA and about to publish his first major work. Thomas Green (2016, 2017) has recently explored the complicated relationship between Vivekananda and Müller, which need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that the two shared a pietistic sensibility and saw religion in terms of "good moral conduct, subjective experiences of truth, and personal unity with God" (Green 2017: 252).

A young Vivekananda had found inspiration in the story of the Buddha, and visited Bodh Gaya in 1886, but he ultimately found a more concrete embodiment of mysticism in his guru Rāmakṛṣṇa.²⁸ After his address to the Parliament of Religions on September 11, 1893, seven years after Rāmakṛṣṇa had died of throat cancer, Vivekananda became an instant celebrity (Sil 1997: 21–23). Though the true extent of their mutual influence is largely unknown, the mature Vivekananda was influenced by William James, with whom he shared the impact of transcendentalism (Schmidt 2003; Hodder 2003).²⁹

27 On Müller's representation of Rāmakṛṣṇa, see Green 2017: 231–239.

28 On Vivekananda's evolving relationship with Buddhism, see Brekke 2002: 50–60.

29 On their mutual influence, see Taylor 1996: 62–65.

Like James, Vivekananda accepted the notion of a core mystical experience, which he mainly conceived in terms of Patañjali's *samādhi* as it occurs in the *Yoga Sūtras*.³⁰ Ever since Blavatsky came onto the scene, enlightenment had been linked to a mystical experience called *samādhi*, which, if not actually *nirvāṇa*, was nevertheless close (Blavatsky 1950–1985: XII, 659). Vivekananda would occasionally “go into *samādhi*,” i.e., go into a kind of trance state which was identified as *samādhi*, and these events were witnessed by his disciples.³¹ These performative trances go back to Rāmakṛṣṇa, who was known to do the same, and were continued by Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1960: 56, 65, 107).³² The transmission of these unusual displays has not been examined in a scholarly context, but a more concrete embodiment of higher states of consciousness is hard to imagine.

Vivekananda's first major work, his *Rāja Yoga* of 1896, contains all the elements of a new age concept of enlightenment. Vivekananda emphasizes the transformative quality of *samādhi*, which he contrasts with deep sleep:

When a man goes into deep sleep he enters a plane beneath consciousness. He works the body all the time, he breathes, he moves the body, perhaps, in his sleep, without any accompanying feeling of ego; he is unconscious, and when he returns from his sleep he is the same man who went into it. The sum-total of the knowledge which he had before he went into the sleep remains the same; it has not increased at all. No enlightenment has come. But if a man goes into Samadhi, if he goes into it a fool, he comes out a sage.

VIVEKANANDA 1896: 75

The use of the word “enlightenment” to describe the state that results from the attainment of *samādhi* is significant. Elsewhere, Vivekananda uses “liberation” or “liberation of the soul” and “realization” or “self-realization” (1896: 21, ix, 70, 223). Evidently, these yogic and Advaita Vedāntic concepts had already converged.³³ Vivekananda also used the psychology developed by psychical researcher F. W. H. Myers (1843–1901) to articulate his understanding of yoga, just

30 On the concept of *samādhi* in traditional yoga, see Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 323–330.

31 One such event occurred under an oak tree in the presence of Mary Funke and Sister Christine; see Burke 1983–1989: III, 176–178.

32 There is a short film of Yogananda going into *samādhi* recorded in England in 1936, which circulates widely on the internet, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIxNgQ-CwPo>.

33 Also see Madaio 2017, who argues that the convergence of yogic and Vedāntic concepts occurred in medieval and early modern India.

as James would in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (Taves 2003: 303–326). Building on Myers, Vivekananda glosses *samādhi* as “superconsciousness,” and contrasts this superconsciousness with the unconscious.³⁴ Here we witness the start of a trend of psychologization that would also result in Carl Gustav Jung’s foreword to Suzuki’s *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (Suzuki 1964 [1934]: 9–29).

In a perennialist fashion, Vivekananda describes the *rājayoga* by which *samādhi* can be attained as “the science of religion, the rationale of all worship, all prayers, forms, ceremonies and miracles” and later adds that “doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details” (1896: 55, iv), going on to state:

The teachers of the science of Yoga, therefore, declare that religion is not only based upon the experience of ancient times, but that no man can be religious until he has the same perceptions himself. Yoga is the science which teaches us how to get these perceptions. It is useless to talk about religion until one has felt it.

VIVEKANANDA 1896: 4

Vivekananda also ascribes to yoga the power to bring about evolutionary development (1896: 209–211). In a jab at the Theosophists, he proclaims that “there is no mystery in what I preach. What little I know I will tell you” (13). And he did; in a series of books on *karmayoga*, *bhaktiyoga*, and *jñānayoga*, he offered different roadmaps to *samādhi* (1984). His books were more practical than anything the contemporaneous TS offered, and deeply affected nontraditional conceptions of yoga. By 1896 then, Vivekananda already expressed something very close to the new age concept of enlightenment.

4 From Suzuki to the 1960s

Another early paradigmatic expression of the new age concept of enlightenment can be found in D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966). Vivekananda and Suzuki moved in largely the same milieu, and a year after Vivekananda published his *Rāja Yoga*, the young Suzuki traveled to the USA, where he stayed in La Salle, Illinois, with Paul Carus, the editor of Open Court Publishing Company. They had been introduced by Suzuki’s teacher, Soyen Shaku (1860–1919), who met

34 The relationship between Myers, James, and Vivekananda will be explored in Jacobs and Kraler: Forthcoming.

Carus when he attended the Parliament of Religions,³⁵ although Suzuki had already published a translation into Japanese of Carus's 1894 *Gospel of Buddha* in 1895. During Suzuki's eleven years in the USA, he became acquainted with the writing of the transcendentalists and read William James (Rampell 2011). Carus was also an acquaintance of Vivekananda, although his enthusiasm for Vivekananda's Vedānta cooled in later years (Henderson 1993: 108). Carus's *Gospel of Buddha* probably inspired both Suzuki and Vivekananda, because it represented Buddhism as a scientific religion. Carus, however, did not emphasize the experiential quality of religion. For him, religion was a quest for truth (Albanese 2007: 389).

Unlike Carus, but like Vivekananda, Suzuki did emphasize the experiential quality of religion. In his *Essays on Zen Buddhism (First Series)* of 1927, Suzuki argued that the essence of Buddhism was experiential. Buddhism was an attempt by followers of the Buddha to imitate his example and unfold the inner life that the Buddha exemplified: "what constituted the life and spirit of Buddhism is nothing else than the inner life and spirit of the Buddha himself; Buddhism is the structure erected around the inmost consciousness of its founder" (Suzuki 1949 [1927]: 53). Dogma is a theorization of the lived experience of the Buddha, which his companions shared and transmitted, and, therefore, Suzuki describes what he called "the doctrine of enlightenment" — the fundamental belief that the origin and goal of religion is a final transformative experience of enlightenment — as "the essence and genuine spirit of Buddhism" (39).

Suzuki argued that "Enlightenment consisted in personally realizing the truth, ultimate and absolute and capable of affirmation" (64). Furthermore: "Intellectually, it [enlightenment] must transcend all the complications involved in an epistemological exposition of it; and psychologically, it must be the reconstruction of one's entire personality" (67).

Enlightenment is not the outcome of an intellectual process in which one idea follows another in sequence finally to terminate in conclusion or judgment. There is neither process nor judgment in Enlightenment, it is something more fundamental, something which makes a judgment possible, and without which no form of judgment can take place. In judgment there are a subject and a predicate; in Enlightenment subject is predicate, and predicate is subject; they are here merged as one, but not as one of which something can be stated, but as one from which arises judgment. We cannot go beyond this absolute oneness; all the intellectual

35 Suzuki was a lay student of Soyen Shaku.

operations stop here; when they endeavour to go further, they draw a circle in which they for ever repeat themselves. This is the wall against which all philosophies have beaten in vain.

SUZUKI 1949 [1927]:68

Most of elements mentioned in the introduction are present here, although it is curious that the evolutionary element is absent. Suzuki's writing is characterized by a tendency toward concordance and syncretism. Suzuki, for instance, compares Buddhism to Christianity (45–47), and applies Hindu phrases to Buddhist concepts when he compares *nirvāṇa* to *mokṣa*. He even uses the term “self-realization,” which was coined by Vivekananda (60; De Michelis 2004: 127–148).

Suzuki lived until 1966, and in the 1950s spent six years teaching Buddhism at Columbia University (Pearlman 2012: 1–26). During this time in the USA, he inspired counterculture luminaries such as John Cage (1912–1992; see Pearlman 2012: 47–52) and Aldous Huxley (1894–1963). He also had a touching encounter with Beat author Jack Kerouac (1922–1969), just before the publication of *On the Road* (1957). When he was about to leave, Kerouac realized that the aged Suzuki was his “old fabled father from China,” and said: “Dr. Suzuki! I'd like to spend the rest of my life with you.” To which Suzuki replied enigmatically: “Sometime” (Kerouac and Charters 2000: 187–190).³⁶ In a sense, Suzuki, in his own life, bridged the world of Vivekananda and the counterculture movement of the sixties; a similar role can be ascribed to Huxley.

5 Temporary Enlightenment

One of the most important early theorists of the psychedelic experience, Aldous Huxley, had close links to the sort of Vedānta Vivekananda taught in the USA, through his association with Swami Prabhavananda (1893–1976), a monk of the Ramakrishna Order founded by Vivekananda, whom he met in 1939 (Poller 2019: 164–166). In a letter to Dr. Humphry Osmond (1917–2004), the man who invented the term psychedelic and provided Huxley with his initial dose of mescaline, dated June 1, 1957, Huxley describes meeting “dear old Suzuki” in New York. He praises Suzuki's *Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist* (1957) and *Essence of Buddhism* (1957) and goes on to say that “It makes one

36 The account I am giving is Kerouac's own. Suzuki's secretary Mihoko Okamura (b. 1934) reports that Suzuki replied — equally enigmatically — “Come along” (Pearlman 2012: 203–204).

realize how much subtler these Far Eastern Buddhists were, in matters of psychology, than anyone in the West" (Huxley 1977: 132).

The concept of enlightenment had a prominent place in Huxley's 1946 *The Perennial Philosophy*, an anthology of selections from the "inspired writings" of "enlightened ones" (Huxley 1946: 3–4), accompanied by Huxley's commentary. Here, Huxley describes enlightenment as a "total deliverance" (50) and "your true end" (103). Throughout the book, Huxley cites mystics of different traditions as witnesses to the Perennial Philosophy, and writes that "the Perennial Philosophers are primarily concerned with liberation and enlightenment" (78). Here, enlightenment explicitly becomes the goal of all experiential, mystically oriented, religion. With Huxley, enlightenment becomes universal.

When Huxley started to experiment with psychedelics, he interpreted his experience in light of his previous ideas. In a letter to Margaret Isherwood, dated August 12, 1959, Huxley writes that:

This matter of drugs and mystical experience was discussed years ago by Bergson in *The Two Sources* ... apropos of Wm. James and laughing gas. That a chemical can help people to get out of their own light is distressing to many people; but it happens to be a fact. That the experience is a "gratuitous grace," neither necessary nor sufficient for salvation, is certain. Ethical and cognitive effort is needed if the experiencer is to go forward from his one-shot experience to permanent enlightenment.

HUXLEY 1977: 160³⁷

In this perspective the core experiences of perennialists like James become somehow less than the "final enlightenment" (Huxley 1977: 91). Vivekananda and Suzuki presented enlightenment as a permanent state, a state that transformed a person into a sage or Buddha, but they did not emphasize that enlightenment was final. It became necessary to do so when temporary enlightenment, in the form of psychedelics, became available. Then the value of mystical experience came to be measured by its permanence, and temporary enlightenment became second-best.³⁸

37 This passage echoes Huxley's earlier assessment in *The Doors of Perception* (1954); see Huxley 2004: 46.

38 Huxley's influence on the counterculture movement of the 1960s is too familiar to recount here, but see Poller 2019. Also note Timothy Leary's formative encounters with Huxley; see Leary 1990: 38, 41–44, 114–115, 191–192.

6 Effortlessly Enlightened

Another development became especially prominent in the 1990s: the notion of spontaneous or effortless “instantaneous” enlightenment. Suzuki had already introduced the distinction between a sudden realization and a gradual path.³⁹ In 1927, for example, he had written that “The preparatory course may occupy a long stretch of time, but the crisis breaks out at a point instantaneously” (Suzuki 1949 [1927]: 67). Suzuki’s suggestions were elaborated by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (a.k.a. Osho, 1931–1990), an iconoclastic spiritual teacher whose orange or maroon robed followers were a visible presence in many major European and North American cities in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁴⁰ In his daily lectures, Rajneesh commented on a wealth of mystical literature that he believed represented the teaching of enlightened masters — an interpretation that made him an important proponent of enlightenment perennialism. These lectures were collected in almost 200 books that remain popular with new age audiences. Versluis correctly excludes Osho from the immediatist stream, probably because of his emphasis on therapy and meditation practice, but overlooks the fact that Osho would comment appreciatively on sudden enlightenment as well (Versluis 2014: 228). In a particularly clear statement, Osho said that “there is a tradition which says that enlightenment is gradual, but that tradition is not really the truth. It is just a half-truth uttered in compassion for human minds. Enlightenment is sudden, and it cannot be otherwise” (Osho 1972–1973: I, 559).

In the early 1990s, a movement emerged for which the sudden, uncontrived nature of enlightenment was of central importance. This movement became known as the neo-advaita or nonduality movement, although some scholars have suggested alternatives such as “the Satsang network” (Frisk 2002) and “non-traditional modern advaita” (Lucas 2014). Only here do we find an unambiguous example of Versluis’s immediatism.

The Satsang network revolves around social events called “satsangs” (Skr. *Satsaṅga*, “holy company”). The format for these events is derived from the satsangs given by H. W. L. Poonja, affectionately known as “Papaji” (1913–1997), in the 1990s. After a short meditation and the reading aloud of inspirational texts, the enlightened teacher will invite a few attendees to come to the stage for a one-on-one interview, witnessed by the audience. During this interview the teacher gives what Tibetan Buddhists call “pointing out instruction” (*ngo sprod*): through a series of questions, answers, jokes, and comments the

39 Suzuki was drawing on ideas rooted in the history of Zen; see Gregory 1987.

40 Osho read Suzuki; see Rajneesh 1985: 41–42. On Osho, see Urban 2015.

attendee is cajoled into realizing that they are enlightened. Because enlightenment is obtained without effort, the Satsang network produced an enormous number of enlightened teachers, probably leading to an overall devaluation of the notion.

As noted by Frisk (2002: 66), a majority of teachers in the Satsang network are in some way related to Osho. In his fascinating *Life of Osho*, Osho follower Sam (Swami Prem Paritosh, born Chris Gray) noted how many sannyasins drifted toward Poonja after Osho died, and comments on the similarity between Osho's later teaching on Zen and Poonja's satsangs (Sam 1997: 248–249). Connections to Osho are generally downplayed because of his infamous reputation, but if we want to understand the modern satsang phenomenon and the origin of “immediatism,” we have to explore its connection to Osho.

7 Conclusion

The trajectories of perennialism and enlightenment perennialism largely overlap. Every enlightenment perennialist (Vivekananda, Suzuki, Huxley, Osho) subscribes to the notion of a common core, but not every perennialist subscribes to the notion of a final release. Although Vivekananda, Suzuki, and James were equally inspired by the transcendentalists' understanding of religion, one of the key characteristics of mystical experience, as James understood it, was *transiency* (James 1902: 381). Enlightenment, however, is not transient, it is final. The notion of a final liberation was imported into the rapidly secularizing Christian cultural sphere by “missionaries from the East.” These missionaries had much in common with perennialists like James — they shared a pietistic sensibility, drew inspiration from transcendentalism, and had uneasy relationships with Theosophy — but they introduced a distinctly Asian idea, which they fused with “Western” notions of mystical experience, evolution, and psychology.⁴¹ What made this fusion possible?

It is reasonable to assume that these ideas already circulated in a milieu conducive to their exchange and development. Such a milieu would be similar to Colin Campbell's cultic milieu (Campbell 2002 [1972]). Although Campbell described the cultic milieu as “a constant feature of society” (14), his ideas mainly applied to the counterculture movement of the 1960s, which subsequently developed into new age. However, it seems likely that a similar milieu existed as early as the second half of the 19th century. In this milieu of

41 On Vivekananda's complex relationship with Theosophy, see Green 2016: 239–247; with regard to James, see Leland 2018.

alternative spirituality, we find different ideas of what constitutes “the good,” as well as a drive toward concordance and syncretism. Some conceived of “the good” in terms of evolutionary development, others in psychological terms as consciousness expansion, and others, again, in terms of an experiential core common to all religions. When missionaries from the East tried to peddle their wares, they naturally addressed an audience open to alternative spirituality, an audience involved in transcendentalism, spiritualism, Theosophy, and its various offshoots and countermovements. And they presented their *mokṣa* and *nirvāṇa* as whatever the ephemeral groups making up that milieu thought of as “good.” In doing so, they created an all-inclusive soteriological concept for a new age.

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