

Mysticism East and West

Mysticism in American Literature – Thoreau’s Quest and Whitman’s Self, Redding, CA:
Vedantic Shores Press, 2004

Paul Hourihan

Hourihan, Paul, *Ramakrishna and Christ – The Supermystics*, Redding, CA: Vedantic
Shores Press, 2002

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Review by Dr. Mike King, *Network Review, Journal of the Science and Medical Network*,
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These two books by Paul Hourihan on mysticism East and West are valuable and thought-provoking volumes. Hourihan held a doctorate in English literature and spent fifteen years teaching mysticism in Ontario Canada, home in the 19th century to Richard Maurice Bucke, a pioneer of studies in mysticism. Bucke’s *Cosmic Consciousness* was one of the first books in the West to find spiritual genius outside of mainstream religion, and one of the few texts of that period still circulating that paint a portrait of Whitman as mystic. It is appropriate therefore that one of the first volumes to be posthumously published of Hourihan’s work is on Whitman and Thoreau. The other, on Ramakrishna and Christ, reflects Hourihan’s engagement with the Indian Vedantic tradition and its relationship to Western religious thought.

Hourihan prefaces both books with the remark that much of his presentation has to be understood as his own interpretation, made in the light of his own mystical experiences. It is this which makes the books of interest: the combination of background in English literature – making for a deeply poetic sensibility – and his own development in the spiritual life. In each book therefore we are effectively considering three mystics: in the first they are Thoreau, Whitman and Hourihan, and in the second Ramakrishna, Christ and Hourihan.

I was particularly pleased to review these books as Whitman and Ramakrishna have had a significant impact on my own spiritual journey. I received the massive *Ramakrishna Gospel* from my grandmother when I was nineteen, and picked up Bucke’s *Cosmic Consciousness* by chance in a second-hand bookshop in my late twenties. (Bucke’s ideas triggered a long period of study of Whitman, by the end of which I saw him as not just America’s greatest mystic, but also as a guru in the traditional Eastern sense.) By the time of reading Bucke my spiritual interests had been awakened through the now discredited guru, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, whose particular interest was Tantra, the ancient Hindu tradition of sexual spirituality. Such a label does Tantra a disservice however: it is more an approach to the divine through celebration of the manifest, which may or may not include sexual activity. Hence it is a useful perspective from which to consider both Whitman and Ramakrishna.

The idea of Whitman as a mystic in the full sense, as opposed to some vague literary descriptor, has existed since the late 19th century, but has little currency in our profoundly secular Western culture. Instead he is understood as a great poet, probably homosexual, and the father of the ‘Beat Generation’ post war poets, writers, musicians and artists. However only a few obscure texts, with little impact on the mainstream, have exposed the extraordinary spirituality of Whitman (amounting in my opinion to nothing less than

genius). In another context Whitman might have been an inscrutable Taoist sage, or a perplexingly unpredictable Zen Master, but in the America of the mid-19th century – undergoing the transition from theism, through deism to atheism – he was merely the country's greatest poet. Hourihan does us a great service by showing us the true religiousness of Whitman, set against the American Romanticism of Transcendentalism. Hourihan has an invaluable background in Indian spirituality which allows Whitman's mysticism to emerge, free as it is from what Whitman called 'ecclesiasticism.' It is only when set against the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* or the Advaita Vedanta that one can see the religiousness of Whitman, who otherwise calmly dismisses the Christian tradition of his land.

Knowing much less about Thoreau than Whitman, I was interested in Hourihan's assessment of him, alongside Whitman. He regarded Thoreau's early experience on Walden Pond as transformative, though one he never fully recaptured, trying instead to refine the written account. Hence the title of the book, suggesting the Thoreau's 'quest' remained relatively unfulfilled next to Whitman's 'self,' a self that had approached the full realisation that is the focus of Vedantism. Quite early in Hourihan's discussion of Thoreau and Whitman he touches on what is clearly a key issue for him in the spiritual life: the discouragement that any genuine spiritual seeker faces from family. By setting worldly goals – centred on marriage, procreation and property – against spiritual goals, Hourihan exposes the dynamics (sometimes subtle, sometimes overt) that operate within families against the spiritual impulse. Hourihan's template for this is the tension that he detects between Jesus and his mother, in particular Jesus's repudiation of her in Matthew (12: 46-50). With no autobiographical details on Hourihan, we don't know why he should place such emphasis on this, but it does not matter: his discussion of it in both volumes is detailed and thought-provoking. He finds in the families of Thoreau, Whitman and Ramakrishna little to suggest either the intensity of spiritual quest or their varied achievements, rather an active opposition. Oddly enough it was only Ramakrishna – a celibate Hindu priest—who married (a delightful contradiction thoughtfully explored by Hourihan).

Any work on Thoreau and Whitman that explores their spirituality is welcome, but it is particularly so when it comes from an author with a doctorate in Western literature. The formalities and prejudices of cultural studies as a discipline in Western universities generally require the acquisition of a secular positivist paradigm, with Marxist or postmodernist assumptions that bracket out the spiritual. Instead, Hourihan uses his background in literature to open up this fundamental area of human experience to scholarly but sympathetic scrutiny. It may be this that in fact prevents Hourihan exalting Whitman quite as far as I do. In a poem that Hourihan either missed or purposely passed over, Whitman compares himself to Christ: 'we few equals' is how he states it. The conventionally religious might be shocked, while the secular minded find in it only a confirmation of a monstrous egotism. Yet the research I did on writings contemporaneous with Whitman's life show that not a few sensitive souls, Bucke's included, were convinced of the comparison.

Hourihan instead claims *Ramakrishna* as Christ's equal, both examples of 'supermystics,' a category that Hourihan allows to very few others (the Buddha is one). Hourihan's wonderful book on Ramakrishna and Christ is both an excellent introduction to the 19th century Hindu mystic and an exploration of a key Hindu idea: the distinction between devotional and non-devotional spirituality (known as *bhakti* and *jnani* respectively). Very

few Western commentators have ever drawn on this distinction to help navigate the complexities of the spiritual life, yet Hourihan puts it to great use. He outlines many of the key events in Ramakrishna's life, and gradually makes clear why he has chosen him in the Christ-comparison. For Hourihan Ramakrishna represents that rarity, a great spiritual teacher who celebrated *all* the paths to 'God.' Ramakrishna's depth of personal transformation would normally imply a disinterest in other paths, but his extraordinary spiritual genius lay in his curiosity, as a Hindu, for all the other traditions: Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. More than this, Hourihan finds in Ramakrishna an unprecedented openness to the feminine. It is this complex of ideas that Hourihan explores so well: the devotional (*bhakti*) instincts of Ramakrishna, his openness to other paths including the non-devotional (*jnani*), and the role of the feminine, particularly the mother.

Ramakrishna's greatest disciple, Vivekananda, appeared in Chicago in 1893 as a spokesman for Hinduism at the World's Parliament of Religions, and provoked a growing popular interest in that religion. A century later the West has largely forgotten that interest in favour of Buddhism. I would speculate that the largely non-devotional *jnani* character of Buddhism is the reason, as the West distances itself from the 'emotionality' of devotional religion. Hence Ramakrishna is a difficult topic for the West at this period, making Hourihan's analysis all the more important. Nowhere in the mystical literature of East and West can we find such a vivid and ongoing juxtaposition of *bhakti* and *jnani*, nor is it easy to find a skilled commentator like Hourihan to guide us through it. He shows us how women mystics in Ramakrishna's life helped him intensify his devotions to the goddess Kali; how a wondering naked monk helped him pursue and achieve the goal of the opposite *jnani* path; and introduces Vivekananda as his great *jnani* successor. For Hourihan to do this, he must have personally held both spiritual impulses in a considerably developed and balanced form. I was intrigued therefore if I could spot, as I generally anticipate, even the slightest leaning to one or the other, and in the end I did find this. Amongst the clues scattered through both books is the insight that Eckhart had a non-devotional nature (and should therefore be understood as a great *jnani*), accompanied by what appears from Hourihan to be a regret that he was 'cut off' from the devotional experience. It is however the insistence that Jesus was a devotional Master that best testifies to Hourihan's own devotional leaning.

Hourihan tells us that Ramakrishna helped stem the tide of Western secularism and atheism that was attracting India's young intellectuals of the day. However it was the British habit in the first place of writing things down that ended the ahistorical attitude of India, and encouraged Ramakrishna's followers to document his life in such detail. This innovation makes Ramakrishna the first great mystic in India's history about whom we have any reliable knowledge. Hence I have a reservation about Hourihan's desire to compare Ramakrishna with Christ, as we have so little reliable historical data on the latter. While the comparison between Christ and a mystic – whether Whitman or Ramakrishna – might convey a poetic kind of insight, any detailed account will be mainly speculation. Hence Hourihan's analysis of the role of women in the life of Christ, relevant as it might be to the discussion of Ramakrishna, strikes me in this light.

More problematic still is his assertion that Jesus was a devotional or *bhakti* mystic. It is certainly true that Christianity became a religion with an almost exclusive emphasis on *bhakti* (hence the condemnation of Eckhart for example), but I have always suspected that St Paul and St Augustine helped create this leaning, not Jesus. The *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, suggests that Jesus himself might have had more of a *jnani* orientation. In

Hourihan's speculation on Christ, however enjoyable, I would suggest that we are learning more about his own mystical impulse than anything we can reliably assert about Jesus. This does nothing to detract from his work however, merely raising one's curiosity about Hourihan himself.

To conclude, I found both these books provided much thought-provoking detail and discussion on mystics from America and India. They are an important contribution to many of the key issues in mysticism East and West, including the better understanding of the devotional / non-devotional difference in the spiritual life, the role of sexuality and renunciation, and the possibility for spiritual pluralism illustrated by that extraordinary religion: Hinduism. I understand that other books by Hourihan might be published in the future, and look forward to reading them.

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