

FROM *DEUS IN ADIUTORIUM* TO *MARANATHA*: COLONIALISM AND REFORM IN
JOHN MAIN'S HINDU ENCOUNTER

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“By making his body the under-wood, and the syllable Om the upper-wood, man, after repeating the drill of meditation, will perceive the bright god, like the spark hidden in the wood.”¹

- *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*

“This prayer centers on no contemplation of some image or other...It is a fiery outbreak, an indescribable exaltation, an insatiable thrust of the soul. Free of what is sensed and seen, ineffable in its groans and sighs, the soul pours itself out to God.”²

- John Cassian, *Conferences*

¹ F. Max Müller, ed., *The Upanishads*, vol. 1, Sacred Books of the East 15 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 237.

² John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibhéid, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 138.

John Douglas Main, OSB (1926-1982) holds a unique place within the modern Christian contemplative tradition. He developed, independent of his contemporaries in the Centering Prayer movement, a method of Christian meditation centered on the silent recitation of a mantra. Main's teaching was notably developed from the synthesis of two major sources: his encounter with Swami Satyananda (1909-1961) in British Malaya in 1955, who first taught him how to meditate, and his subsequent personal discovery of the tradition of the "prayer formula" of John Cassian (circa 360-435 CE) in the *Conferences*. Although Main's interpretation of John Cassian has been the subject of some scholarship, his encounter with Swami Satyananda has been unjustifiably understudied, and few have been able to place their meeting in its proper context. This presents a significant knowledge gap for those interested in the life and work of John Main both because it is clear that Main was profoundly shaped by his time with Swami Satyananda, and because Main's teaching has been continually beleaguered by questions about its Christian authenticity.

As such, I would suggest two major interventions into the discourse surrounding John Main's meeting with Swami Satyananda and the question of Hinduism's influence on the development of contemporary Christian meditation: (1) their meeting must be understood within the religio-political context of Malayan Hindu reform during the British colonial period and the efforts on behalf of an English-educated Hindu *intelligentsia* to institutionalize and support a sense of Hindu identity compatible with the perceived values of modernity, and (2) that scholarship has too narrowly focused on the particulars of Main's method, such as the use of the term *mantra*, and ignored the possibility that other characteristics of his work, such as the accessibility of the teaching to laypeople or a focus on universalism, may also be indebted to Swami Satyananda. As it stands, what is required is a new genealogy of John Main that gives

due attention to Swami Satyananda and his lineage of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hindu reform. Such a genealogy will illuminate how John Main arrived at a modern, universalistic, and lay-oriented understanding of Christianity with the practice of meditation at the very center.

The narrative of John Main's meeting with Swami Satyananda is most famously recounted by Main himself in *The Gethsemani Talks*, a series of lectures he gave at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1976, some twenty years after his stint in colonial Malaya. Main was stationed in Malaya in February of 1955 – in the waning days of British rule – as an administrator in the British Colonial Service. He was there studying a dialect of Chinese and assisting in preparations for the Malayan general election of 1955, the first and only general election to occur before independence in 1957.³ According to Main's account, he had come to meet Swami Satyananda almost by chance, sent to meet him "on some official business or other,"⁴ purportedly to deliver a photograph as a gesture of goodwill.⁵ Main, as he recalls, was immediately attracted to Swami Satyananda's "peacefulness and calm wisdom,"⁶ and the Swami asked him if he meditated. "I told him I tried to," Main writes, "and, at his bidding, described briefly what we have come to know as the Ignatian method of meditation."⁷ "He was silent for a short time," Main says, "and then gently remarked that his own tradition of meditation was quite different...For the swami, the aim of meditation was the coming to awareness of the Spirit of the universe who dwells in our hearts."⁸ Swami Satyananda then paraphrased a verse from the

³ Neil McKenty, *In the Stillness Dancing: The Life of Father John Main* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 47.

⁴ John Main, *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks*, 4th Edition (Singapore: Medio Media, 2007), 13.

⁵ Paul Harris, ed., *John Main by Those Who Knew Him* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1991), 7.

⁶ Harris, 7.

⁷ Main, 13.

⁸ Harris, 7.

Chandogya Upanishad: “He contains all things, all works and desires and all perfumes and tastes. And he enfolds the whole universe and, in silence, is loving to all. This is the Spirit that is in my heart. This is Brahman.”⁹

Main was taken by this meeting and decided to join Swami Satyananda at his ashram once a week for the next eighteen months, studying and learning to meditate. Swami Satyananda instructed Main to meditate every day, twice a day, for a half an hour – any less would be “frivolity.”¹⁰ Main describes Satyananda’s method of meditation rather concisely, paraphrasing the teaching in the following manner:

To meditate you must become silent. You must be still. And you must concentrate. In our tradition we know one way in which you can arrive at that stillness, that concentration. We use a *word* that we call a *mantra*. To meditate, what you must do is to choose this word and then repeat it, faithfully, lovingly and continually. That is all there is to meditation. I really have nothing else to tell you.¹¹

According to one account, the Swami gave Main the mantra “Jesus.”¹² After leaving Malaya in 1956, Main would practice this form of meditation, only halting the practice in obedience to an order from a novice master at Ealing Abbey in 1959. It was a full fifteen years after his time in Malaya, however, when Main discovered the following teaching in the *Conferences* of John Cassian and thus rekindled his interest in meditation:

⁹ It is probable that this is from the third *Prapathaka*, fourteenth *Khanda*, verse four of the *Chandogya Upanishad*:

sarvakarmā sarvakāmaḥ sarvagandhaḥ sarvarasaḥ sarvamidamabhyāto'vākyanādara eṣa ma ātmāntarhṛdaya etadbrahmaitamitaḥ pretyābhisaṃbhavitāsmīti yasya syādaddhā na vicikitsāstīti ha smāha śāṇḍilyaḥ śāṇḍilyaḥ

Translated by Radhakrishnan as follows:

“Containing all works, containing all desires, containing all odours, containing all tastes, encompassing this whole world, without speech, without concern, this is the self of mine within the heart, this is Brahman. Into him, I shall enter, on departing hence Verily, he who believes this, will have no more doubts. Thus used to say Sandilya, yea Sandilya.” (Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, ed., *Principal Upanishads* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd), 392.)

¹⁰ Main, *The Gethsemani Talks*, 13.

¹¹ Main, 14.

¹² Harris, 236.

Every monk who wants to think continuously about God should get accustomed to meditating continually on [the prayer formula] and to banishing all other thoughts for its sake... To keep the thought of God always in your mind you must cling totally to this prayer formula for piety: ‘Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue’ (Ps. 69:2).¹³

“In reading these words in Cassian... I was arrived home once more and returned to the practice of the mantra,” Main says.¹⁴ From these two teachers, Swami Satyananda and John Cassian, Main distilled and developed a teaching of his own, summarized nicely at the beginning of his first published work on Christian meditation, *Word into Silence*:

Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer phrase ‘Maranatha’. Recite it as four syllables of equal length. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything – spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word. Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes.¹⁵

Although here Main uses John Cassian’s language of the “prayer phrase,” he quickly transitions to using the term “mantra,” suggesting that the two are in fact interchangeable. He writes, “The name for this prayer-word, called ‘*formula*’ in Latin, is in the Eastern tradition [called] *mantra*.”¹⁶ Main also suggests, rather anachronistically, that certain sacred words, including the Aramaic phrase that he recommends using in meditation – *maranatha* – were “first taken over as mantras for Christian meditation by the Church in its earliest days.”¹⁷ Whether or not those in the early Church actually used the term “mantra” is of no concern to Main, and the interchange of “prayer phrase,” “prayer formula,” “prayer word,” and “mantra” is also

¹³ John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibhéid, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 132.

¹⁴ Main, *The Gethsemani Talks*, 18.

¹⁵ John Main, *Word into Silence* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), xvii.

¹⁶ Main, 10.

¹⁷ Main, 10.

uncontroversial for him. Throughout his work, “mantra” comes to predominate as the preferred term for describing the tradition of silent repetition of a sacred word or phrase – a persistent reminder of Main’s time with Swami Satyananda.

Although the appropriation of the term “mantra” was uncontroversial for Main, it has left others perplexed. In fact, the question of Hinduism’s influence on the teaching of John Main has, for better or worse, engendered some disagreement about the Christian character of Main’s particular form of prayer. What is at stake in this debate is the very authenticity of Main’s teaching within the larger history of Christian orthodoxy. As such, most of the scholarship that does exist on Main’s meeting with Swami Satyananda is primarily focused on delineating the precise influence of Hinduism on Main’s teaching. The starting point for this type of analysis, which has been pursued by Stefan Reynolds, Adalbert de Vogüé, and Fabrice Blée, among others, is usually a demonstration of how Main’s teaching differs from that of his most direct Christian predecessor, John Cassian. Where Main does differ from Cassian, for example, in the use of the term “mantra” as opposed to Cassian’s “prayer formula,” or in Main’s dispensation with the recitation of “*Deus, in adiutorium meum intende. Domine, ad adiuvandam me festina*”¹⁸ in favor of the Aramaic word *maranatha*, the difference can be resolved by the influence of Swami Satyananda. Stefan Reynolds, for instance, speculates that Main’s mantra, *maranatha*, may have been chosen “because of its open vowels sounds, which according to Hindu teaching

¹⁸ Adalbert de Vogüé, “From John Cassian to John Main: Reflections on Christian Meditation,” in *John Main: The Expanding Vision*, ed. Laurence Freeman and Stefan Reynolds (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2009), 105. De Vogüé notes, “For Cassian the great secret of the Egyptian monk does not consist in the repetition of any formula but precisely of the one he proposes: *Deus, in adiutorium meum intende. Domine, ad adiuvandam me festina* (Ps. 69.2) This verse literally possesses all virtues. If it is suited to nourish continual prayer, it is because by its generality, it expresses the fundamental need which human beings in their fragility and sinfulness experience in every situation.”

facilitates the opening of the heart.”¹⁹ This claim aligns closely with how Main himself describes Swami Satyananda’s teaching on the mantra. Main, paraphrasing Satyananda, says:

And during the time of your meditation there must be in your mind no thoughts, no words, no imaginations. The sole sound will be the sound of your mantra, your word. *The mantra is like a harmonic. And as we sound this harmonic within ourselves we begin to build up a resonance. That resonance then leads us forward to our own wholeness. We begin to experience the deep unity we all possess in our own being. And then the harmonic begins to build up a resonance between you and all creatures and all creation, and a unity between you and your Creator.*²⁰

In order to resolve this seeming syncretism in Main’s teaching, these interlocutors are concerned with projects that make claims about the authenticity of Main’s thought within the Christian tradition. Adalbert de Vogüé, for one, suggests that John Cassian was used by Main merely as a “liaison,” a means to an end, for the “Christian authentication of [a] Hindu practice.”²¹ “Thanks to Cassian,” writes de Vogüé, “a Hindu practice finds the right to be applied in Christianity.”²² Although de Vogüé asserts that Main had “perfectly assimilated Hindu meditation into a religious life that was entirely given over to Christ,” his analysis nonetheless implies that Main used Cassian in a rather utilitarian fashion merely to authenticate what is an essentially Hindu practice for those who might doubt its Christian character. This interpretation has not quite satisfied Christian practitioners of Main’s method. Fabrice Blée, for example, contends that Main’s method represents a “new coherence,” which is not syncretism nor Hinduism masquerading as Christianity, but a method that is simultaneously verifiable by both Christian

¹⁹ Stefan Reynolds, “Hindu Mantra Meditation and Christian Contemplative Prayer: Swami Satyananda (1909-1961) and John Main O.S.B (1926-1982),” *Dilatato Corde* 4, no. 2 (December 2014).

²⁰ Main, *The Gethsemani Talks*, 13. Emphasis added.

²¹ de Vogüé, 108.

²² de Vogüé, 102.

and Hindu sources.²³ In his words, Main is “both faithful to [Christian] tradition and indebted to other spiritual currents,”²⁴ that is, Hinduism.

Ultimately, these projects that attempt to attribute the influence of Swami Satyananda on John Main’s particular teaching are important, not least because they complicate the question of Main’s syncretism while also helping to place Main within the larger Christian contemplative tradition (and Hindu tradition, for that matter). Yet, this type of analysis suffers from a few crucial and interrelated shortcomings. Namely, it tends to essentialize Hinduism and reduce the historical diversity of the tradition into a single unitary category. Consequently, this essentialized conception of Hinduism is used in a comparative fashion against the teaching of John Main with little or no reference to historical and religio-political context. As such, certain aspects of Main’s teaching can be attributed, in a purely speculative fashion, to concepts that emerge from a variety of Hindu contexts despite the fact that his knowledge of and encounter with Hinduism was profoundly situated in a particular time and place.

Furthermore, in the quest to verify the authenticity of Main’s teaching, which is to say determine the extent to which Main’s teaching conforms to a set of ill-defined criteria for what it means to be Christian, these scholars reify a notion of religion as unchanging, unadulterated, and uniform. To the extent that religion *is* influenced by other religions or contexts, they operate under the assumption that change only occurs at the margins while the essential character remains genuine, untainted, pure. Fabrice Blée is one of the few who have recognized this trend within the scholarship. He writes, “It should be remembered that there is no such thing as a

²³ Fabrice Blée, “The Use of the Mantra in the Practice of Meditation Taught by John Main: Resurgence of an Apologetic Exchange about Its Christian Origin and Hindu Influence,” trans. William Skudlarek, *Dilatato Corde* X, no. 2 (December 2020).

²⁴ Blée.

watertight seal between religions; indeed, all religions are the result of a great syncretic process, and in this respect a meditation practice is no less Christian if it is influenced by foreign currents.”²⁵ Still, one may reasonably wonder if this same consideration of the myth of religious authenticity is applied with respect to Hinduism. Although Blée notes, for instance, a diversity of interpretation about the function of mantras in Hindu traditions, there is no discussion of the way Hinduism itself was altered by Christianity vis-à-vis British colonialism by the time John Main arrived in Malaya. Just as the Christianity of John Main is not pure, unadulterated, or unchanging, it should be assumed that the Hinduism Main encountered was itself a shifting amalgamation of various sources, chief among them the influence of Orientalist scholarship and colonial critiques. This is an important concern for a few reasons. First, it indicates that the Hinduism that shaped Main so profoundly was also, prior to his encounter with Swami Satyananda, shaped *by* the colonial project that Main himself participated in as a colonial administrator. Secondly, instead of a “pure” Hinduism, Main met a Hinduism that in several important respects reflected many of the qualities of the liberal Protestantism of the West, which Main, despite being Catholic, was steeped in during his time at Trinity College in Dublin from 1950-1954.^{26 27}

Instead of contextualizing the meeting between John Main and Swami Satyananda as such, nearly all of Main’s biographical and analytical interlocutors treat the matter rather ahistorically, which can make it seem as if Main’s synthesis of Cassian and Hindu forms of nondiscursive, mantra-based meditation was inevitable or simply a matter of course. In other

²⁵ Blée.

²⁶ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 287.

²⁷ McKenty, 37-44.

words, it is quite easy, in hindsight, to analyze these two traditions (i.e., John Cassian’s “formula” and the Hindu practice of repeated recitation of a sacred name or *japa*) in a vacuum and observe their obvious similarity and complementarity. Although this comparative analysis certainly has its own time and place, it does not illuminate how the Christianity of John Main and the Hinduism of Swami Satyananda became amenable to this type of inter-religious exchange. In other words, most of John Main’s interlocutors are interested in the *what*, which is to say they are interested in an attributional project that dissects the particular ideas, doctrines, and practices present in John Main’s work and seeks to ascribe them to John Cassian, the Hindu tradition in general, or some other source. What needs to still be answered is the *why* and the *how* – what factors made Swami Satyananda, for instance, willing to take on a white, European colonist as a spiritual protégé? How were the tensions between these religious systems resolved, especially amid the contentious religious climate of colonial Malaya? More importantly, where did this particular instruction to meditate twice per day with a mantra come from, and how did it come to be the central practice around which John Main’s Christianity revolved?

A historical genealogy of John Main that takes seriously the religious lineage of Swami Satyananda would attempt to answer these questions, as well as assert that Main gained more from his time in Malaya than merely the appropriation of the Sanskrit term “mantra.” It is possible to understand other aspects of Main’s thought, such as his universalistic approach to other religious traditions, the accessibility of the practice to laypeople as conceived through the concept of a “monastery without walls,” or even the very notion of meditation as the Christian practice *par excellence*, as emerging not only out of the Desert Fathers and the legacy of Vatican II, but also as an outcropping of twentieth-century Hindu reform in Malaya. In this vein, rather than present another referendum on the orthodoxy or authenticity of John Main’s teaching, this

present study is an attempt to suggest, primarily through historical reconstruction and contextual analysis, that the conditions of colonial Malaya were such that they were particularly favorable to the type of inter-religious encounter undertaken by Main and Swami Satyananda, and that Main may yet be more indebted to Swami Satyananda than previous critics have posited. Altogether, through a more robust understanding of Swami Satyananda's context, writings, and religiosity, it will hopefully be possible to correct for an inclination in the existing scholarship to treat him merely as a foil for Main's unique teaching and return to him some sense of agency, taking the exotic and enigmatic holy person that Main met in a faraway land and demystifying him through context and historical perspective. In this sense, it will be necessary to look beyond the basic facts of Main's meeting with Swami Satyananda to understand that their encounter was but one brief episode in Satyananda's life as a religious and national leader, a life dedicated to promulgating and institutionalizing a uniquely universalistic and modern form of Hindu practice tied to Indian and Malayan national identity that engaged other religious traditions within a milieu of reform. Satyananda's own lineage, however, extends beyond twentieth-century Malaya to the earliest reformers of nineteenth-century Bengal. These earlier reform movements planted the seed for Satyananda and Main's later meeting, and their context continues to inform the philosophical and ideological backdrop of their encounter.

Colonialism and Reform from Bengal to Malaya

When John Main entered colonial Malaya in February of 1955 as part of the British Colonial Service, Hinduism in the country was undergoing a fundamental transformation. The movement towards a more "modern" form of Hinduism that began in India during the nineteenth-century, led by figures such as Rammohun Roy, Keshub Chunder Sen, Debendranath Tagore, and Swami Vivekananda, had made its way to Malaya through large-scale Indian

immigration, where it adapted relative to the social and political context of the country.²⁸ This nineteenth-century movement, sometimes described by a number of contested terms such as neo-Hinduism, Hindu modernism, the Hindu Renaissance, and simply Hindu “reform,”²⁹ emerged out of what Tomoko Masuzawa describes as a “process of mutually interactive development”³⁰ between colonial representations of Hinduism, on the one hand, and Hindu self-representation on the other. These early reformers, known as the “*Bhadralok*” or “gentlemen” of Bengali society, navigated a position of social and cultural “middleness” as English-educated, “Westernized” elites operating within the colonial milieu.³¹ Their unique status as an elite, yet subordinate group enabled a critique of Hindu customs that both appropriated and resisted British colonial critiques within an overall “countercolonial discourse.”³²

Nineteenth-century European Indological scholarship broadly privileged the study of Indian traditions vis-à-vis ancient textual sources.³³ As such, the essential nature of Hinduism – the vastness of which was reduced to a singular category – could be divined, these scholars would assert, through these texts without reference to social or historical context.³⁴ Insofar as

²⁸ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, “Indian Immigration and Settlement from 1800,” in *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*, Rev. ed. (Kuala Lumpur, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 10-39.

²⁹ Brian A. Hatcher in *Hinduism Before Reform* prefers to describe this phenomenon using the “normatively neutral” language of “religious polity.” This certainly has its advantages, but for the purposes of this study, “reform” will suffice, as it indicates the emergence of something distinct relative to previous forms of Hindu religious belief and practice. The normative presuppositions of this term are also important to maintain insofar as it is an accurate descriptor of how figures such as Swami Vivekananda viewed their project as a process of improvement in the creation of a new sense of Hindu identity for the modern world.

³⁰ Masuzawa, 283.

³¹ Andrew C. Willford, *Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 130.

³² Willford, 130.

³³ Carl Vadivella Belle, “Colonialism, Colonial Knowledge and Hindu Reform Movements,” in *Thaipusam in Malaysia: A Hindu Festival in the Tamil Diaspora* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2017), 65-66, 73.

³⁴ Vadivella Belle, 73-80.

these texts were treated as containers of ideal and unadulterated principles upon which Indian society should be centered, nineteenth-century India, with its popular cultic and ritual practices, was understood to be the unfortunate outcome of a long process of denigration from a pristine Vedic source.³⁵ Brahmin reformers thus took it upon themselves to reestablish this supposed pristine Hinduism of early Sanskrit civilization. Having been educated according to Western notions of science and logic, the assumptions of orientalist scholarship became the starting point for a reformist project of “a rational plan of national uplift”³⁶ in which religious practice recognized as being consistent with Sanskrit textual sources became privileged over and against “deviant” folk practices, festivals, devotions, and other forms of popular religious practice. It followed that Hinduism is properly a religion of “inwardness,” an assertion that hedged these reformers’ ambivalent social location to critique both the “worldliness” of folk religion as well as the “materialism” of the British colonists.³⁷

Another, perhaps even more prominent, colonial assumption was that Hinduism lacked the same commitments to charitable aid and social service that were characteristic of Christian missionaries. The *Bhadralok* responded with a de-emphasis on *bhakti* and devotional practice in favor of the more “worldly” commitment to Karma Yoga, or “unselfish action.”³⁸ Organizations dedicated to reform and social service, such as the highly influential Ramakrishna Society of Swami Vivekananda, rose to prominence as vehicles for this self-styled form of Hinduism that emphasized ecumenism, meditation, and service for a largely middle-class following.

³⁵ Vadivella Belle, 73-80.

³⁶ Willford, 130.

³⁷ Willford, 130.

³⁸ Willford, 130-131.

In the early half of the nineteenth-century, principally because of shifts in Malayan commercial and agricultural interests, large numbers of Indian Hindus settled in Malaya as indentured plantation laborers. While these laborers constituted the vast majority of Indian immigrants of this time period, a significant number of Hindus, particularly English-educated Ceylonese Tamils, were also recruited to populate certain sectors of the colonial bureaucracy and, in subsequent generations, as professionals and private sector employees.³⁹ Thus, a two-tiered Indian society distinguished not only by class and caste, but also by religion – with the ritual-heavy folk practices of the indentured laborers on the one hand and the reformed Hinduism of the educated classes on the other – began to emerge in colonial Malaya.

Andrew Willford argues that this latter group of educated Tamil professionals occupied a similar position of “middleness” between British elites and Tamil laborers within the social strata of Malaya, with the same ambivalence to traditional Indian customs and colonial attitudes that emerged in the Indian context.⁴⁰ As such, this professional class contributed to the establishment of new temples and institutions within urban centers as a way of preserving Hindu identity against the real or perceived threat of Westernization. Soon other organizations that had grown in prominence in India, such as the Ramakrishna Mission and the Vivekananda Society, had also established themselves in Malaya and further institutionalized the “great tradition” that had originated in Bengal in the nineteenth-century.⁴¹ The Ramakrishna Mission, famously founded by Swami Vivekananda, established itself in Malaya in 1903, offering social services and classes on Vedantic philosophy to a chiefly middle-class patronage. A similar organization known as the

³⁹ Arasaratnam, 10-39.

⁴⁰ Willford, 132.

⁴¹ Willford, 132.

Divine Life Society, founded by Swami Sivananda, also gained prominence among a similar clientele, at times overtaking the Ramakrishna Mission in standing and popularity. According to Willford, these organizations share the same essential philosophical commitments in their stress on the practice of meditation, devotion, charity and service, and ecumenism and universalism.⁴²

Swami Satyananda and The Context of Reform in Malaya

It is within this context of a growing, deliberate effort to institutionalize a sense of Hindu identity rooted in the socio-political “middleness” of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indian and Malayan reformers that we must also understand Swami Satyananda. Born on July 15th, 1909, Satyananda was orphaned by the age of 11, brought up by an uncle, and educated at St. Michael School in Ipoh. His original name was Kailasam. He served as a clerk in the Malayan government for ten years starting in 1926.⁴³ It was at this time that he met Shri V. Ramalingam, who taught him yoga, meditation, and Vedanta, as well as Mahayana Buddhist philosophies.⁴⁴ Later he met Swami Abhedananda, a sannyasin of the Ramakrishna Order and direct disciple of Ramakrishna, as well as a successor to Vivekananda, who “inspired him with the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, the Buddha and the sublimity of Indian culture.”⁴⁵ He studied under several other prominent figures, including Swami Paramananda, Swami Bhaswarananda and Swami Atmaram, developing an intense commitment to meditation and the Raja Yoga methods of Vivekananda, as well as studying Sanskrit, Saiva Siddhanta and Tamil language. He had a number of visions and spiritual experiences during his life, including visions of Krishna, Buddha,

⁴² Willford, 133.

⁴³ V.G. Nair, *Swami Satyananda and Cultural Relations Between India and Malaya*, 1st Edition, Commemoration Volume (Kuala Lumpur, Malaya: Pure Life Society, 1960), iii.

⁴⁴ Nair, iii.

⁴⁵ Nair, iii.

Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, Sankaracharya, and Jesus.⁴⁶ Satyananda was a devoted member of the Vivekananda ashram in Kuala Lumpur and the Ramakrishna Mission in Singapore, as well as a prominent educator throughout Malaya before renouncing these positions to join an order of monks under the direction of Swami Vijnanananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, in 1937. He traveled and studied throughout India, Burma, and Ceylon for three years, meeting with such figures as Gandhi, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, and Sri Ramana Maharshi. It is said that Sri Ramana stared into his eyes and gave him an “exalted spiritual experience.”⁴⁷

During the second World War and the Japanese occupation of Malaya, Swami Satyananda became an esteemed friend to the nationalist leader, Subhas Chandra Bose. Satyananda joined the Indian nationalist movement and was appointed Member-in-Charge of Education and Culture in the Azad Hind Government.⁴⁸ This was a time of deep suffering for Malaysians, but for Malayan Indians especially. With the evacuation of European authorities in government and the private sector, many industries, including crucial plantations and agricultural operations, were left in disarray. Laborers were left without wages, sanitary conditions deteriorated, supply chains were broken, and food shortages were commonplace.⁴⁹ Laborers were sent to work in appalling conditions on projects meant to buttress the Japanese military. Swami Satyananda was sent as Indian Representative to the Japanese Military Administration to oversee one such project, the Siam-Burma Railway, also known as the “Death Railway.”⁵⁰ Here he sent

⁴⁶ Nair, iv.

⁴⁷ Nair, v.

⁴⁸ Shuddhananda Bharati, *Experiences of a Pilgrim Soul* (Chennai: Shuddhananda Library, 2000), 387; Nair, vii.

⁴⁹ Arasaratnam, 110.

⁵⁰ Nair, vii.

confidential reports on the working conditions of the forced laborers to Subhas Chandra Bose.⁵¹ He set up an orphanage for some 300 children, all dependents of those who perished or were killed while working on the railway line.⁵² All told, forced labor and general disrepair meant that the Indian population in Malaya fell from 14 percent in 1940 to 10 percent in 1947.⁵³

With the British reoccupation of Malaya in 1945, the Indian nationalist movement was subject to new hostilities and suspicions. Swami Satyananda himself, along with several other civilian leaders, were detained by the British military.⁵⁴ Satyananda was ultimately released and in 1946 was appointed Secretary of the Indian Relief Committee under the Indian National Congress by Jawaharlal Nehru.⁵⁵ Nehru spoke fondly of Satyananda, calling him, “an idealist who believes in practical religion.”⁵⁶ Satyananda assisted Nehru in the legal defense organized by the Indian National Congress on behalf of those interned by the British in Malaya.⁵⁷ The charges against those detained were eventually dropped, and soon after Swami Satyananda was involved in the creation of the Malayan Indian Congress in 1946, which competed with several other Indian nationalist groups at the time for the loyalty of Indians in Malaya.⁵⁸

The following year, wanting to deepen his religious commitments and dedicate himself more fully to social service, Satyananda appealed to one of his teachers, the Indian philosopher

⁵¹ Bharati, 388.; Nair, vii.

⁵² Nair, vii-viii.

⁵³ Arasaratnam, 111.

⁵⁴ Arasaratnam, 112; Bharati, 388.; Nair, viii.

⁵⁵ Bharati, 388; Nair, viii.

⁵⁶ Bharati, 388.

⁵⁷ Arasaratnam, 112; Bharati, 388.; Nair, viii.

⁵⁸ Arasaratnam, 112; Nair, x.

and hermit, Shuddhananda Bharati (1897-1990). Bharati was a prolific poet and sage actively engaged in the project of “modernizing” Hinduism for both middle-class Hindus and British colonists according to Western understandings of science and rationality. He was dedicated to his concept of Sama Yoga, often translated as “spiritual socialism,” which “accepts yoga for the betterment of one’s inner-self and modern science for one’s material prosperity.”⁵⁹ Bharati’s encounters with a number of prominent Indian religious leaders, including Sri Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi, Swami Sivananda, as well as Swami Satyananda, are detailed in his autobiographical work, *Experiences of a Pilgrim Soul*. Bharati claims to be the catalyst for the establishment of a number of reformist social service organizations, including both the Divine Life Society of Sivananda and the Pure Life Society of Satyananda. His message to Sivananda, “Be centered in; organize the life Divine”⁶⁰ was the supposed seed that would eventually blossom as the Divine Life Society not only in India, but Malaya as well. His message to Swami Satyananda was even more direct. After declaring Satyananda a sannyasin, Bharati gave him the following directive:

‘I call you Swami Satyananda from today. I silently utter the Viraja Mantra...Sit there closing your eyes,’ said S[huddhananda] to the calm Serene Sadhu. When the inner communion was established, he said, ‘I have a new peace and energy now and I want a service.’ ‘Go to Kuala Lumpur and start the Shuddha Samaj (Pure Life Society). The means shall seek you by the Divine Grace. Meditate at 6 am and 6 pm alone, calmly and commune with the In-Dweller. He will show you Light and you will be victorious.’⁶¹

⁵⁹ R. Venkatakrisnan, “Preface,” in *Experiences of a Pilgrim Soul*, by Shuddhananda Bharati (Chennai: Shuddhananda Library, 2000).

⁶⁰ Bharati, 310.

⁶¹ Bharati, 389.

Thus, Satyananda mostly withdrew from political activity, became the “Pure Life Missionary,”⁶² and established the Pure Life Society in the following years with the blessing of the Divine Life Society, which was also operating locally.⁶³

The founding of the Pure Life Society coincided with a post-war revival of interest in Hinduism in Malaya following Indian independence.⁶⁴ Key figures of the Hindu reform movement were invited from India at the behest of societies like the Divine and Pure Life societies to spread their message to fresh and enthusiastic listeners.⁶⁵ Arasaratnam describes this period in Malayan history as one of “distinct commitment of the educated classes to their Hindu tradition,” in which the “more Sanskritized and scriptural” religion of reform Hinduism proliferated among study groups, sangams, and lectures of middle-class societies.⁶⁶ Interestingly, despite the fact that these sangams were preaching the distinctly modern Hinduism of the reformers (and through the medium of English, no less), they helped facilitate a “movement of rejection of cultural westernization” in Malaya, where people could “re-educate themselves in their tradition.”⁶⁷

In a speech given at the Second Conference of World Religions in Kolkata in 1960, Swami Satyananda described his philosophy and the hopes of the Pure Life Society. He writes,

The world of experience is one of variety. At the same time there is a unity underlying this variety – called Reality, God, Universal Spirit, the Great Mind and by many other names according to the climes and times... The deeper aspect of religion which consists

⁶² Bharati, 389.

⁶³ Willford, 139.

⁶⁴ Arasaratnam, 165.

⁶⁵ Arasaratnam, 165.

⁶⁶ Arasaratnam, 165.

⁶⁷ Arasaratnam, 166.

in living a highly ethical and moral life, a life of universal love and benevolence coupled with self-culture – the practice of contemplation and meditation – is the key to the lasting realization of this Unity.⁶⁸

This is a representative passage that underscores the dominant animating idea of Satyananda's life and work: universalism. "God is one and common to all men," he writes elsewhere, "but the paths which different people in different ages, times and conditions take to realise It [sic], necessarily vary."⁶⁹ The Pure Life Society is the vehicle for realizing this underlying unity of all races and religions. Its Temple of Universal Spirit is a shared worship space that exists under the motto "One Race and One God."⁷⁰ Swami Satyananda applied this universalism, which was undoubtedly a remnant of the work of earlier reformers like Swami Vivekananda, in a unique way to fashion a sense of Malayan national identity, particularly a Malayan Indian and Hindu identity, as the country entered independence. "We have to accept and appreciate all that is best in the culture of others as much as our own," he writes. "Such a universal attitude will evidently tend to promote unity and harmony amongst the different Malayan races with different cultures."⁷¹ Universalism was a conceptual framework that could at once establish Indian culture and Hinduism as being uniquely tolerant, modernizing forces in Malayan society without polemic, as well as create a national identity such that "Malaya will rightly have the pride to tell the world that variegated races, cultures and religions can really co-exist united with the bond of love and understanding."⁷²

⁶⁸ Nair, xix-xx.

⁶⁹ Nair, 61.

⁷⁰ Nair, xiv.

⁷¹ Nair, xxv

⁷² Nair, xxx.

Universalism undergirds all of Swami Satyananda's work and provides a conceptual through-line in the development of several of his other major theses. The first thesis describes all of life, including religion, as being dictated by a process of evolution and movement towards perfection. The second thesis posits that the world has entered a new epoch - "the age of the common man" – and the "periods of the priest, the king and the trader are over."⁷³ In this schema, it is incumbent upon society to meet the problems of this particular age with "spiritual socialism," a concept Satyananda clearly adopted from Bharati, which has less to do with socialism as it is conventionally understood than the creation of a synthesis of religion and science, spirituality and materialism, East and West. For Swami Satyananda, the "equalizing impulse of the worker" during this age is "expressing itself in violent and destructive ways" in the "upheavals" happening around the world.⁷⁴ These upheavals are indicative of a lack of tolerance and spirituality within society, of socialism without spirituality. He writes,

If man can realise the spiritual basis of this equalizing impulse and become conscious of his divine nature and the oneness of human being and manifest that unity of consciousness in his daily life then alone can uniform harmony and peace reign in society and true socialism be established.⁷⁵

Satyananda was, in many ways, a characteristic figure within the religious climate of twentieth century Malaya. He was part of a "band of devoted and intellectually equipped monks" that assumed the role of a Hindu *intelligentsia* within Malayan society.⁷⁶ These monks were affiliated with the reformist monastic orders and societies taking root, and their non-sectarian approach appealed widely to all Malayan Hindus. Nonetheless, they drew a largely middle-class

⁷³ Nair, xvi-xvii.

⁷⁴ Nair, 117.

⁷⁵ Nair, 117.

⁷⁶ Arasaratnam, 175.

following of Indian Hindus eager to reconnect with their cultural and religious heritage.⁷⁷ These swamis were also able to appeal beyond religious boundaries, and the universalism and toleration they preached facilitated dialogue with the intellectual classes of other religious groups.

The Context of Inter-religious Encounter in Malaya

In light of the historical context outlined above, Satyananda's relationship with John Main would not have been particularly out of the ordinary. John Main, as both an intellectual and member of the colonial bureaucracy, presented an opportunity for the assertion of this modern Hinduism to the West. Satyananda's acceptance of Main's proposal to become his student would have been motivated, perhaps in part, by the reformist view, tracing back to Rammohun Roy and Vivekananda, of the "general superiority of the East in the realm of spirituality,"⁷⁸ in which the spiritual East, in the words of Vivekananda, may "have yet something to teach"⁷⁹ the scientific and materialistic West. Satyananda certainly ascribed to this view, writing, "One fundamental fact stands out most prominently on the firmament of Indian civilization, and that is 'the history of Indian culture is in the main the history of spiritual contributions.'"⁸⁰

Hinduism is, in the words of Swami Satyananda, "the one religion which impresses on mankind the closeness of God to us and embraces in its compass all the possible means by which man can approach God."⁸¹ It is "the one religion that can triumph over materialism by including

⁷⁷ Arasaratnam, 175.

⁷⁸ Masuzawa, 289.

⁷⁹ Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda.*, 11th ed., vol. 3 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1970), 148

⁸⁰ Swami Satyananda, *A Study on the Influence of Indian Culture on Malaysia & Malaya* (Petaling, Kuala Lumpur: Pure Life Society, 1947), 2.

⁸¹ Nair, 24.

and anticipating the discoveries of science and the speculations of philosophy.”⁸² These claims, while they appear to be exclusivist or triumphalist, are adopted under the banner of universalism, which paradoxically claims that a universal religion is the most appropriate and supreme form of religion. Other “narrow,” “sectarian,” or “exclusive” religions do not meet the challenges of the modern age and are doubly destined for failure and obsolescence, for they “can live only for a limited time and a limited purpose.”⁸³ Hinduism, then, in its rich spirituality and ability to embrace a diverse array of often conflictual and competing traditions, stands in a position of some authority with regard to the materialistic West. Its uniqueness, coupled with a universalism that seeks to establish commonality, becomes the basis for engagement with other religions and stands as a way to absorb Westernization while retaining a distinct Hindu character.

What’s more, John Main’s encounter with this modern form of Hinduism would not have necessarily been limited to his personal encounter with Swami Satyananda. Hindu modernism, with its universalism, emphasis on social service and inner development, and synthesis of East and West, was very much in vogue among the middle classes that populated the colonial bureaucracy surrounding Main. In other words, the religious and political climate of Malaya at the time was such that Hindu modernism, often in dialogue with Christianity, would likely have been the dominant expression of Hinduism that Main would have encountered among the diverse forms of Hinduism within Malaya. The Pure Life Society of Swami Satyananda was a key feature of this religious climate, and it established a continuity between nineteenth-century Bengal, the Ramakrishna Mission of Swami Vivekananda, and Divine Life Society of Swami Sivananda.

⁸² Nair, 24.

⁸³ Nair, 24.

John Main and Swami Satyananda's relationship was predicated on the ideals of earlier reformers, especially universalism, the insistence on the supremacy of the East in the realm of spirituality, and the institutionalization of inter-religious encounter within societies and institutions of social service. Each of these facets of reformist thought found their own application in 1950's Malaya, where Satyananda and others like him sought to encourage a certain form of religious practice that would modernize and unite diverse religious groups in the creation of "Merdeka" Malaya, independent Malaya.⁸⁴ Ultimately, Swami Satyananda is John Main's connection to nineteenth-century Bengal, a curious if not unexplored linkage that may open up new ways of understanding Hinduism's influence on John Main's work. While there may be several aspects of Swami Satyananda's religious lineage that were passed on to John Main, two major features of these reformist movements, namely the institutionalization of lay meditation practice through reformist societies and universalism came to prefigure characteristic aspects of John Main's thought.

Lay Empowerment and the Tailoring of Meditative Practice

Swami Satyananda taught John Main to meditate twice a day, each day, for a half an hour. This was the same teaching that Satyananda received from one of his teachers, Shuddhananda Bharati, who taught him to meditate at 6am and 6pm each day for a short period. To meditate for one hour each day, while demanding, is a relatively moderate teaching that was tailored for a specific purpose: to provide balance between religious commitments to social service, on the one hand, and inner development, contemplation, and prayer on the other. One could, for instance, meditate in the morning, then during the day assist in the orphanage at the Pure Life Society, or teach adult education through the society's school, or work in the

⁸⁴ Nair, xxix-xxx.

dispensary distributing medicines, returning to meditate in the evening for an ideal balance of Karma Yoga, the “path of active selfless service,” and Raja Yoga, “the path of concentration, meditation, and psychic control.”⁸⁵ This teaching also has the added benefit of being compatible with the life of a layperson in the modern world. It is not a teaching that demands years of commitment to long hours of meditative practice as an ascetic or hermit. Rather, it is a teaching that claims that one can reach a certain level of attainment and realization in an otherwise active, busy life. “God could be realized both by the householder and the ascetic,” writes Satyananda, “provided they fulfill their duties and obligations in the proper manner according to their stages of life.”⁸⁶

In a talk entitled “Life Divine,” Swami Satyananda uses the examples of the Nayanars of the *Periya Puranam*, a Tamil poem recounting the lives of sixty-three Shaivite saints of Tamil Nadu, to illustrate how “one need not necessarily become a recluse or a monk or a nun to attain God-consciousness.”⁸⁷ In the following passage, he describes how these saints used the practice of repeated recitation of a sacred name to maintain a sense of equanimity despite external distractions:

“Pray always” said Jesus when answering a question “When shall we pray?” So the Saints and Saintesses of the Periapurana lived in constant prayer and “acted in the living Present, heart within God O’erhead.”⁸⁸

Wise men and women who know this secret of work do not get bound or affected (*subjectively*) by the reactions that works of all kinds inevitably produce; they are in continuous relaxation and maintain an inner calmness and equipoise despite all outward happenings because their soul is in perennial touch (*Yoga*) with the Source of all peace, joy and blessedness, through whole-hearted and single-minded devotion which is attained by meditation on a sacred name, form or ideal; they, therefore, turn work as well as all

⁸⁵ Nair, 45.

⁸⁶ Nair., 66.

⁸⁷ Nair, 153.

⁸⁸ Quotation taken from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “A Psalm of Life.”

circumstances as effective means to the attainment of God-realisation. This is the Path of Right Action – Karma Yoga – practised and taught by the Great Teachers of the world.⁸⁹

This passage is extremely instructive, for not only does it once again illustrate the connection and balance between Raja Yoga (through meditation on a sacred name) with Karma Yoga that the earliest reformers were concerned with, but it claims that meditation on a sacred name (*japa*) is a practice suitable to laypeople whose lives are especially punctured by the distraction of “outward happenings.” Swami Satyananda’s efforts to institutionalize lay practice through the Pure Life Society and his way of tailoring *japa* practice to the demands of lay life are intimately connected to the creation of Malayan Hindu identity, of reconnecting Malayan Indians to a certain cultural heritage. Satyananda and other reformers, as monastic leaders of communities of laypeople, fostered a revival of lay practice in Malaya through lectures on a broad range of topics from Advaita Vedānta to Malayan and Indian history, by providing opportunities for service and uplift, through inter-religious engagement, and, crucially, by tailoring yogic and meditative practice to lay life.

John Main, studying with Swami Satyananda during this lay revival, would later foster a lay movement of his own centered on the twice daily practice of meditation. Although Main’s time as a formal teacher of meditation spanned only seven years before his death from cancer in 1982, the lay community he fostered was significant and consisted of several phases. The first was the parallel monastic-lay community Main conceived at Ealing Abbey in London in 1975. With the support of his abbot, he invited a small group of young laymen to live for a short period at the monastery to teach them to meditate. Word of this unique undertaking soon spread, bringing larger numbers of laypeople to the monastery to learn meditation from Fr. John. “Many who could not leave their family or work responsibilities to live with us for six months

⁸⁹ Nair, 154.

nevertheless seriously wanted to learn to pray,”⁹⁰ Main writes of this time. And although Main initially expressed some trepidation that hosting such groups of laypeople might “threaten the ‘purity’ of our monastic spirit,”⁹¹ it was the “seriousness and perseverance” of the non-resident laypeople that assured him that his fears about the dilution of the teaching were misplaced. Like Satyananda, Main believed that the practice of meditation need not be a practice exclusive to monks or hermits. Rather, the first meditation group Main founded at Ealing Abbey was, for him, “a place where very ordinary people, not spiritual heroes, prove that faith is possible.”⁹²

The second phase of the growing community of Christian meditators began when Bishop Leonard Crowley (1921-2003), the Auxiliary Bishop of Montreal, invited Main to establish a “new kind of monastery”⁹³ in the city that gathered monks and laypeople together around the practice of Main’s Christian meditation and in adherence to the Rule of St. Benedict. In 1977, Main and the community at Ealing accepted Bishop Crowley’s proposal. The earliest community at Montreal consisted of Main, four laypeople, and Fr. Laurence Freeman, who now stands as Main’s principal successor and is a renowned teacher in his own right. Throughout his teaching years, Main developed a distinct philosophy of lay life that insisted, in concurrence with the long-established institution of Benedictine oblates, on the accessibility of the Rule of St. Benedict and the practice of Christian meditation to all people regardless of one’s place in life.

Main’s biographer, Neil McKenty, writes:

One of the most exciting and revolutionary elements in Father John’s fresh vision of community was the role of lay people, both those living inside and outside the

⁹⁰ John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main*, ed. Laurence Freeman (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2006), 6.

⁹¹ Main, 5.

⁹² Main, 9.

⁹³ Main, 11.

community itself. As the community developed so would the active participation of the laity, single or married. This would be one of Father John's contributions to modern monasticism – a community life where, for example, the oblates (those with a special commitment to prayer and the office) were not just a passive guild of pious women but a group of people who formed an integral part of the monastic community, its prayer life and its activities, some of which they initiated. In a real sense the monastery was to be the centre of a growing family linked by strong spiritual bonds. This was a vital and developing monasticism – flexible, prayerful, vitally connected to the real world.⁹⁴

Aside from his continual insistence on the practicality and simplicity of the practice of meditation, Main writes more explicitly about the lay relationship to Benedictine monasticism and the practice of meditation, saying, “There is nothing esoteric or exclusive about this tradition. The participation of the Lay Community [sic] and the weekly meditation groups in the prayer-life of the monastic tradition is a focal point of the Christian tradition, of the Christian experience of prayer, lived with a particular kind of commitment.”⁹⁵ One may contend that Main's openness to laypeople is in fact not unique, but simply a customary charism of Benedictine life that finds expression in the oblate tradition which welcomes laypeople to commit to a life of prayer and stability through a formal affiliation with a particular monastery. This is partly true, but as McKenty suggests, Main conceived of oblates as an integral part of the regular functioning of a monastic community who make a special commitment not only to the dictates of the Rule of St. Benedict, but also to the daily practice of meditation such that, in the words of Fr. Laurence Freeman, “the essential bond of the oblate community is meditation itself.”⁹⁶ Through the institution of Benedictine oblates, Main finds a way to institutionalize the lay practice of meditation, organizing the twice daily practice of meditation he first learned from

⁹⁴ McKenty, 116.

⁹⁵ John Main, *Community of Love* (London: Medio Media, 2020), 119-120.

⁹⁶ Main, 39.

Swami Satyananda around the more conventional prayer life of oblates. Speaking to oblates, he says, “Have your morning prayer, the prayer that you will find in the Breviary, psalms and readings and then your morning meditation where you can be silently aware of the power of Christ in your own hearts. And then return to it again in the evening and to offer that evening prayer, psalms and readings from the New Testament, and then your evening meditation.”⁹⁷

According to Fr. Laurence Freeman, Main, while always stressing the importance of monasteries, “found more hope for the future in the phenomenon of a contemplative laity, the meditation groups and the worldwide Benedictine oblate community of meditators who interpreted the Rule [of St. Benedict] in the light of their lives in the world.”⁹⁸

Of course, Main’s openness to laypeople was not only influenced by the milieu of reform he encountered in Malaya but was also significantly informed by the reforms of Vatican II. The Second Vatican Council elucidated the role of the lay apostolate within the Church and declared that “modern conditions demand that their apostolate be broadened and intensified.”⁹⁹ This was the first time a council had officially taken up the question of the role of the laity within the Church. The Council declared that the laity “share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world.”¹⁰⁰ In addition to the creation of new lay orders, the already extant oblate tradition received a renewed sense of mission and purpose within the post-Vatican II

⁹⁷ Main, 53.

⁹⁸ John Main, *John Main: Essential Writings*, ed. Laurence Freeman (Orbis Books, 2002), 47.

⁹⁹ Second Vatican Council, “Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Solemnly Promulgated By His Holiness, Pope Paul VI On November 18, 1965,” 1, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html.

¹⁰⁰ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2.

Church. Roberta Werner writes that “[Benedictine] oblates are ideal people in the lay world to carry out the desires of Vatican II.”¹⁰¹

As such, John Main’s commitment to a vital role for oblates within the monastic community was entirely consistent with the ethos of the Second Vatican Council. The post-conciliar environment enabled and encouraged his experiments in monastic innovation and lay empowerment. Nevertheless, the precise mechanism through which Main is able to bring laypeople into the fold – the twice daily practice of meditation as part of the oblate life – is a relatively novel invention that originates more in the reform tradition of Swami Satyananda than in the vision of Vatican II or the teaching of John Cassian. For instance, as de Vogüé has noted, these two discreet times for meditation are nowhere prescribed by Cassian.¹⁰² Conference Ten is rather clear that there should be no distinction between times of prayer and times of not-prayer, the genius of the prayer formula being its way of facilitating “continuous prayer, an endless refrain [you recite] when you bow down in prostration and when you rise up to do all the necessary things in life.”¹⁰³ To be clear, Main does not rule out such “continuous prayer,” and the two set-aside times for formal meditation practice are meant to support and cultivate such prayer. Nevertheless, the integration of two short periods of daily meditation for both monks and lay oblates helped to create, in the words of John Main, “a new kind of Benedictine community based on meditation.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Roberta Werner, *Reaching for God: The Benedictine Oblate Way of Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013).

¹⁰² de Vogüé, 108-109.

¹⁰³ Cassian, 136.

¹⁰⁴ Main, *Monastery Without Walls*, 29.

This twice daily meditation, which was originally a dictate of Bharati to his protégé Satyananda and adapted to complement reformist commitments to social service, thus receives a new application within this Benedictine context. The end is the same – the institutionalization of lay meditation practice – though the motivations and precise institutions through which this end is realized differ. Satyananda offered a meditation practice compatible with lay life within the institutional framework of the Pure Life Society that helped to foster a certain Hindu national identity. Main carried on that legacy, synthesizing both the *japa* practice learned from Satyananda and the *hesychast* tradition of John Cassian into a simple, straightforward teaching for laypeople and oblates for another purpose – personal, cultural, and, indeed, monastic reform that was to be realized in the new communities he founded at Ealing and Montreal.

Universalism, Christian Inclusivism, and the Limits of Encounter

To understand how John Main's universalism is related to his relationship with Swami Satyananda, we must first determine if John Main is indeed a universalist. This question is complicated by a seeming contradiction in the way in which Main engages with other religious traditions, both practically and textually, on the one hand, and his soteriological understanding of the universal redemptive love of Christ, on the other. Sicco Claus argues that Main's body of work contains strands of both universalism, in this case meaning the belief that all religions share an underlying transcendent reality despite their apparent diversity, and Christian inclusivism, or the belief that Christ is the only way to salvation and all of humanity, whether they know Christ or not, may access this salvation.¹⁰⁵ On a practical level, Main's belief in a certain degree of commonality between religious traditions is readily apparent. His relationship with Swami

¹⁰⁵ Sicco Claus, "Redeem Us From Shallowness: An Interpretation of the Spiritual Heritage of John Main" (Doctoral Dissertation, Radbound University, Publication Forthcoming), 210-215.

Satyananda notwithstanding, Main met with a number of prominent figures from religious traditions other than Christianity throughout his life, including a meeting with the 14th Dalai Lama in 1980. In general, he staked out a non-threatening, open position to other religions. “We need Christian people who realize that we have nothing whatever to fear from the Buddhist tradition or the Hindu tradition that is truly spiritual,” he once wrote.¹⁰⁶ In certain places, he draws equivalence between certain Christian teachings and those of other traditions, such as in the following comparison:

By faithfulness to the twice-daily meditation we find that in the Christian tradition self-discovery and self-affirmation are the realizations of our own true grandeur and true splendor in Christ...In the Indian tradition the same understanding finds expression in the assertion that our first task is the discovery of our own true inner self, the Atman, which means becoming aware of union with the ultimate universal self, which is Brahman, which is God.¹⁰⁷

Main makes the same equivalence again in a letter to a friend, saying, “There is the true self (Atman) which is Christ, in him, with him and through him we are in God (Brahman).”¹⁰⁸ This is far from the only place where Main’s use of teachings from other religious traditions, and Hinduism in particular, points toward a certain universalism. Elsewhere he says, “What our encounter with India and the East is teaching us is something we should never have forgotten – that the essential Christian experience is beyond the capacity of any cultural or intellectual form to express,”¹⁰⁹ suggesting that there is some underlying universal reality that transcends symbolism and cultural difference. Again, he says, “the Truth is non-dualistic, *advaitic* is the

¹⁰⁶ Harris, 204.

¹⁰⁷ John Main, *Word into Silence*, 19. Main here conflates belief in *Ātman* with a generalized and unspecified “Indian tradition” despite the fact of a wide diversity of religious traditions within India, including Buddhist traditions that assert a conflictual doctrine of *anātman*.

¹⁰⁸ McKenty, 123.

¹⁰⁹ Main, *Monastery Without Walls*, 91.

common universal insight among men. ‘The Father and I are One,’ ‘The Lord God is One, there is no Other,’ ‘The One without a second.’ It is an insight central to the Christian tradition, both in the Gospels and the early Church Fathers.”¹¹⁰ At times he echoes Swami Satyananda’s notion that God is one, but the paths to God are varied, though Main uses the language of the Holy Spirit to express this: “the power of the Spirit – which is not confined to any tradition [is] working in different ways and expressing itself in quite different terms.”¹¹¹ To provide but one more example of Main’s universalizing impulse, he says, “What we learn in meditation is that to be in our own centre is to be in God. That is not only the great teaching of all Eastern religions but it is the fundamental insight of Christianity.”¹¹²

Despite an abundance of such passages that suggest that Main did ascribe to a vision of a universal and underlying reality shared by all religious traditions – a reality to be found and accessed in prayer and meditation – Sicco Claus suggests that these passages are “exceptional” and, moreover, they “concern religious *language*, not salvation.”¹¹³ He contends that Main’s universalism needs to be contextualized within Main’s particular Christology. Using Alister McGrath’s typology of Christian responses to the existence of other religions, Claus argues that, for as open as Main is to inter-religious engagement and dialogue, he nonetheless occupies the position of an inclusivist, believing that Christ is the only way to salvation and that every human being, whether they profess belief in Christ or not, may be included in that salvation.¹¹⁴ At times

¹¹⁰ John Main, “Anaheim Congress Talks: Prayer and Integrity” (Private collection of Georgetown University, n.d.), 2.

¹¹¹ John Main, “Prayer: A Way for Today” (Private collection of Georgetown University, n.d.), 2.

¹¹² John Main, *Moment of Christ: The Path of Meditation* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 2.

¹¹³ Claus, 213.

¹¹⁴ Claus, 213-215.

Main makes explicit this inclusivist position, saying, “[Jesus] is the universal Redeemer; inclusively, not exclusively, by love alone. Jesus does not condemn anyone. Everyone is eventually redeemed by the universal love that flows from him personally.”¹¹⁵ Christ, according to Main, is not just another “Great Teacher” such as he is conceived of by Satyananda but is “the One Way because his love embraces all human ways. He is the universal Redeemer and the universal Sanctifier.”¹¹⁶ These passages pointing to Christ as the *one* way to salvation exist alongside affirmative references to Ramakrishna,¹¹⁷ Buddhist understandings of *samsara*,¹¹⁸ the *Upanishads*,¹¹⁹ the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu,¹²⁰ the Zen tradition in general,¹²¹ the Sufi poet Attar,¹²² and other texts and figures from outside the Christian tradition. For Main, there is no seeming conflict between claims that Christ is the one way to salvation and that there is some universal reality at the core of all religions, nor does he actively seek to resolve the tension. Rather, Main’s position towards non-Christians, even if it is somewhat implicit, seems to approximate Karl Rahner’s notion of the “anonymous Christian,” of someone who “lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside explicitly constituted Christianity.”¹²³

¹¹⁵ John Main, *Door to Silence: An Anthology for Christian Meditation*, ed. Laurence Freeman (London: Medio Media, 2006), 1-2.

¹¹⁶ John Main, *The Way of Unknowing: Expanding Spiritual Horizons Through Meditation* (Canterbury Press, 2012), 60.

¹¹⁷ Main, *Word into Silence*, 8.

¹¹⁸ Main, 12.

¹¹⁹ Main, 14.

¹²⁰ John Main, *The Heart of Creation: The Meditative Way* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 27.

¹²¹ Main, 102.

¹²² Main, 29.

¹²³ Karl Rahner, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965-1982* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 207.; Claus, 214.

The tension between universalism and inclusivism in Main's work is indicative of both his indebtedness to Swami Satyananda as well as the constraints of their exchange brought about by the colonial context. For Swami Satyananda and earlier reformers before him, universalism is a way of leveling the playing field of inter-religious encounter and undermining the theological basis of Christian proselytism. If Christ is merely another "Great Teacher" – a *rishi* or *arivar*¹²⁴ – on par with Buddha, Muhammed, Ramakrishna, or the saints of the *Periya Puranam*, with no distinctive soteriological significance, conversion becomes an unwarranted proposition. Satyananda would claim that the missionary impulse within Christianity is, in fact, a perversion of the original and universal message of Christ. He writes,

The great founders and masters of the various faiths originally taught the self-same fundamental spiritual truths in their pristine purity, but, unfortunately, their followers have read and interpreted their teachings with a clouded vision and have consequently adumbrated the masters and propagated invidious dissensions, holy wars, religious hatred, forced conversions and other horrors in the name of God and Religion.¹²⁵

Swami Satyananda did not counter missionary activity with a proselytization of his own. Rather, he believed the proper response to religious diversity is not for each religion to be subsumed under one supremely universalistic religion, but that each religion and each religious person needs to recover the original tolerance and universalism of their faith. Hence, he gives Main not a Hindu mantra, but the mantra "Jesus." As such, Satyananda's universalism neutralizes the exclusivist claims of Christianity while also placing Hinduism in a position of some power as the religion best suited to guide others back to their original vision of toleration.

For John Main, however, the stakes are not nearly so high, the specter of proselytism being absent. Main's ambiguous stance on universalism – an open and receptive position towards

¹²⁴ Nair, 26.

¹²⁵ Nair, 157.

other religions which nonetheless maintains the idea of salvation through Christ alone – reflects the same ambiguity of his social position during his time in Malaya. As both a colonial administrator and protégé to a prominent Hindu national leader, Main too occupies a position of “middleness” that, while not subordinate to the colonizing class, nonetheless has to mediate between the exclusivist claims of Christian missionaries and the universalistic claims of his esteemed teacher. Throughout his talks and writings, there is a continual working out of this ambiguity, but no clear resolution. He maintains that a Christian, Hindu, and a Buddhist, for example, can meditate together, sharing in some fundamental truth that can be realized in silence. Furthermore, he does at times have an evangelical sensibility such that “we want to communicate our message of meditation as widely as we can,”¹²⁶ but he nowhere seems to argue for conversion to Christianity. At the same time, he holds on to an eschatological vision of the salvific role of the Church, a Church that “draw[s] all life to itself as it builds up to the body of Christ and prepares for the fullness when all creation will be incorporated in the Church because *all will be united to Christ.*”¹²⁷

Ultimately, by virtue of having adapted his teaching from the *japa* practice of Swami Satyananda, Main is also strongly compelled to adopt some semblance of the universalism of the reformers as justification for his inter-religious encounter. He does so, but not in any fashion that would compromise the soteriological significance of Christ as the universal Redeemer. In this sense, he both retains and moderates the missionary aspect of the colonial project, insisting on the *one way* which is Christ while simultaneously embracing the universal wisdom of the many and varied non-Christian religions.

¹²⁶ Main, *Community of Love*, 67.

¹²⁷ Main, 7, emphasis added.

Conclusions

The context of Hindu reform from Bengal to colonial Malaya provides a historical framework through which we can better appreciate John Main's encounter with Swami Satyananda. Understanding Swami Satyananda's role as both a religious and national leader engaged in constructing Malayan Hindu identity around Hindu modernism reveals something of his motivations in adopting John Main as his student. The universalism of earlier reformers, particularly Swami Vivekananda, provided a way for Swami Satyananda to try to unite various Hindu groups in Malaya, as well as Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Jains, around shared commonalities. Universalism provides the basis of a future vision of a unified, pluralistic, and independent Malayan state:

Malaya having had the impact of Malaysian, Indian, Chinese, Arabian and British cultures has a rich but diverse heritage. A synthesis of these cultures would be the healthy Malayan culture of tomorrow. Meanwhile, knowing the law that variety is the order of nature and at the same time that there is underlying 'unity' behind phenomena (what we call the SPIRIT or the GOD) peoples of Merdeka [free, independent] Malaya should live and work together imbued with the spirit of love, forbearance and above all, 'give and take,' if this beautiful land is to be a prosperous and happy place to live in.¹²⁸

In this way, encounter with other religious groups becomes a point of national pride as well as a way of engaging with the West on more equal footing. From this context we can understand that Main's meeting with Swami Satyananda was not an historical aberration, but it existed within an overall milieu of inter-religious encounter predicated on universalism. Additionally, this context helps to locate more precisely the form of Hindu philosophy and practice that Main encountered in Malaya, which can open the door to further study that engages with the question of the influence of Hinduism on Main's teaching in a more exacting and historical manner.

¹²⁸ Nair, xxix-xxx.

This context also helps us to appreciate what role *japa* practice played within Swami Satyananda's religious framework. *Japa* practice was explicitly communicated as being fitting to the life of a layperson in the modern world. It was a concrete way of realizing the "deeper aspect of religion," which consisted in a balance of "living a highly ethical and moral life," on the one hand, and "self-culture," on the other.¹²⁹ It was the counterpart to reformist commitments to selfless service and provided a simple, twice-daily practice that could reconnect Malayan Indians with the meditative aspects of their tradition. Main retained this twice-daily practice and its significance for laypeople, and while he was of course not concerned with questions of Malayan identity or Hindu reform, he re-organized Benedictine life around this practice for monks, oblates, and laypeople alike. The ease with which this practice could be integrated into both the lives of modern Christians and the regular prayer life of oblates and monks was the key to Main's unique approach to modern Benedictine life.

Main's ambiguous relationship with universalism, however, complicates his meeting with Swami Satyananda in an illuminative way. Main clearly adopts some of the perennialism and universalism of Satyananda in his openness to other religions and the frequent equivalencies he draws between certain Hindu and Christian teachings. Nevertheless, Main would not be willing to go so far as to claim that Christ is merely a *rishi* or an exalted teacher. Christ is the one way to salvation for Main – the very idea reformers like Satyananda countered with an equalizing universalism that insisted that one religion does not have an exclusive claim on truth.

In this sense, Main's Christology is a reminder of the complicated fact that his teaching ultimately finds its origins not only within John Cassian, but the British colonial project as well. The colonial origins of Main's teaching are not something that has been reckoned with in any

¹²⁹ Nair, xix-xx.

comprehensive manner, with potential implications that extend well beyond the scope of this study. What is surely needed is much more sensitivity to broader histories of colonial persecution such that we can read John Main critically and with an eye to the way in which this history may inform his later theology and the communities that he left behind. For example, can we merely dismiss Main's repeated tendency to group together disparate religious beliefs and traditions under the single banner of "the Indian tradition" as being merely a product of his time? Is his belief that "we have nothing whatever to fear from the Buddhist tradition or the Hindu tradition that is truly spiritual"¹³⁰ a laudable philosophy of inter-religious encounter, or does it reveal a certain continuity with the nineteenth-century habit of reducing a broad diversity of religious practice and belief to essentialized categories, such as the "scientific West" and the "spiritual East"? These are questions that can only be answered by placing Main's work in conversation not only with the ancient history of the Christian contemplative tradition, but also modern histories of colonialism and Orientalism.

Despite the fact that Main's biographers note that his "personal politics did not fit with British imperialism," that he was "certainly not an imperialist," and that he joined the Colonial Service because "it was an experience, an adventure,"¹³¹ future studies must focus less on Main's personal intentions for joining the Service and deal honestly with the context of his storied meeting with Swami Satyananda and its potential reverberations throughout his work. Before such an accounting is possible, however, it may be necessary to understand just what Main gained from Swami Satyananda and vice versa; to explicate exactly how the colonial context shaped the religiosity of both of these remarkable figures.

¹³⁰ Harris, 204.

¹³¹ McKenty, 45.

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