

The Diffusion of Hindu religiosity in the Western World

By Apostolos Michailidis*

Introduction

Before going to address the issue under discussion, we should explain what we mean by the term “diffusion” (diffusion)¹, by contrasting it with the term “spread” within the framework of intercultural osmosis. “Diffusion” is a polymorphous, multifaceted, and diverse process which might possibly not obey the deliberate, targeted, and organized effort for the spread of religious notions, symbols, and beliefs. It does not only go beyond the limits of institutionalized religion (sacred texts, teachings, dogmas, councils/synods, clergy, moral precepts, cult) but also those of spread agents (religious orders or organizations, yoga “schools”, ashrams, Buddhistic centers, agents of Islam’s spread, etc.), and it covers large parts of the population that come into contact with religious terms or beliefs through independent agents or hosts, such as the different Art forms (cinema, theatre, painting, sculpture, music, dance), the Media, the Internet, the different literary genres, the comics, the electronic or printed periodicals and journals, and the videogames. For example, as far as the Media, the Internet, and the videogames are concerned, the diffusion of religious notions and beliefs is carried out automatically,

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1. For the notion of “diffusion” within the framework of the “new religiosity” and culture in general, see respectively St. Papalexandropoulos, «Ἡ Διάχυτη Νέα Θρησκευτικότητα», *Θεολογία / Theologia* 94, 1 (2023), pp. 11-22; Dim. J. Bekridakis, «Ἡ Διάχυτη Θρησκεία καὶ ἡ ἐπαναμάγευση τοῦ Δυτικοῦ Πολιτισμοῦ», *Θεολογία / Theologia* 94, 1 (2023), pp. 163-201, especially pp. 163-166.

almost imperceptibly, while at the same time, their receivers absorb them almost unconsciously and inadvertently – we are dealing here with an automated, rapid process, susceptible to repetition (e.g., in the case of television, internet or radio advertising).

Therefore, terms that have been widely diffused in the West like “karma”, “dharma”, “yoga”, “haṭha-yoga”, “aum̐”, “guru”, “āśram” (āśram or in the form of its more widespread ashram), “saṃsāra”, “cakras”, “ahimsa” are primarily Hinduist, coming directly from Sanskrit. Other terms have also been diffused which, although they had already become part and parcel of the European languages, they have nowadays acquired a new conceptual content referring to the Hinduist religiosity, and, more specifically, to the conceptual framework and practice of yoga – here is a list of some relevant terms: “energy centers”, meaning the “chakras”), “meditation” (in Sanskrit, dhyāna), “aura” (in Sanskrit, chāyā, prabhā-maṇḍala, dīpta-cakra), “astral body” (which corresponds with the Sanskrit term prāṇamayakośha), “positive energy”, “positive thinking”, “self-realization” (in Sanskrit, ātma-jñāna, ātma-bodha), “spirituality”, “relaxation” (in Sanskrit, śavāsana).

What are the reasons, though, of their diffusion? This, undoubtedly, came as a result of historical evolution, springboarding by cultural contact and osmosis, and followed by the terms’ spread, primarily through the actions of the different gurus and secondarily through migration.

Let us try, therefore, to concisely present those terms, based on the following evolutionary triptych: *contact and cultural osmosis – spread – diffusion*. We are highlighting the adjective “concise” because, within the limited space of an article, it would be impossible for us to refer in detail to all the historical conditions and personalities that are linked with the Hinduist religiosity and civilization’s acquaintance and contact; neither it is possible to present here all the persons and events connected with its subsequent spread. Likewise, we are unable to present here all the examples of its diffusion; therefore, we shall necessarily limit ourselves to those that –according to our opinion– are the more important ones.

Contact and Cultural Osmosis

Any contacts that might have existed between the West and the Indian subcontinent and, by extension, with Hinduist religiosity, are due to different factors: travelers, trade transactions, military campaigns and conquests, missionary activities, cultural contacts during the period of colonialism, linguistic and Indological studies, the interest that Western scholars, writers and thinkers have exhibited for the Indian civilization, as well the interest of their Indian counterparts for the Western civilization and, of course, migration.

The first contacts are dated around 326 BC, when Alexander the Great, after having conquered Sogdia and Vactria, turned southwards, passed through the Paropamisus mountain range –that is, the Hindu Kush–, crossed the river Indus and clashed with Porus (Ind. Puruvāsa), the local ruler. Therefore, real acquaintance and contact with the Indian civilization and religious traditions began after the subjugation of a part of the Indian subcontinent that included present-day Pakistan and present-day northwestern India. Alexander’s successors fought over and carved up his empire; thus, India’s Hellenistic Kingdoms came into existence, and they managed to survive till the end of the 1st century BC, under the rulership of Strato II Soter and Strato III Filopator². Some of the material remains of the Greek presence in the Indian subcontinent are the emperor Asoka’s (268-232 BC) engraved decrees promoting the principles of Buddhist ethics that have been written in Greek, the sculptures of the Greek-Buddhist school of Gandāra, which flourished in the northeastern edge of the subcontinent (1st c. BC-7th c. AD), the numerous coins of the Greek rulers of Vactria and India, the pillar³ of

2. M. Kordosis, «Οἱ Ἑλληνες βασιλεῖς τῆς Βακτρίας καὶ τῆς Ἰνδίας ὡς τὸ θάνατο τοῦ Μένανδρου (περ. 250-135 π.Χ.)», *Ἐπιστημονικὴ Ἐπετηρίδα τοῦ Τμήματος Ἱστορίας καὶ Αρχαιολογίας τῆς Φιλοσοφικῆς Σχολῆς τοῦ Πανεπιστημίου Ἰωαννίνων* / *Epistimoniki Epetirida tou Tmimatos Historias kai Archaeologias tis Philosophikis Scholis tou Panepistimiou Ioanninon* 20, 1 (1991), pp. 217-225; Ap. Michailidis, «Τὰ ἐλληνιστικὰ βασίλεια τῆς νοτιοανατολικῆς Ἀσίας», *Ἱστορία Εἰκονογραφημένη* / *Historia Eikonographimēni* 582 (2016), pp. 16-28, espec. 24, 26.

3. See D. K. Velissaropoulos, *Ἑλληνες καὶ Ἰνδοί – Ἡ συνάντηση δύο κόσμων*, vol. I, Hestia Publications, Athens 1990, pp. 344-346; J. Irwin, “The Heliodorus Pillar at

Heliodorus, who was King Andialcidas Nikephoros's [reigned ca. 115-95 BC], in central India with a dedicatory inscription to god Vāsudeva, the Buddhist text *Milinda Pañhā* (*Milinda's Questions*), where king Milinda –who is none other than the Greek King Menander I Soter (180-130 BC [reigned 165/55-130 BC])– retains a prominent role⁴.

Towards the end of the 1st c. BC, the remaining Indo-Hellenistic kingdoms were subjugated to the Tocharian people of Kuchians, who had migrated from western China. Their rulers Hellenized their names while the influence of the Greek language and the Greek alphabet has been impressed upon their coins⁵.

In any case, what is of interest in this particular context is the information regarding Hinduist religiosity contained in texts of ancient Greek writers like Strabo, Plutarch, Lucian, Diodorus Siculus, Arrian, etc. We've been informed about the existence of eremites –although the writers do not clarify if they were Hinduists, Buddhists, or Jains–, that they've been called “*gymnosophists*”⁶. Onesicritus, a cynic philosopher and historian, and also helmsman at Alexander the Great's fleet, informs us that it was the first Greek that came into direct contact with them near the city of Taxila (its ruins lie close to the contemporary city of Rawalpindi in Pakistan). Certain writers (Arrian, Plutarch, and Pseudo-Callisthenes among them) present Alexander himself talking with them. It seems the characterization of *gymnosophists* is due, on the one hand, to the fact that

Besanagar: A Fresh Appraisal”, *Purātattva. Archaeological Society of India* (co-published Art and Archaeology Research Papers, US), 8, 1974, pp. 166-178 [republished: <https://archive.org/details/aarp-the-heliiodorus-pillar-a-fresh-appraisal/page/n15/mode/2up> (15.8.2023)]; M. D. Khare, “The Heliodorus Pillar – A Fresh Appraisal: A Rejoinder”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 36 (1975), pp. 92-97, [republished *JSTOR*: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44138838> (14.8.2023)].

4. D. K. Velissaropoulos, *Ἑλληνες καὶ Ἰνδοί*, vol. I, *ibid.*, pp. 388-425.

5. D. K. Velissaropoulos, *ibid.*, pp. 431-432, 435, 437-438; J. M. Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Art of the Kushans*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi 1993.

6. For *gymnosophists* see Ud. Prakash Arora, *Greek Sources on India*, pp. 157-220; D. K. Velissaropoulos, *ibid.*, pp. 123-129, 183-193, 195-200; W. Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding*, State University of New York, Albany 1988 (republishation Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1990, pp. 12-15); Ap. Michailidis, «γυμνοσοφιστές», *Θρησκευτολογικὸ Λεξικό*, M. Begzos (ed.), Hellenika Grammata Publications, Athens 2000, pp. 168-169.

they were partly or totally naked, and on the other, to that they prefer to explain their beliefs by using examples. In the texts that cover the period from Alexander the Great to the first decades of the 5th century AD, what we are given is mainly an outline of the *gymnosophists*' ascetic way of life but much less information regarding their philosophical or religious beliefs, from which those that are mentioned do not seem to entirely or precisely represent the Indian worldview.

In any case, *gymnosophists* are generally described as not being affected by grief or pleasure, yet they seem to accept the positive values of pain. They show contempt about death and they are indifferent in obeying social mores and customs. They are patient and vegetarians, they abstain from sexual consummation and they are engaged in painful bodily positions, which are very similar to those of yoga. They are exposing themselves to the hot sunrays or directly gazing at them without taking any precaution, and they use to paint their hair or face. If someone invites them to his place, they refuse to visit him; on the contrary, they prefer for him to come and meet them, even if he is a powerful ruler. Moreover, they are in a position to predict future climatic phenomena or diseases, and some of them do possess enough medical knowledge to cure people from venomous snake bites. Ill health, contempt for death («θανάτου καταφρόνησις»⁷) or the feeling of bliss («ἐπ' εὐπραγία»⁸) are reasons sufficient enough for them to commit suicide. A representative example of the first category is gymnosophist Calanus (or Caranus), who, "went along as a eulogizer of the king, outside the boundaries of India, contrary to the common custom of the philosophers there"⁹. When he was 73 years old, "his health became delicate, though he had never before been subject to illness. Accordingly, not being willing to lead the life of a man in infirm health, he told Alexander that in such circumstances he thought it was best for him to put an end to his existence before he came into experience any disease that might compel

7. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* XVII, 107, 3-4.

8. Strabo, *The Geography* XV, 1, 73.

9. Strabo, *The Geography* XV, 1, 68: «[...] συνακολουθήσαι γὰρ ὡς ἐγκωμιαστὴν τοῦ βασιλέως ἔξω τῶν τῆς Ἰνδικῆς ὁρῶν παρὰ τὸ κοινὸν ἔθος τῶν ἐκεῖ φιλοσόφων».

him to change his former mode of living”¹⁰. “Before he ascended the funeral pyre, he presented the horse which he should himself have mounted, being a royal steed of the Nisaeen breed, to Lysimachus, one of those who attended him to learn his philosophy”¹¹. As an example of the third category, we could mention Zarmanochegas, “an Indian from Bargaosa”¹², who “although had fared as he wished up to that time, he thought it necessary then to depart this life, lest something untoward might happen to him if he tarried here; and that therefore he leaped upon the pyre with a laugh”¹³.

Calanus’ personality falls short compared with that of Mandanis (or Dandamis / Dandamius), “the oldest and wisest of the sophists”, who rejected the invitation to follow the Greeks in Persia and abandon his native soil. Furthermore, he is presented to be much more modest and prudent than Calanus, who laughed at Onesicritus’ rich garments¹⁴. What is notable in Mandanis’s exposition, as it is narrated by Strabo, is that the gymnosophists defended *nature* (φύσις) over *law* (νόμος)¹⁵, that is, instincts and inclinations over social conventions. Nevertheless, the ancient writers do not concentrate on the detailed presentation of the gymnosophists’ religious and philosophical beliefs, and whenever they try to do something like that, it is very doubtful if they have managed to convey the Indian notions in their full and unmitigated form [for example, it seems very odd that, in Strabo’s work, the gymnosophists are referring to Greek gods and Greek myths, or that in the work of

10. For Calanus, see D. K. Velissaropoulos, *Ἑλληνες καὶ Ἰνδοί*, vol. I, *ibid.*, pp. 159-165, 182-185, 196; vol. II, pp. 48-49, 54-55, 90-91, 96, 102, 217-218, 224, 248; G. T. Halkias, “The Self-immolation of Kalanos and other Luminous Encounters among Greeks and Indian Buddhists in the Hellenistic World”, *Journal of the Oxford Center for Buddhist Studies* 8 (2015), pp. 163-186; Ap. Michailidis, “Voluntary Death in view of the Eastern Orthodox Christian and Jain Tradition”, *Θεολογία/Theologia* 93, 2 (2022), pp. 139-156, 139-140.

11. Arrian, *Anabasis* VII, III, 1-6.

12. Strabo, *The Geography* XV, 1, 73.

13. *Ibid.*: «[...] ἅπαντα γὰρ κατὰ γνώμην πράξαντα μέχρι νῦν ἀπιέναι δεῖν, μή τι τῶν ἀβουλήτων χρονίζοντι συμπέσοι».

14. Strabo, *The Geography* XV, 1, 64.

15. Strabo, *The Geography* XV, 1, 65.

Hippolytus of Rome they are using the term “Word” («Λόγος»)¹⁶, in the sense of God].

Later on, during the first centuries AD, in the works of ecclesiastical writers like Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-211 or 216) and Hippolytus of Rome (170-235), as well as those of the Greek orator, historian, and philosopher Dio Chrysostom (40-120), there are references to Indian religiosity – e.g., there are descriptions not only about gymnosophists but also about Brahmans, who are differentiated from the wandering ascetics («σαρμάναι», Sanskr. śramaṇa). The anonymous writer of the work *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (1st-3rd century AD) informs us about the worship of a certain goddess at the southernmost part of the subcontinent, which rather corresponds to the contemporary worship of the virgin goddess (kanyā-kumārī) in the same area¹⁷.

A new chapter on the investigation of Indian spirituality was opened with the explorations and the transoceanic voyages at the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century. In 1498, Vasco da Gama (1460 or 1469-1524) arrived at the southwestern coast, in the area of Calicut (present-day Kozhikode), and 1510 Alfonso de Albuquerque sailed further north and conquered the Goa area. The missionaries along with the seafarers arrived to spread Roman Catholicism, followed later on (1560) by the Inquisition to establish it. During the period of the East India Company's (EIC) rule –although the Company didn't encourage missionary activities– also arrived Protestant missionaries of different denominations (Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists). Some of them will exhibit a special interest in the Indian mores and customs.

Within this context, Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) is particularly noteworthy because he was one of the first Roman Catholic missionaries that they “were deeply and unabashedly identified with a non-Christian tradition, in this particular case Brahmanic Hinduism”¹⁸. More specifically,

16. Hippolytus, *Philosophoumena* 24, 2.

17. See *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* 58; Ap. Michailidis, *Ἰνδουισμός (Καταβολές – Ἱστορική πορεία – Βασικὲς ἀντιλήψεις – Λατρεία)*, Institute of the Book-Kardamitsa, Athens 2022, p. 196.

18. Er. Sharpe, *Συγκριτικὴ Θρησκευολογία*, transl. in Greek St. L. Papalexandropoulos, Artos Zois Publications, Athens 2008, p. 54; see also W. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, *ibid.*, pp. 38-43, 45-47.

he shaved his head leaving only a tuft, he used wooden sandals and he wore a white dhoti (a white piece of cloth), reminding a Hinduist hermit (*sannyāsi*). Apart from that, he also learned Sanskrit, Tamil, and Telugu, earning the nickname “white Brahman”. Similarly, the French Roman Catholic missionary Abbé Jean-Antoine Dubois (1765-1848), whom Mysore’s local inhabitants called Dodda Swami, adopted the way of life, eating habits, and outfit of a Hindu anchorite, thus gaining the respect of the natives. His work: *Mœurs, institutions, et cérémonies des peuples de l’Inde* (1816), translated into English as *Hindu manners, customs and ceremonies*, –which is still regarded monumental and has been reprinted many times– was based much less to the Hinduist religious texts than to the writer’s sharp eye for detailed observation. The fruit of this is a general description of the Hinduist society, especially of the caste system, of the four stages of Brahman’s way of life, and the Hinduist worship. Equally important was the contribution of the multilingual English Baptist missionaries William Carey (1761-1834) and Joshua Marshman (1768-1837), who, apart from translating the Bible into different Indian languages, also translated the epic Rāmāyaṇa, which was published in three volumes¹⁹.

The explorations and the missionary activities led to the flourishing of Hindu studies. From the middle and towards the end of the 18th century, British scholars who arrived in India –Sir William Jones (1746-1794), Henry Thomas Colebrook (1765-1837), Sir Charles Wilkins (1749-1836) and a little bit later Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1860)– translated some of the classic Indian texts. More specifically, Wilkins published in 1785 *Bhagavad-gītā*’s first translation in any European language, while Jones published translations of the story of Śakuntalā (part of the epic *Mahābhārata*) and the *Laws of Manu* (*Manusmṛiti*) in 1794. The first French Indologist Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil Dupperon (1731-1805) published in 1802 a work in two volumes: *Oupnek’hat, id est, Secretum tegendum*. It was a translation from Persian into Latin of fifty *Upanishads* accompanied with commentary. In 1808, Friedrich

19. *The Ramayuna of Valmeeki in the original Sungskrit, with a Prose Translation and Explanatory Notes*, by William Carey and Joschua Marshman, Serampor 1806-1808.

Schlegel (1772-1829) published his study: *Über die Sprache und die Weisheit der Indier* (*On the Indians' Language and Wisdom*), in which the writer argues that the first European civilizations were created by a people who came from India. He also compared the Sanskrit language with Latin, Greek, Persian, and German, and he found many similarities related to vocabulary and grammar. One of the pioneer Indologists was Demetrios Galanos (1760-1833), an Athens-born scholar who went to Calcutta [contemporary Kolkata] in 1786 to teach Greek language and literature to the offspring of the then flourishing Greek colony; at the same time, his interest about the civilization of the country pushed him to learn Sanskrit and Persian. The result of his industrious studies were the translations of seminal texts of the Hindu literature and spirituality –*Bhagavad-gītā* (with the title *Γιτὰ ἡ θεσπέσιον μέλος*), *Devīmāhātmyam* (*Δουρά*), Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* (*Ραγγοῦ Βάνσα ἡ Γενεαλογία τοῦ Ραγγοῦ*)– as well as a three lingual –Sanskrit-Greek-English– lexicon²⁰.

Those efforts have led many philosophers, prose writers, and poets to exhibit a great interest in India²¹. From the German-speaking countries, we could mention Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767-1845), Novalis (1772-1801), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854), Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860)²² and Friedrich

20. For Dimitrios Galanos's Life and work see Gr. D. Ziakas, *Θρησκευτές και πολιτισμοὶ τῆς Ἀσίας*, Kornilia Sfakianaki (ed.), Thessaloniki 2008, pp. 59-63; Milt. Ath. Spyrou, *Δημήτριος Γαλανός – Ἡ ζωὴ καὶ τὸ ἀγνωστο ἔργο του στὶς Ἰνδίες*, Hellenic-Indian Society for Culture & Development, Athens 2023; S. Kargakos, *Δημήτριος Γαλανός ὁ Ἀθηναῖος (1760-1833) – Ὁ πρῶτος Εὐρωπαῖος Ἰνδολόγος*, Gutenberg Publications, Athens 1994; D. Th. Vassiliades, *The Greeks in India*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, pp. 138-148.

21. For this subject, see the well-informed studies of Georgios Amarantos, *Ἀπόλλων καὶ Κρίσινα-Ελλάδα καὶ Ἰνδία στὴ νεότερη εὐρωπαϊκὴ σκέψη καὶ λογοτεχνία*, Hellenic-Indian Society for Culture & Development, Athens 2022; see also W. Halbfass, *India and Europe...*, *ibid.*; see also Er. Sharpe, *Συγκριτικὴ Θρησκευτιολογία*, *ibid.*, pp. 64-69.

22. Schopenhauer expressed his great admiration for Duperron's translation of the *Parerga und Paralipomena* (1851) has written about them that "they were the most rewarding and uplifting study that is possible in this world. It has been a source of

Nietzsche (1844-1900). From the British Isles, we could mention Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Robert Southley (1774-1843), Lord Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), John Keats (1795-1821), Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859) and John William Cousin (1849-1910). From Frenchmen, we could mention François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869), Alfred de Vigny (1797-1863), Victor Hugo (1802-1885) and Edgar Quinet (1803-1875). Lastly, from the realm of American *Transcendentalism*²³, we could mention Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Charles Timothy Brooks (1813-1883) and Orestes Brownson (1803-1876).

Nevertheless, we have to comment upon the ways that native Indians corresponded to the reception of their civilization on behalf of the Westerners. A prime example of this is the efforts made by Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), a multilingual scholar, and member of a Brahman caste, who came into contact with a team of Baptist missionaries in Serampore. A public dialogue was developed there between the two interacting parties which –despite their initial good intentions– ended up in open confrontation, when Joshua Marshman called Ram Mohan Roy “heathen”, while the latter accused the missionaries of being distorters of Jesus’s teachings²⁴. He rejected the dogma of the Holy Trinity, but he equally

consolation through my whole life and will also be at the moment of my death [*Es ist die belohnendste und erhabendste Lektüre, die auf der Welt möglich ist; sie ist der Trost meines Lebens gewesen und wird der meines Sterbens sein*]. See H. von Glasenapp, *Das Indienbild Deutscher Denker*, K. F. Koehler Verlag, Stuttgart 1960, p. 71; G. Amarantos, *Ἀπόλλων καὶ Κρίσνα*, *ibid.*, p. 201.

23. *Transcendentalism* was a philosophical current that was developed during the 1820’s in the eastern U.S.A. Heavily influenced by the English and German Romanticism, Hume’s and Kant’s thought and Hindu philosophical writings, it claimed that man is born good, but he is steadily corrupted by the society and its institutions.

24. For this confrontation, see Sisir Kumar Das, *The Shadow of the Cross: Christianity and Hinduism in a Colonial Situation*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi 1974, pp. 15-37; Sita Ram Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian encounters, AD 304 to 1996*, Voice of India, New Delhi (1989) 2010, pp. 54-68; Mohan Chandra Kotnala, *Raja Ram Mohun Roy and Indian Awakening*, Gitanjali Prakashan, New Delhi 1975, pp. 81-110; Richard Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India*, Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, Sammlung De Nobili, Wien 1981, espec. pp. 18-20, 38-40, 111-112, 116-117, 121-122.

rejected the worship of *mūrtis* (the Hindu deities' statues) and the belief in reincarnation. He even sought to expurgate Hinduism from extraneous elements by using the *Upanishads* as his guiding principle and he struggled all his life for the abolition of the law of the barbarous practice of *sati*, in which a widow sacrifices herself by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral pyre, something which he finally accomplished in 1829 when the British High Commissioner William Bentinck issued the relevant decree. He was followed by a whole bunch of Indian social reformers who, influenced by Western thought, tried to reform Hinduism and Hinduist society. The list that includes their names is quite extensive; here, though, suffice it to refer to Radhakat Deb (1784-1867), Isvaracandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), Debendranant Tagore (1817-1905, father of the Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore) and Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), who evaluated, modified and continued Ram Mohan Roy's work. Akshay Kumar Datta (1820-1886), Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) and Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) were Western rationalism's ardent defenders; Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901), Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (1837-1925) and Gopal Hari Deshmukh (1823-1892) were social reformers who combined West's inquisitive spirit with the Indian cultural traditions, while the same path was followed by poets, writers and thinkers like Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-1894) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Lastly, Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886) and Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) were well-known representatives of regenerative tendencies within the realm of Hinduism.

Before concluding this subsection, we should refer to the important role played by the Theosophical Society, which was founded in 1875 in New York by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) and William Quan Judge (1851-1896). Theosophy is a system of pronouncedly syncretic occultist beliefs, based on the assumption that bits and pieces of the divine or eternal truth can be traced in all religions – this is the reason why Theosophy came into contact with Hinduism as well as with other Eastern religious systems. The books of the organization's main representatives (Helena P. Blavatsky, Charles Leadbeater, Annie Besant, Alice Ann Bailey) are full of Hinduist notions and beliefs, a fact that contributed not only to coming into contact with the Hindu civilization but also to the spread of those beliefs and notions.

The spread

The first yogi who traveled in the West and disseminated Hinduist beliefs and ideas was Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). In 1893, he gave an impressive speech at the first World Parliament of Religions that took place in Chicago. He introduced himself as a monk of the most ancient monastic order – the school of Advaita Vedānta. During his stay in the U.S.A., as well as in other Western countries, he propagated a system of ideas, which he called “practical Vedānta”. The central feature of his teachings was that he highlighted the tolerance that should exist among all religions, given the fact that each one of them was a path leading to the only truth, brahman’s supreme reality – that is, the Absolute. By adopting this position, he essentially showcased Hinduism as the very basis of the idea mentioned above and his country as the cradle of spirituality against the materialistic and technocratic West. He introduced the so-called “Modern Yoga”, by distinguishing its four varieties: “Rāja-yoga”, “Bhakti-yoga”, “Jñāna-yoga” and “Karma-yoga”. His whole set of ideas, which cover not only metaphysics and yoga exercises but also social and educational subjects, has been called “Neo-Vedānta” or “Neo-Hinduism”²⁵.

Many representatives of yoga and Hinduist spirituality will follow in Vivekananda’s steps. Among them, Shri Yogendra (1897-1989) and Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952) are worth mentioning. The first of those, apart from being a poet and writer, he eventually emerged as one of the most important teachers who contributed to Haṭha Yoga’s revival and dissemination, both in India and the U.S.A. In 1918, he founded in Bombay the Yoga Institute, the first organized yoga center in the world. One year later, he traveled to Europe and the U.S.A. to propagate yoga. At Harriman, a village in New York State, he founded a branch of his institute, The Yoga Institute of America. The second moved to the U.S.A. when he was 27 years old and remained there till the end of his life²⁶.

25. For Swami Vivekananda, see Ap. Michailidis, *Ινδουισμός*, *ibid.*, pp. 281-284; «Βιβεκανάντα», *Θρησκευολογικό Λεξικό*, *ibid.*, pp. 123-124; R. Rolland, *Ὁ βίος τοῦ Βιβεκανάντα καὶ τὸ παγκόσμιον εὐαγγέλιον*, transl. in Greek K. Stefanidis, Vivliothiki Neas Epoxis Publications, Athens 1967.

26. See his biography written by his younger brother Gorakhnath (Sananda) Lal Ghosh, *Μέτζντα – Ἡ Οἰκογενειακὴ καὶ Νεανικὴ Ζωὴ τοῦ Παραμαχάνσα Γιόγκανάντα*, transl.

He was the first important Indian teacher who settled down in America and the first prominent Indian who was invited as a guest to the White House (by President Calvin Coolidge in 1927). In 1946 he published his book *Autobiography of a Yogi*²⁷, which became –and remains– an international bestseller. As one of the pioneers of the whole movement, we could also mention Swami Vishnudevananda Saraswati (1927-1993), Swami Shivananda Saraswati's (1887-1963) pupil, who is the main responsible for the way that yoga is being taught nowadays in the West, by summing up classical yoga's teachings into five principles: correct exercise (*āsana*), correct breath (*prāṇāyāma*), correct relaxation (*śavāsana*), proper diet (vegetarian), positive thought (meaning Vedānta's teachings) and dialogism (*dyāna*)²⁸. In December 1957, he arrived in San Francisco and began teaching yoga. The following year went to New York to also teach there. During the 1960s, he was the one responsible for introducing the yoga techniques to the Beatles²⁹. He founded ashrams and centers of practical application not only in the U.S.A. but also in Canada, Europe, and New Zealand. In 1966, B. K. S. Iyengar (1918-2014) published a book titled *Light in Yoga*, a full guide with pictures attached for the practical application of āsanās, executed by himself, which is constantly reprinted since then in different languages³⁰. A little bit later, during the 1970s K. Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009), who introduced Ashtanga Yoga, taught in the U.S.A. as well as in Australia. Yoga's popularity in the West was further reinforced by Yogi Bhaṇan (1929-2004), a missionary

in Greek X. Th. Karkantzou, Kedros Publications, Athens 2007.

27. This work has been translated and published in Greek twice. The first translation by Io. D. Vorres published in 1955 (Hestia Publications) – reprinted nineteen times since then. The second by Rena Karakatsani published in 1991 (Kaktos Press). A third one, without reference to translator or translators, published in 2014 by the Self-Realization Fellowship, an organization founded by Paramahansa Yogananda himself in the U.S.A. in 1920.

28. Vishnudevananda, *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*, Three Rivers Press/Random House, New York 1960, 1988, p. x.

29. M. Roth, "Let's harness the revolutionary optimism of the 1960s to counter dark times", *The Guardian*, 12 Sep 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/12/revolutionary-1960s-dark-times-technology> [05.8.2023].

30. See B. K. S. Iyengar, *Φῶς στὴ γιόγχα/yoga dīpikā*, transl. Ch. Lyroni, P. Bolou, Ch. Pavlou, A. Spiliotopoulos, Nāga – Paraskevi Bolou Publications, 2020.

of Sikhism, who settled in California in 1969 to teach Kuṇḍalinī Yoga. From then onwards, a host of variations of yoga have been formed and flourished in many Western countries. Long is the catalog of the teachers, “gurus” that swarmed West, who, along with yoga, also disseminated Hinduist beliefs. It is sufficient for us to refer here to Shri Shivabalayogi Maharaj (1935-1994), Swami Muktananda (1908-1982), Satchidananda Saraswati (1914-2002), Bhaqwan Shree Rajneesh (who changed his name in Osho just before his death, 1931-1990), Swami Rama (1925-1996), Satyananda Saraswati (1923-2009), Sri Chinmoy (1931-2007), K. V. Desikachar (1938-2016), Ravi Shankar (born 1956, not to be confused with the music composer and performer bearing the same name), Prem Rawat (formerly known as Balyogeshwar or Maharaji, 1957-).

Particular mention should be made here of a personality that introduced the worship of the god Krishna in the Western world. We are referring to Abhay Charanaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada or simply Swami Prabhupada / Srila Prabhupada (1896-1977), who was given a mandate by his teacher Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati (1874-1937), to spread around the world the message of the Visnu teacher Caitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534), major exponent of the Visnu branch Gauḍīya, in English³¹. In July 1966, he founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in New York; since then, it is known as “Hare Krishna”³². He defended its name, by claiming that Krishna embodied all the notions and forms of divinity. In 1967, he inaugurated yet another branch of his organization in San Francisco. He traveled extensively across the whole country, by popularizing his message through religious chants (*saṅkīrtana*) executed in public places and streets, and by distributing books and public

31. For Swami Prabhupada’s life, see Satsvarūpa Dāsa Goswāmī, *Srīla Prabhupāda līlāmṛta: a biography of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda*, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Los Angeles (1983) 2002. For his teachings, see Tamal Krishna Goswami, *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti: Essential Teachings of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012.

32. For ISKCON’s spread in the West, see D. G. Bromley & L. D. Shinn (eds.), *Krishna Consciousness in the West*, Associated University Presses, London 1989 and also some other studies that are taking a critical position: M. Ekstrand & Ed. H. Bryant, *The Hare Krishna movement: The postcharismatic fate of a religious transplant*, Columbia University, New York 2004 and also E. B. Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed*, New York University Press, New York & London 2007.

lectures. George Harrison, one of the four Beatles, recorded with some of his followers a disc in London and assisted in the establishment of a temple honoring Krishna and Rādhā in the same city. In the following years, Swami Prabhupada, as ISKCON's preacher and leader, traveled to many other countries, where he established branches of his organization. Until he died in 1977, ISKCON became internationally known as Vishnuism's major offshoot. Through his missionary work he disseminated Caitanya Mahaprabhu's teachings, as well as bhakti yoga –the yoga that exhibits the ardent, dedicatory love to divinity–, accompanied by chants of worship and anthems. Today, ISKCON maintains more than 800 centers around the globe, Greece included, with millions of devotees. Essential for the spread of the Vishnuism Gauḍīya theology is Prabhupada's books and translations –the most well-known of them are *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* (part of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*) and *Caitanya Charitāmṛta* (it contains Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's teachings). His works have been translated into more than 70 languages, while his deep influence within the community of writers and intellectuals, especially those related to the counter-culture, "Underground", current, is apparent in Allen Ginsberg's, Timothy Leary's, Gary Snyder's and Alan Watts's efforts to integrate him, along with his spiritual chants, into the hippies movement.

The ISKCON describes Krishna as the source of all the god's "descents" (avatar). According to his followers, Krishna is the supreme manifestation of the divine, the svayam bhagavān, that is the unique, the supreme divine being, while Rādhā, his companion, represents Krishna's divine female equivalent, the primeval spiritual power and the embodiment of loving dedication.

At this point, it is worth mentioning Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (real name Mahesh Prasad Varma, 1918-2008), who introduced the dialogist method of Transcendental Meditation and created the movement that bears the same name (Transcendental Meditation); it's one of the New Religious Movements, and includes programs and organizations that promote the technique of the Transcendental Meditation, a specialized practice of dialogism which is called TM-Sidhi program³³, a program of alternative

33. Its popular name is "yogic flying".

medicine that is called Maharishi Ayurveda, and an architectural and building system known as Maharishi Sthapatya Ved. The movement's activities also include a publishing house (MUM Press), a TV channel (KSCI) and Radio (KHOE) station, and a satellite TV channel (Maharishi Channel).

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi)³⁴ started his first world tour in 1958³⁵, with their followers calling him “His Holiness”, while sometimes he was referred to as the “giggling guru” because he laughed quite often during his first TV appearances. His achievements include the training of more than 40.000 educators of transcendental meditation, the teaching of his technique to “more than 5.000.000 people”, the establishment of colleges around India, Canada, the U.S.A., the UK, and Switzerland, as well as schools, charitable institutions (e.g., clinics), laboratories for the production of food supplements and organic farming facilities. In 1992, he founded the Natural Law Party (NLP) based on “the principles of Transcendental Meditation”, the natural laws, and their application at all governmental levels. More specifically, he defines “natural law” as the organizational intelligence that governs the natural universe. The “natural law” can be revitalized through the technique of Transcendental Meditation and the TM-Sidhi program, which can also contribute to the reduction, or even the elimination of social problems. During the height of his action, this particular party had been active in 74 countries. Nowadays it is active in India and the U.S.A.

Apart from the above, towards the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, Maharishi became even more famous as the guru of the

34. Maharishi Mahesh's life, see P. Mason, *The Maharishi-The Biography of the Man Who Gave Transcendental Meditation to the World*, Dorset: Element Books Ltd, Shaftbury 1994 and C. A. Humes, “Maharishi Mahesh Yogi: Beyond the TM Technique”, in: Th. A. Forsthoefel and C. A. Humes (eds.), *Gurus in America*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2005, pp. 55-80.

35. Within the context of his world tour, he visited Greece in 1961. The following year, the association *Κίνησις Πνευματικής Αναγεννήσεως* [Movement of Spiritual Renaissance/Rebirth] was established. It organized weekly lessons and lectures of “Deep Dialogism”. The association does not longer exist. See Loukia Reditou, *Η Προβολή της Γιόγκα στον Έλληνικό Διαδικτυακό Χώρο*, Department of Social Theology & The Study of Religion, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens 2023, pp. 106, 301 (<https://pergamos.lib.uoa.gr/uoa/dl/object/3315737/file.pdf>).

Beatles, the Beach Boys, and many other musical, artistic or literary celebrities. Towards the end of the 1970s, he inaugurated the TM-Sidhi program having as his aim, as it was advertised, the improvement of the body-mind relationship of the trainees through the use of techniques like the so-called “yogic flying”.

At the beginning of his career, Maharishi Mahesh set himself the goal of achieving three goals: to revive the Indian spiritual tradition, to show that meditation is suitable to anyone and not only to the hermits, and that Vedanta is compatible with science. In 1967, he published a new annotated translation of *Bhagavad-gītā* (*Bhagavad-Gītā: A New Translation and Commentary*), which, according to his view, is the “Scripture of Yoga”. This further contributed to the popularity of this book, especially among the cycles of the hippies’ movement and the Underground culture in general.

In the world of Academia, the major exponent of Neo-Hinduism’s principles was Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), a distinguished professor of Indian philosophy, India’s representative at UNESCO (1946-1952), ambassador in the former USSR (1946-1952), Vice-President (1952-1962) and President of the Indian Democracy (1962-1967). He served as a Professor of Philosophy at the Universities of Calcutta/Kolkata and Mysore and he held the Spalding Chair of Eastern Religion and Ethics at the University of Oxford (1936-1939). He also served as vice-chancellor at the University of Adhra (1931-1936) and dean at the Universities of Banaras Hindu University (1939-1948) and New Delhi (1953-1962). During his long academic career, he received many distinctions [he was knighted (1931), was elected as a member of the British Academy, he had been a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature for four consecutive years (1933-1937)]. Having started with his dissertation that bears the title *The Ethics of Vedānta* (which was published when his writer was only 20 years old), he proceeded to systematically present Hinduism through a series of publications in English: *Indian Philosophy* (1923), *The Hindu View of Life* (1927), *An Idealist View of Life* (1929), *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (1939), *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (1957) et. cetera. His annotated translations of classical Hinduist texts, such as *The Bhagavadgītā* (1948),

The Principal Upaniṣads (1953), and *Brahma-Sutra* (1960) have attained classical status.

His contribution to the promotion of Hinduism in the West is that he highlighted its salient feature and supreme ideal its monistic aspect, which is none other than Advaita Vedānta. According to his view, Advaita Vedānta's aim is for every human being to experience total identification with the supreme being, that is, brahman³⁶. He also tried to combine Western rationalism with Hinduism by presenting the latter as a religious experience that is essentially rationalistic and humanistic. He acquired great prestige through his great efforts to get Western thought into contact with the Indian philosophy and promote Hinduism as a religion of the spirit; thus, he paved the way for a re-evaluation of its identity, trying to outline a tolerant, "spiritualized" Hinduism, compatible with "the future world religion" – a "scientific" as well as a "humanistic" religion, which would be able to give answers to all the questions that weigh heavily in modern people's minds³⁷.

Finally, we should not fail to mention some charismatic religious guides, who, while they spent most of their lives in India and traveled abroad only occasionally or for a very short amount of time, managed to acquire a large number of devoted adherents both within and outside its borders. In this category belong the following: Shri Aurobindo (1872-1950), philosopher and yogi, Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1887-1963), yoga's guru and Vedānta's champion, Neem (or Neeb) Karoli Baba (1900-1973), guru and God Hanuman's worshiper, Pramukh Swami Maharaj (1921-2016), guru and preacher of Swaminarayan, a branch of Vaishnavism, and Sathya Sai Baba (1926-2011), well-known as a magician.

From those we've just mentioned, we think that we should refer to three of them in a more detailed manner: Shri Aurobindo, Swami Sivananda Saraswati and Sathya Sai Baba.

36. See S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, Unwin Paperbacks, London (1927) 1988, p. 24. See also Ap. Michailidis, *Ἰνδουισμός*, *ibid.*, pp. 290-291; V. S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought*, pp. 236-237.

37. For the new religion envisioned by S. Radhakrishnan see Ap. Michailidis, *Ἰνδουισμός*, *ibid.*, p. 291. B. Kumar Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, pp. 286-296.

The first of them, Shri Aurobindo³⁸, was one of the most important exponents of Neo-Hinduism and a fighter for India's independence. Though his worldview was essentially Vedantic as far as its perceptions and principles are concerned, it also contains elements of 19th-century Western evolutionary thought. He introduced a new version of Vedanta, known as Punar-advaita or "integral non-dualism"; according to it, brahman is the only reality, but it embraces plurality/multiplicity and change. For him, life and the mind's constant involvement are the result of inert matter. This evolution will lead the human consciousness to attain even higher levels. "Superminds" and "superhumans" will appear, eventually reaching a point where the human volition will be united with the divine one. Human beings dedicated to God and the perfection of their consciousness through the medium of exercise with "integral" or "synthetic" yoga, will enjoy the Divine energy's ("śakti") supra-rational descent. By acting under the guidance of divine insight and having erased the feeling of their individuality, superhumans will transform the world into a place where unity and harmony will prevail among perfected human beings.

Shri Aurobindo envisioned "mankind's spiritual religion", which, according to his view, will provide human beings with the possibility to live united and free from religious commitments and racial discrimination. Wishing to spread his teachings, in 1926 he founded at Pondicherry (the contemporary Puducherry in southeastern India) the Shri Aurobindo Ashram, which has followed since then the same path through its different branches. Her close associate, the French citizen Mira Alfassa Richard, well-known among the disciples as "The Mother" and inspired by his teachings, founded Auroville, an ideal city, just about 10 kilometers northern of Pondicherry, that is nowadays populated by 3.288 inhabitants who belong to 60 different nationalities³⁹.

38. See Ap. Michailidis, *Ἰνδουισμός*, *ibid.*, pp. 284-286; «Ἀουρομπίντο Γκόσε», *Θρησκευτολογικὸ Λεξικόν*, *ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

39. Cencus April 2023-Auroville population, April 3, 2023, see <https://auroville.org/page/census-dec-2022-auroville-population-539> [31.7.2023].

The second one, Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1867-1963)⁴⁰, studied medicine, and served as a doctor in Malaysia for 10 years before becoming an anchorite. In 1924, he went to Rishikesh, a renowned Hindu and yoga pilgrimage center, where he met with his teacher, Vishvananda Saraswati, who introduced him to the way of anachoretism (sannyāsa). Swami Sivananda Saraswati became a famous yoga guru and Vedanta supporter. In 1936, he founded the Divine Life Society (DLS) and in 1948 the Yoga-Vedanta Forest Academy, a monastic community (with many brunches around the world), as well as an educating facility for yoga trainees. He named Yoga of Synthesis the method of yoga that he invented because it combines four types of yoga – action, worship, knowledge, and meditation (Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jñāna Yoga, Rāja Yoga).

In 1950, he toured all over India founding branches of the Divine Life Society. He was extremely enthusiastic about yoga's spread, to the point that their critics gave him the mocking characterization "Swami Propagandananda". Swami Sivananda Saraswati featured many disciples who spread yoga around the world – indeed, many of them founded their schools and ashrams. It suffices here to mention –we've been already referred to some of them– Chidananda Saraswati (1916-2008), Chinmayananda Saraswati (1916-1993), Sahajananda Saraswati (1925-2007), Satchidananda Saraswati (1914-2002), Satyananda Saraswati (1923-2009), Shantananda Saraswati (1913-1997), the German-Canadian Sivananda Radha Saraswati (her real name was Sylvia Demitz, 1911-1995), Venkatesananda Saraswati (1921-1982) and Vishnudevananda Saraswati (1927-1993).

Lastly, we have Sathya Sai Baba, who at the age of 14 years old claimed that he was the reincarnation of Sai Baba from Shirdi [1838(-)1918], a hermit whose teachings combined elements of Hinduism and Islam, and who became universally known as a magician⁴¹. More specifically, his

40. Sivānanda, *Life and Works of Swami Sivananda*, Divine Life Society, Fremantle Branch 1985; R. J. Fornaro, *Sivananda and the Divine Life Society: A Paradigm of the "secularism", "Puritanism" and "cultural Dissimulation" of a Neo-Hindu Religious Society*, Suracuse University 1969.

41. For Sathya Sai Baba see Ap. Michailidis, *Ἰνδουισμός*, *ibid.*, pp. 292-296, where all

followers thought of him as being god Siva's avatar; they attributed to him many miracles – the “materialization” of “sacred ash” (vibhūti) and other small objects (watches, rings, necklaces), miraculous cures, resurrecting a dead man in one case, insight and bilocation, hovering and the ability to become invisible, turning stones into sweets and water into another kind of liquid or gas, the ability to change at will the color of his robe, the multiplication of food and the control of weather conditions, displaying of different kinds of fruits hanging from the same tree, being transformed into different deities that radiate a bright light. Nevertheless, some disputed his miraculous abilities, especially the Professor of Physics and vice-rector of the University of Bangalore (present-day Bengaluru) Hossur Narasimhaiah (1920-2005), and the committee that was founded by him and bore his name. When he was asked to prove his miraculous capabilities through experiments, he refused to submit himself to this procedure by claiming that Hossur Narasimhaiah's stance was inconsistent with spiritual matters. On his part, Hossur Narasimhaiah considered Sathya Sai Baba's refusal as an indicator of fraud. Apart from those, Sathya Sai Baba's social contribution, which was undisputedly great, was officially recognized by the Indian state. In 1960, he founded the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization (SSSIO), a “spiritual” and “charitable” non-governmental organization that nowadays runs 1.200 branches in 114 countries, and in 1972 the Sri Sathya Sai Trust (SSSCT), through which he created a network of clinics of specialized care, general hospitals, irrigation, and water infrastructure works, a university and schools.

In any case, the spread of Hinduist beliefs is nowadays going through not only tens of thousands of teaching centers of the different yoga schools in the Western countries but also through Hinduist monastic communities. At the same time, the Internet constitutes a fertile ground for the spread of Hinduist beliefs, as there are a whole lot of webpages of Hinduist associations that promote them – especially yoga, though imported, has become a constitutive element for the attainment of self-improvement in western environments. We could mention here,

the relevant bibliographical references can be found.

although very cautiously as far as the correctness of the numbers given and the way it was conducted, that according to a survey, yoga trainees in the U.S.A. are 36.700.000⁴² while worldwide are 300.000.000⁴³.

In conclusion, it is sufficient to say that the UN, after a proposal made by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, declared the 21st of June –yearly and from 2015 onwards– as the International Day of Yoga. During this particular day, many different yoga-related events are taking place worldwide – including Greece: (speeches, lectures, mass demonstrations of bodily exercises, and breath control in public spaces).

Diffusion

In the previous pages, we've outlined West's conduct with the Hinduist spirituality and the latter's spread there.

Yet, what are the ways that Hinduist beliefs are nowadays diffused within Western societies?

As a simple example, we could mention the projection and the diffusion of the sacred syllable “aum”, (Sanskrit. ओम्, alphabet *devanāgarī*, transliteration *aum̐*) also known as *praṇava omkāra*, ὦ ὁποία which is rendered with the famous symbolic form ॐ. It can often be found in Westerners' everyday life practices. It may be engraved upon jewels (rings, bracelets, necklaces) and stamped on t-shirts, books, journals, or posters. More often than not, those who bear this symbol may be unaware of its meaning or simply just want to manifest their sympathy for the Eastern civilizations – for the East in general or India as a

42. The research was conducted in 2016 by the polling company Ipsos Public Affairs on behalf of *Yoga Journal* and the international *Yoga Alliance*. See “2016 Yoga in America Study Conducted by Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance”, *Yoga Journal*, Apr 13 (2017), <https://www.yogajournal.com/yogainamericastudy/> [07.8.2023].

43. S. Karkun, “Yoga across the globe-Some facts and figures to check”, *Times of India*, Jun 08, (2023), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/thethinkingcap/yoga-across-the-globe-some-facts-and-figures-to-check-54918/> [07.08.2023]. The survey was conducted Zippia, a US job-seeking, stuffing and personnel recruitment company; see A. McCain, “25+Interesting Yoga Industry Statistics [2023]: Yoga Trends+Revedue”, *ZIPPIA*, Jun 20 (2023), <https://www.zippia.com/advice/yoga-industry-statistics/> [07.8.2023].

country. It might be recalling to someone his or her trip to India or be an expression of their wish to visit that country. Of course, we cannot exclude the possibility that some people have consciously chosen this symbol to be a part of their attire, either because they want to express in this way their sympathy for the Eastern philosophies and religions or because they are followers of one of yoga's schools. More specifically, the sacred syllable "aum" symbolizes the *brahman* (the Absolute), essence of everything, and the *ātman*, individualized emanation [ἄπορροή] in every human being. Usually, the syllable can be found at the beginning or the end of chapters in some of the greatest Hindu texts, like the *Vedas* or *Upanishads*. It is exclaimed before the recitation of a mantra or independently, as a sacred invocation before, or in between, the psalming of sacred texts, the performing of rituals and private prayers, ceremonies of passage (*saṃskāras*) and meditation exercises. It is Brahman's –the absolute reality– most sacred symbol and mantra⁴⁴. It is also called *śabda brahman* (brahman as sound), as it is perceived as the primeval sound (*pravaṇa*) of the universe⁴⁵.

Given the fact that that yoga is a method of bodily exercise and meditation, intricately connected with Hinduist religiosity, we couldn't spare ignoring the religious elements that diffused through it. Considering its centuries-old history⁴⁶, and despite the fact that in the Western world most teaching schools present yoga as nothing else than a method of well-being and relaxation, or even as "science" or "philosophy", that is totally alien to religion, there is absolutely no doubt about its religious background: having as point of departure the representation in signet seals of an anthropomorphic ithyphallic being seated in a meditative posture, which Sir John Hubert Marshall (1876-1958) named as (*proto-Śiva*)⁴⁷, because he

44. W. J. Johnson, "om", *Oxford Dictionary of Hinduism*, p. 226. J. Lochtefeld, "Om", *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Vol. 2: N-Z, The Rosen Publishing Group, p. 482.

45. G. L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound*, Motilal Banarsidas, New Delhi 1995, pp. 42-48.

46. For yoga's history, see G. Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*, Hohm Press, Prescott (Arizona) 2001; El. De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, Continuum, London & New York (2004) 2008; V. Worthington, *A History of Yoga*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London 1982.

47. Ap. Michailidis, Ἰνδουισμός, *ibid.*, p. 94.

reminded to him the subsequent great god of the Hinduist pantheon and “great yogi” (*māhā-yogi*), of the Ganges Valley civilization (3500-1700 BC), we could pass to the descriptions in the Vedas concerning the supernatural capabilities of *keśin* (“the long-haired”⁴⁸) and the mysterious ascetic group of the black-dressed *Vrātyas*⁴⁹, to the references in yoga that can be found in the Upanishads and then to the great epics, the Puranas, and finally to the different and diverse texts of the literature of Yoga’s many branches. Regarding Yoga’s widespread influence on the Internet, there is not much to be said – it suffices for those who have some interest in this, to search an electronic social networking platform, entering the word “yoga” – about 3.820.000.000 entries will appear: spots with the execution of exercises, interviews with many gurus, advertisements of many schools, medical bits of advice based on yoga exercises, advertisements about the ways it benefits physical and mental health, etc.

In the Western world, the type of yoga that has been most widely disseminated is *Haṭha-yoga* (*Haṭha-yoga*, *Haṭha*=power, therefore “power yoga”), where bodily exercises’ role is pivotal⁵⁰. More specifically, it consists of a broad range of teachings and practices aiming at “self-realization”, (*ātma-jñāna*, *ātma-darśana*), through the perfection of the human organism’s function. The term “self-realization”, which is a yoga-related term that has been diffused mainly in the West, is usually perceived as the revelation of the authentic atomic self (*ātman*), essentially identified with transcendental reality (*brahman*), of a self not related with the ephemeral individual ego of everyday experience, but is an integral part of the transcendental reality. This revelation is synonymous with “illumination” (*bodhi*) or “liberation”

48. Ṛg-Veda, 10.136. See also Ap. Michailidis, *Ἰνδουισμός*, *ibid.*, p. 232, where you can find the translation of the hymn dedicated to *keśin*.

49. *Atharva-Veda*, *Vrātya-Khānda* (15th Book). For *Vrātyas* see also G. Feuerstein, “*Vrātyas*”, *The Shambhala Encyclopedia of Yoga*, Shambhala, Boston & London 1997, pp. 334-335; *The Yoga Tradition*, *ibid.*, pp. 119-121.

50. For *Haṭha-yoga* see Ap. Michailidis, «“Τί εἶναι ἡ Χάτα Γιόγκα;” (Ὁρισμός-Σκοποθεσία-Γραμματεία-Ἱστορική Διαδρομή-Μέθοδος)», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 90, 4 (2019), pp. 271-306, with the relevant bibliography (pp. 302-304). See also M. Eliade, *Γιόγκα-Ἀθανασία καὶ Ἐλευθερία*, transl. Elsi Toutsis, Xatzinikoli Publications, Athens 1980, pp. 202-209; N. N. Lorensen, “*Hathayoga*”, M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 6th, Macmillan, New York 1987, pp. 214-215; J. Mallinson, “*Haṭha Yoga*”, K. A. Jacobsen & H. Basu (eds.), *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 3, Brill Academic, Leiden 2011, pp. 770-781.

(*mokṣa* or *mukti*), as they are being perceived within the context of the Hinduist tradition. Furthermore, based on the most representative texts of this particular form of yoga, *haṭha-yogi*'s main aim is the suspension of the fluctuating flow of the life force (*prāṇa*) in his body. As it is believed, the life force flows in the right and left channels (*nāḍī*) within his body, thus maintaining the bodily activities and producing all the phenomena of ordinary mental activity, whether the mind is in a state of alertness or it is asleep. *Haṭha-yogi* wishes to focus on this innate power and to prevent its dispersal. His efforts aim at the awaking of the "sedated" energy, which is known as the "serpent-power" (*kuṇḍalinī-śakti*), and its gradual transition from the basic energy center (*mūlāndhāra cakra*), which lies at the pelvic area, in its highest point, at the crown of the head, which is called "thousand-petaled wheel" (*sahasrāra-cakra*). God Siva's throne is regarded as being the highest energy center. The union of the female element or the goddess's energy, which takes the form of *kuṇḍalinī-śakti*, with Siva, the male element, leads to the temporal situation of non-binary self-knowledge, *nirvikalpa-samādhi* – a state of total absorption and bliss. Because the body also participates in this process, the latter is regarded as more comprehensive and complete than the one achieved through simple meditation, as it is the case with the Vedantic tradition.

According to the description mentioned above, the religious elements are conspicuous. It is to anyone's discretion that teaches this particular method if he will reveal their true nature or if he will present them adjusted to the Western frame of mind.

On a practical level, and irrespective of the fact that the disciple is aware of it or not, certain bodily exercises unquestionably have a religious background. For example, the bodily exercise that is called (*sūryanamaskāra*), "greetings to *sūrya*", refers directly to the Vedic solar divinity *Sūrya*⁵¹. The exercise consists of twelve consecutive body

51. According to K. Pattabhi Jois, founder of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, "There is no Ashtanga yoga without Surya Namaskara, which is the ultimate salutation to the Sun god. In Hindu philosophy, the sun is accepted as the giver of life, the protector of all life forms on this earth-the health minister, you might say-and the illuminator of the intellect". "Surya Namaskar in the words of Sri K. Pattabhi Jois", <https://empowerpeace.typepad.com/empowerpeace/2010/07/surya-namaskar-in-the-words-of-sri-k-pattabhi-jois.html> [30.7.2023].

positions (*āsanas*), the execution of which, according to certain schools, is accompanied by the recitation of mantras, with each mantra corresponding to one position. There are also some other, more specialized positions, which are called “seals” (*mudrās*) and “locks” or “bonds” (*bandhas*). One of Haṭha-yoga’s classic texts, (*Gheraṇḍa-saṃhitā*, ca. 1700 AD), describes twenty-five “seals” and “locks”. One of the “seals” is *śambhavī-mudrā* or “Śambhu’s seal”⁵², where Śambhu is one of God Siva’s appellatives/cognomens. During its execution, the trainee has to essentially gaze at the eyebrow center, stilling his or her mind and reflecting the transcendental Self (*ātman*). It is said that the yogi who masters this position becomes equal to Siva⁵³.

More generally, yoga’s bodily positions (*āsanas*) are reflected in many manifestations and aspects of the Indian civilization. The religious Indian art represents Budha, Jainism’s founders, known as Tīrthaṅkaras (literally, “ford-makers”), and God Siva seated in the “lotus position” (*padmāsana*), as well as in other positions, like the *lalitāsana*⁵⁴. As yoga spreads in the West, *āsanas* are traced in literature, in the cinema, in TV series, and even in TV commercials⁵⁵. More generally,

52. *Gheraṇḍa-saṃhitā*, 3, 64-67: “And know about *śambhavī-mudrā*. By focusing the gaze between the eyebrows, see the ultimate Self (*ātman*). This is *śambhavī-mudrā*, the secret of all Tantras [64]. And those are *śambhavī-mudrā*’s benefits: The Bedas, Sastras, and Puranas are like harlots, but *śambhavī-mudrā* must be guarded as a lady of a respectable family [65]. The man that is knowledgeable of it, the *śambhavī-mudrā*, is Ādinātha [Siva’s cognomen] himself, is Nārāyaṇa [Visnu’s cognomen], is Brahmā, the Creator [66]. Maheśvara [that is, the ‘Great Lord’, another cognomen of Siva] said: ‘This is the truth, the truth and nothing else but the truth: the man who knows and possesses *śambhavī-mudrā* is no one else but Brahman itself’ [67]”. (*Atha śāmbhavīmudrākathanam. Netrāñjanam samālokya ātmārāmaṃ nirīksayēt. Sā bhavecchāmbhavī mudrā sarvatantraṣu gopitā* [64]. *Atha śāmbhavīmudrāyāḥ phalakathanam. vedaśāstrapurāṇāni sāmānyagaṇivā. iyaṃ tu śāmbhavīmudra guptā kulavadhūriṇī* [65]. *Sa eva hyādināthaśca sa ca nārāyaṇaḥ svayam. Sa ca brahmā sṛṣṭikārī yo mudrāṃ vetti śāmbhavīm* [66]. *Satyam satyaṃ punaḥ satyaṃ satyamāha maheśvaraḥ. Śāmbhaviṃ yo vijānīyātsa ca brahma na cānyathā* [67]).

53. See Ap. Michailidis, «Τί εἶναι ἡ Χάτα Γιόγκα;», op.cit., pp. 271-306, 294.

54. Known as the “royal position”, because different rulers as well as deities (Brahma, Visnu, Shiva, their wives and other female deities) and religious personalities are depicted in it. The person is sitting with his/her left leg bent, almost touching the right thigh, while the right leg touches the ground. In certain variations, the right elbow touches the knee of the right leg.

55. For example, in Greece’s case, we can refer to the following TV commercials: <https://>

yoga as a concept, a bodily exercise, or a meditation technique, is the most diffused element of the Hinduist religiosity⁵⁶.

The diffusion of the Hinduist religiosity can be also observed in the area of the seventh art. The most characteristic examples of movies inspired by Hinduist mythology to which we could primarily refer are those that have been produced in India and have subsequently been distributed in the West. For example, *Raavan* (2010), a movie written, directed, and co-produced by Mani Ratnam, is a modern version of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, which is very popular within the Hinduist community. The leading part belongs to Beera Munda, chief of a group of “Naxalites”, that is Maoist partisans, who are attacking police stations. At some point, Beera Munda abducts Raagini Sharma, Dev Pratap’s wife, who, is a senior police officer. Following an investigation, it is revealed that Beera Munda is the ealdorman of his village; he and his brothers, Mangal and Hariya, are controlling the surrounding agricultural areas. Although he is perceived as a “Naxalite” by the local police, Beera enjoys the villagers’ respect. As the plot unfolds, it is revealed that Beera abducted Raagini to get revenge for his sister’s death, Jamunia, who after her arrest and the tortures she was subjected to reveal her brother’s hideout, committed suicide. But the abduction was not the end of the story; after that, he brought Raagini to the edge of a cliff, ready to kill her. She does not want to find death at his hand; instead, she throws herself into the water, hoping to get drowned. At this point, Beera realizes that he does not want to kill someone and that she is not afraid of dying. Nevertheless, his brother Hariya, negotiates with Dev Pratap, by proposing a truce, which the senior office initially seems to accept. But when Hariya arrives at his hideout, Dev Pratap murders him while at the same time he reveals that, for him, Beera’s annihilation is vastly more important than his wife’s salvation. Then follows Beera’s and Mangal’s attack on Dev’s

www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bJ18JoVN18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrhGQfkB5qg>, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q1xOEZR_86Q [11.7.2023].

56. For yoga’s promotion in Greece’s internet space, as well as for all yoga forms and the schools that are available in Greece, see Loukia Roditou, *Ἡ προβολή τῆς γιόγκα στὸν ἐλληνικὸ διαδικτυακὸ χῶρο*, *op.cit.*; «Ἡ γιόγκα στὰ διαδικτυακὰ μέσα ἐνημέρωσης ὡς μία μορφή τῆς Διάχυτης Νέας Θρησκευτικότητος», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 94, 1 (2023), pp. 203-232.

camp. The final confrontation between Beera and Dev takes place on a rickety bridge; Beera smashes his adversary but he doesn't kill him for Raagini's sake. Dev will eventually manage to liberate his wife. As they're returning to his birthplace, Dev, according to Beera's revelations to him, accuses her of infidelity. Raagini is furious; she manages to meet Beera through Mangal's mediation and confronts him about his accusations. After Beera's categorical refutation of slandering her, they both realize that Dev had intentionally lied, with the hope that Raagini would lead him to Beera's hideout. Towards the end of the film's plot, Dev makes his appearance with a police squad and Raagini tries to save Beera. The latter moves her away from the line of fire but during his effort, he gets many bullets, falls to the ground and dies with a smile on his lips while Raagini remains upset.

For those who are familiar with *Rāmāyaṇa*'s plot, the movie's basic characters correspond to those of the epic. Thus, Beera corresponds to demon-King Rāvaṇa, who abducted Sītā, the wife of Rāma, heir to Ayodhyā's royal throne and God Visnu's "re-incarnation" (*avatāra*, literally "descent"). Therefore, Raagini Raagini is none other than Sītā. Dev Pratap's role is based on Rāma, Jamuni's on Śurpaṇakā, Rāvaṇa's sister, Hariya's on Vibhiṣaṇa, Rāvaṇa's, younger brother, while that of Mangal is based on Kumbhakarna, who is also Rāvaṇa's brother.

The film, without becoming a major box-office success⁵⁷, apart from India's movie theaters, was shown to those of North America and the UK. More specifically, it was shown in 120 cinemas around North America, making it the fifteenth-highest-grossing film⁵⁸.

57. H. Adesara, "Box Office: Raavan Opening Day Collections Below Expectation", *BOC (BUSINESSOFCINEMA.COM)*, 19 June 2010, <http://businessofcinema.com/news.php?newsid=16489> [20.7.2023]. Vinod Mirani, "Hits continue to evade Bollywood as Raavan flops", *Rediff*, 26 June 2010, <https://movies.rediff.com/report/2010/jun/28/box-office-raavan-flops.htm> [20.7.2023].

58. Sensagent, "Raavan", <https://dictionary.sensagent.com/raavan/en-en/> [20.7.2023].

Another film which, according to its director⁵⁹ is inspired by *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, is an epic-action movie titled *Baahubali: The Beginning* (2015), directed by Koduri Srisaila Dri Rajamouli, who also co-scripted it in cooperation with K. V. Vijayendra Prasad's father, and produced by Shobu Yarlagadda and Prasad Devineni for Arka Media Works (which is based in Hyderabad). The events that are unfolding take place in the kingdom of Mahismati. Sivudu, a villager, is informed of his royal descent and intends to claim his rights to the throne by overthrowing the usurper of it, his uncle Ballaladeva. Indeed, he discovers that he possesses supernatural powers when he lifts to the air a liṅgam, a phallic symbol – an abstract representation of God Siva's creative energy. The plot is full of machinations, chases, violent acts, epic battles, and spectacular effects. It got out in 2015 and was shown in 4,000 cinemas worldwide, of which 135 were in the U.S.A. Two years later, the movie's sequel was released, with the title *Baahubali: The Conclusion*. The original movie was also shown in many festivals – Busan International Film Festival, Indian Film Festival (The Hague), Sitges Film Festival (Catalonia), Utopiales Film Festival (Nantes/France), Golden Horse Film Festival (Taipei) Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival (Estonia), L'Etranger International Film Festival (Paris), Five Flavours Film Festival (Warsaw), Hawaii International Film Festival (Honolulu), Brussels International Fantastic Film Festival (Belgium), Cannes Film Festival, Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF) (Cluj-Napoca

59. Latha Srinivasan, "RRR director SS Rajamouli says 'my movies are influenced by Ramayana and Mahabharata'", *INDIA TODAY*, Mar 2 (2023), <https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/regional-cinema/story/ram-charan-jr-ntr-naatu-naatu-rrr-director-ss-rajamouli-says-my-movies-are-influenced-by-ramayana-and-mahabharata-2341502-2023-03-02> [07.8.2023]; HT Correspondent, "For Baahubali, I turned to Mahabharata for inspiration: SS Rajamouli", *Hindustan Times*, Jun 2 (2015), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/regional-movies/for-baahubali-i-turned-to-mahabharata-for-inspiration-ss-rajamouli/story-cPGAZLuXvGmFG7po31cjTJ.html> [07.8.2023]; Tr. Das, "Adipurush To Hum Saath Saath Hain: 10 Movies That Took Inspiration From the Hindu Epic Ramayana, *India Times*, May 11 (2023): "All my movies are inspired by Mahabharata and Ramayana because those are two epics that have been fed to me right from my childhood", ace filmmaker Rajamouli once said", <https://www.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/adipurush-movies-that-took-inspiration-from-hindu-epic-ramayana-602226.html> [07.8.2023].

/ Romania), Le Grand Rex (Paris). Both the original film and its sequel were the most expensive Indian productions at that point, and they were big box-office successes.

Two modern versions of *Mahābhārata* are the movies *Kalyug* (“Age of Darkness”, 1981) and *Raajneeti* (“Politics”, 2010). The first one was directed by Shyam Benegal; following the epic’s footsteps, it revolves around the grueling struggle between two businessmen and brothers, who are plotting against each other about which of them will manage to be awarded a public procurement contract. In 1982, the film won the Filmfare Award for Best Film for domestic productions, participated in the Berlin International Film Festival, and was one of the three Indian movies received a Oscar nomination for the Foreign Film category. The second one, written and directed by Prakash Jha, which follows the epic’s narrative pattern regarding the family feud between Paṇḍavas and Kauravas, recounts a long-lasting dispute between two extensive families that have been political adversaries. It was released worldwide on June 4th, 2010, receiving mixed to positive reviews, both in India as well as internationally. It was a big box-office hit (it earned \$ 18.000.000), and was one of the highest-grossing Indian films in 2010⁶⁰.

The last of the Indian films to which are going to refer is *Brahmāstra: First Part-Shiva* (2022), the first part of a trilogy heavily influenced by Indian mythology, which was written and directed by Ayan Mukerji. It is an action and adventure movie, filmed in different countries, that abounds with terms taken from the Hinduist tradition, while at the same time is, till now, the most expensive Indian film (the movie’s total costs rose to \$ 51.000.000)⁶¹. According to the script, in Ancient India,

60. Indicine Team, “Rajneeti – A box office Blockbuster!” *INDICINE*, 12 June 2010, <http://www.indicine.com/movies/bollywood/rajneeti-a-box-office-blockbuster/> [06.8.2023].

61. Times of India (etimes.in), “Did you know Alia Bhatt and Ranbir Kapoor’s Brahmastra budget exceeds 400 crores?”, *Times of India*, Sep 2, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/did-you-know-alia-bhatt-and-ranbir-kapoors-brahmastra-exceeds-400-crores/articleshow/93935997.cms> [11.11.2023]; Bollywood Hungama News Network, “SCOOP: Brahmastra official budget is over Rs. 400 crores-Ranbir Kapoor, Alia Bhatt film creates history”, *Bollywood Hungama*, September 1, 2022, <https://bollywoodhungama.com/news/bollywood/scoop-brahmastra-official-budget-rs-400-crores-ranbir-kapoor-alia-bhatt-film-creates-history/> [07.8.2023]; The Indian

a group of sages who are living in the Himalayas, are facing the threat posed by Brahm-shakti energy, which produces many powerful astral weapons, called *astras*. The most potent of them, Brahmāstra, which is frequently mentioned in the two epics⁶², is capable of destroying the world. The sages are using their astra to tame the unstable Brahmāstra and become Brahmans, a secret society aiming at protecting the world from *astras*' power. The man who can handle Brahmāstra is Shiva, a DJ from Bombay who grew up as an orphan, thanks to the training he received from guru Raghu. The script is focused on the amorous relationship between Shiva and Isha Chatterjee, a London resident, who traveled to India to participate in Durgā pūjā, the annual religious festival in honor of Goddess Durgā, and to jointly fight a mysterious and malicious being called Dev, along with its collaborators, Junoon and Zor.

The film was distributed in North America by 20th Century Studios and to the rest of the world by Disney Studios Motion Pictures. It was shown in 5.000 cinemas in India and 3000 abroad, thus gaining the widest release ever for an Indian film⁶³.

Still, there are also films that been made outside India, in which, although the Hindu elements are less diffused, yet they had the biggest ratings. We can refer to the futuristic, science-fiction film *Avatar* (2009) directed by James Cameron, the biggest-grossing film ever and one of the most expensive. As it can be surmised by its title, Hinduist mythology has left its imprint upon it. The same goes for its recent sequel with the title *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022). Its plot unfolds in a future era, where humans are colonizing another planet, Pandora, but they

Express (Entertainment Desk), "Brahmastra made at a cost of Rs. 410 crore, most expensive Hindi film report", *The Indian Express*, September 1, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/brahmastra-made-at-a-cost-of-rs-410-crore-most-expensive-hindi-film-8125379/> [07.8.2023].

62. W. J. Johnson, *Oxford Dictionary of Hinduism*, p. 67; see for example: *Mahābhārata*, Saupitikaparvan, 15; *Rāmāyaṇa*, Yuddha Kanda, 22, 31.

63. Fenil Seta, "BREAKING: Brahmastra to release in 8000 screens worldwide; to get the WIDEST release ever for a Hindi film", *Bollywood Hungama*, September 3, 2022, <https://bollywoodhungama.com/news/bollywood/breaking-brahmastra-release-8000-screens-worldwide-get-widest-release-8000-screens-worldwide-get-widest-release-ever-hindi-film/> [07.8.2023].

are meeting with the resistance of the indigenous humanoid species, the Na'vi. James Cameron has claimed in many of his interviews that the film's title, *Avatar*, came from the Sanskrit word which means "a human incarnation of the Gods"⁶⁴. In an interview that he gave to *Time* magazine, when he was asked about the meaning of the word "avatar", Cameron gave the following answer: "It's an incarnation of one of the Hindu gods taking a flesh form. In this film what that means is that the human technology in the future is capable of injecting a human's intelligence into a remotely located body, a biological body"⁶⁵. According to the director, Na'vi's blue skin refers directly to the color of different Hinduist deities⁶⁶, and more specifically Rāma's and Kṛṣṇa's, who is God Viṣṇu's avatar. It is worth noting here that, according to the Hinduist tradition, blue, which is the color of the sky, refers to the infinite nature of the supreme reality – of the Absolute, that is, brahman⁶⁷. Again,

64. See M. Chhikara, "9 Movies Inspired By Indian Mythology Everyone Should Watch", *Jagran Josh*, Oct 13 (2022), <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/movies-inspired-by-indian-mythology-everyone-should-watch-1665646012-1> [21.7.2023].

65. Interviewed by R. Winters Keegan, "Q&A with James Cameron", *Time*, Jan 11, 2007: "It's an incarnation of one of the Hindu gods taking a flesh form. In this film what that means is that the human technology in the future is capable of injecting a human's intelligence into a remotely located body, a biological body", <https://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1576622,00.html> [21.7.2023].

66. See the interview he gave to B. Svetkey, "'Avatar'. 11 Burning Questions" *Entertainment Weekly*, Jan 15 (2010): "Q: 'Why are the Na'vi blue? Why not another color?'. A: 'I just like blue. It's a good color', James Cameron says. 'Plus, there's a connection to the Hindu deities, which I like conceptually'". See <https://web.archive.org/web/20100117203231/http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0%2C%2C20336893%2C00.html>, [21.7.2023]. See K. M. James, "5 movies that were influenced by Hinduism", *MOVIEKOOP* (07 August 2018): "Avatar is Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language, [...] translated in English as 'incarnation'. The term, is most widely associated in Hinduism with Lord Vishnu, the deity whose Avatar (incarnations) are often depicted as having blue skin, similar to the Na'vi in Cameron's *Avatar*". See <https://moviekoop.com/Story/5-movies-that-were-influenced-by-hinduism-> [07.8.2023].

67. Cf. an extract from a speech given by Swami Chinmayananda (1916-1993), religious teacher and founder of the Chinmaya Mission, Swami Chinmayananda (1916-1993), "The Spiritual Truth of the Great Beauty", <https://thegod.wordpress.com/spiritual-truth-sri-krishna/> [22.8.2023]: "Blue is the color of the Immeasurable, the Infinite. Anything vast and immeasurable will appear to our fleshy eyes as blue, like blue sky or the blue ocean. This infinite is the Blue Boy, is clothed in yellow robes. 'Yellow' is the color of the earth".

Na'vi's tails are reminiscent of Vararas, the monkey people found in, τοῦ ἔπους *Rāmāyaṇa*, whom Rama met in the woods of central India and became his allies, under the leadership of their king Sugrīva and his general Hanumān (a highly respected figure of the Hinduist pantheon). The movie also depicts someone's capability to temporarily abandon his body and enter into that of another creature – more specifically, we can see humans abandoning their bodies and entering into a Na'vi's body. According to the Hinduist tradition, this capacity is called *parakāya praveśam*; it is ascribed to Śaṅkara (788-820), a philosopher and Hinduism reformer in a biography of him that is not that accurate⁶⁸ and in many histories that can be found in *Puranas*. Another feature that has been taken from Hinduist mythology is the use of flying dragons by the Na'vi as a means of transport. It is well known that Vishnu mounts (Garuḍa), a huge mythical bird. Again, many other Hinduist deities use a flying means of transport (*vāhana*, literally, “vehicle”), bird or animal, to move from place to place. Speaking about the connections of his movie with the Hinduist mythology, James Cameron once said: “I have just loved [...] the mythology, the entire Hindu pantheon, seems so rich and vivid. I didn't want to reference the Hindu religion so closely, but the subconscious association was interesting, and I hope I haven't offended anyone in doing so”⁶⁹.

Furthermore, another feature reminiscent of Hinduist religiosity that is depicted in the recent sequel (2022) is *amrita*, a liquid able to completely stop human aging, extracted from Tulkun's glands at the base of their brain. Tulkun, which are similar to the whales, are highly intelligent creatures; this permits them to connect with the Na'vi in an especially emotional way. “Amrita” as a term (Sanskrit., अमृत, transliteration *amṛta*) means “immortality” and is often referred to in Indian texts as an

68. M. Vidyaranya, *Sankara-dig-vijaya (The traditional life of Sri Sankaracharya)*, transl. by Sw. Tapasyananda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, n.d., pp. 112-116.

69. See Ch. Krishna, “How Has Hinduism Inspired Hollywood Movies?”, *Kreately* (December 27 2022), <https://kreately.in/how-has-hinduism-inspired-hollywood-movies/> [22.7.2023]: “I have just loved ... the mythology, the entire Hindu pantheon, seems so rich and vivid. I didn't want to reference the Hindu religion so closely, but the subconscious association was interesting, and I hope I haven't offended anyone in doing so”.

elixir – e.g. in *Ṛg-veda* (120 hymns) as synonymous to “*soma*” and in Brāhmaṇas. It is the liquid consumed by the gods, as well as by the priests who wish to have a taste of immortality – as long as the effect lasts⁷⁰. Furthermore, within the yoga tradition, many different practices have been invented so that the disciple’s body will be in a position to produce the liquid and be permeated by it. Thus, the body will become strong, healthy, and immune to illnesses. Again, it is said that it stops aging and bestows immortality as well as the eight magical powers⁷¹.

The *Matrix* film series (1999-2003) must be numbered in the same category (1999-2003). It is a science fiction action film trilogy through which the following question is being raised: what would have happened if our world wasn’t real but simulated? The trilogy focuses on Neo, a computer hacker, who realizes that the world he inhabits it’s not real, but it’s under the control of ruthless Artificial Intelligent (AI) machines; there exists *Matrix*, a virtual reality program, that deceives people by making them feel alive while in reality they are trapped into it through an artificial connection plugged in the back of their neck. As they are engulfed in this virtual program, they feel it is real, because it hides the fact that it is illusory. Taking this as a starting point, Peter Rader, a Hollywood film producer, claimed that *Matrix* was based on yoga’s principles. More specifically, he professed: “Look at the first *Matrix* movie. It’s a yogic movie. It says that this world is an illusion. It’s about māyā – that if we can cut through the illusions and connect with something larger, we can do all sorts of things. Neo achieves the abilities of the advanced yogis Yogananda described, who can defy the laws of normal reality”⁷².

70. *Ṛg-veda* 8.48.3: “We drunk soma. We’ve become immortals (*amṛita*). We reached to the light. We found the gods (*devas*)” [“*apāma somamamṛtā abhūmāganma jyotiravidama devān*”].

71. See G. Feuerstein, “AMRITA”, *The Shambhala Encyclopedia of Yoga*, *ibid.*, p. 21.

72. See N. Dhaliwal, “How movies embraced Hinduism (without you even noticing)”, *The Guardian* (25 Dec, 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/dec/25/movies-embraced-hinduism> [22.7.2023]: “Look at the first *Matrix* movie. It’s a yogic movie. It says that this world is an illusion. It’s about māyā—that if we can cut through the illusions and connect with something larger, we can do all sorts of things. Neo achieves the abilities of the advanced yogis Yogananda described, who can defy the laws of normal reality”.

According to the Hinduist thought, especially that of Advaita Vedānta School, the present world, compared with Brahman's transcendental reality, is illusive. It's a world covered by the veil of *māyā*, of illusion. The protagonists of the movie are a group of people produced by the virtual reality program, who became acquainted with the real world, something that is parallel with the Hinduist tradition, according to which many seekers managed to break away from *māyā* illusionary universe and approach Brahman's transcendental reality.

Before leaving the Matrix trilogy, we would like to note that in its third installment, *Matrix Revolutions* (2003), during the last battle and the appearance of the end credits on the screen, an ancient Vedic hymn, a mantra from (*Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*): "From the unreal lead me to real, / from the darkness lead me to the light, / from the death lead me to immortality"⁷³.

Yet, apart from the Matrix film series, it would have been impossible to fail to mention another trilogy – Star Wars, George Lucas's brainchild. The latter's central element is the existence and the use of "The Force", which is described by Obi-Wan Kenobi, one of the Jedi teachers and secondary characters of the trilogy, as "an energy field created by all living things". Here, we are dealing with a metaphysical and all-pervading power that resides in the Star Wars imaginary universe. Each one of the two rival orders, Jedi and Sith, is trying to appropriate it, to satisfy its goals. The members of the first order seek to "become one with the Force", by identifying their will with that of The Force, while those of the second, along with other insidious groups, seek to wield it to bring their destructive plans to fruition. In 1981, George Lucas compared the ways of acquiring "The Force" with yoga, by saying that everyone could have it, not only a Jedi, and Yoda not with a Jedi's simple teacher but with a guru⁷⁴. As Candan Mishra, an Indian columnist, observes,

73. *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, 1, 3, 28: *asato mā sad gamaya, / tamaso mā jyotir gamaya, / mṛtyor ma amṛtaṁ gamaya*. We must also note at this point that the same *mantra* was part of the TV series soundtrack *Battlestar Galactica* (2004), (2004), as well as the lyrics of the song *Gita* from the album *Inner Worlds* (1976) by the jazz fusion band Mahavishnu Orchestra, formed in 1971 and led by the guitarist John McLaughlin (1942-).

74. See the interview that he gave to M. Ryan, "'Star Wars' Prequels Were Mapped Out

“The relationship between Yoda and Luke is similar to the traditional guru/disciple relationship, and the instructions Yoda gives are ‘almost verbatim’ from the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the ancient spiritual manual spoken by Lord Krishna to Prince Arjuna before the war of *Mahābhārata*”⁷⁵.

Apart from the films mentioned above, there are many other movies in which we can trace instances of Hinduist religiosity’s diffusion, while there also some cases where we have satirical or humorous references, especially related to the Hare Krishna movement. A partial list of them includes the films *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (1967), *The Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977), *Airplane!* (1980), *Hair* (1979) by Milos Forman, *The Muppet Movie* (1979), *The Devil and Max Devlin* (1981), *Stripes* (1981), *Death Wish II* (1982), *The Karate Kid* (1984), *Falling Down* (1993), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *National Lampoon’s Senior Trip* (1995), *Final Destination* (2000), *Osmosis Jones* (2001), *Bee Season* (2005), *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010) and *Life of Pi* (2012).

As far the elements of Hinduist religiosity in TV shows are concerned, we could first mention the American animated sitcom *The Simpsons*; one of the characters is the American-Indian Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, a religious, workaholic Hinduist (“I work 22 hours a day”), a proprietor who runs Kwik-e-Mart, a convenience store, selling very often expire products in exorbitant prices. More specifically, Apu is presented as a vegetarian, devotee of the god Gaṇeśa, –with his elephant head and four arms–, who believes in the law of retribution (karma) and reincarnation. At one point he has to be married to a girl that he hasn’t seen since childhood – it is an arranged marriage; nevertheless, after their marriage, the two fell in love and had 8 children.

by George Lucas & Lawrence Kasdan in 1981: Exclusive Excerpt From ‘The Making of Star Wars: Return of the Jedi’”, *The Huffington Post*, March 5 (2013), https://web.archive.org/web/20140408025655/http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/22/star-wars-prequels-return-of-the-jedi_n_3313793.html [23.7.2023].

75. Ch. Krishna, “How Has Hinduism Inspired Hollywood Movies?”, *Kreately*, December 27 (2022), <https://kreately.in/how-has-hinduism-inspired-hollywood-movies/> [22.7.2023]: “The relationship between Yoda and Luke is similar to the traditional guru/disciple relationship, and the instructions Yoda gives are ‘almost verbatim’ from the *Bhagavad Gita*, the ancient spiritual manual spoken by Lord Krishna to Prince Arjuna before the war of *Mahabharata*”.

Then we have the American pre-teen animated musical-comedy TV series *Phineas and Ferb*, which was shown on Disney Channel and Disney XD for four seasons (from August 2007 to June 2015). Two of its characters, Baljeet and Ravi, are of Indian origin. The first one very rarely makes any kind of reference to the Hinduist culture, while the second one comments very often upon it. For example, in the third episode of the first season, he is obsessed with karma. Luke, his stepbrother, pulls a prank on him, and Ravi, having in mind to give him a taste of his own medicine, warns him about the “*cosmic payback*”), meaning karma – so he pulls some pranks in his turn to persuade Luke that karma exists. In the end, Luke, convinced about karma’s existence, stays under the rain, and thus Ravi takes his revenge.

Also relevant to our subject is *Mira, Royal Detective*, a CGI-animated mystery children’s TV series, which was shown for two seasons on the channels Disney Junior and DisneyNOW. The first season, which consisted of 25 episodes, ran from 20.3.2019 to 27.3.2021, and the second one, which consisted of 29 episodes, ran from 5.4.2021 to 20.6.2022. The plot of the series unfolds in the fictional kingdom of Jalpur, which resembles late 19th-century India. The protagonist is Mira, a young and resourceful young girl, who has been appointed by the queen as a royal detective to help her. As it is obvious, the TV series characters have Indian names, play Indian musical instruments (Sitar and Tabla), and participate in Hindu religious festivals. We have to clarify, though, that while festivals like Diwali and Holī are featured prominently in the series, much of the attention is given to their external features, while there is no reference to their inner religious content. In Diwali’s case, for example, a prominent place is given to the decoration of the interiors and the exteriors, the illumination of the spaces with *diyas* (oil lamps), candles and lanterns, and the distribution of sweets, while God Rama, the heir of the throne in Ayodhyā, to whom the festival is dedicated, is conspicuously absent. Again, in the festival Holī’s case, while a prominent place is given to the cheerful atmosphere that characterizes it, in parallel with the spaying of colored powdered solutions, there is no reference whatsoever to the annihilation of Holikā, a vicious female demon [asuri], which is the festival’s main religious content. Nevertheless, despite the

absence of the latter, the prominence of their decorative elements is an unquestionable proof of the Hinduist religiosity's diffusion.

Speaking about TV productions we could not fail to mention a six-hour mini-series adaptation of *Mahābhārata* directed by Peter Brook. Initially, in 1985, the French writer Jean-Claude Carrière wrote a theatrical play based on the Indian epic which was staged in a quarry just outside Avignon. The play toured around the world for four consecutive years and then, in 1989, followed its TV adaptation, which was also shown by Hellenic Broadcasting Operation, a Greek state-owned channel.

Passing to the realm of music, one of the most characteristic cases is that of the Beatles. After they came into contact with the religious organization ISKCON [International Society for Krishna Consciousness] founded by Swami Prabhupada in 1969, Hinduist religiosity left its indelible mark on some of their songs. Thus, Hare Krishna's mantra is heard to be recited by George Harrison in the song "My Sweet Lord" (1970). The verse "I hope to get out of this place by the Lord Sri Krishna's grace. My salvation from the material world" is heard to be sung in "Living in the Material World" (1973). Other songs by George Harrison that have references to Krishna are the following: "It is 'He'", "Jai Sri Krishna" (1974), "Sat Sing" (1980), and "Life Itself" (1981).

The invocation "Hare Krishna" has been inserted in the lyrics of some songs written by Jon Lennon, like "Give Peace a Chance" (1969) and "I am the Walrus" (1967). It is also heard as the back vocals of "It Don't Come Easy" (1971), a song composed by Ringo Starr and George Harrison, while the latter also produced it. Furthermore, as we have already noted, George Harrison, who was Krishna's loyal devotee⁷⁶, produced the single "Hare Krishna", as well as the album to which

76. When he was at his deathbed, apart from his family members, he was surrounded by two important members of Hare Krishna organization, Shyamasundar Das and Mukunda Goswami, who were reciting verses from *Bhagavad Gītā*. After his cremation and funeral, which took place at the Self-Realization Fellow Shrine funded by Swami Yogananda, his family, according to the Hinduist custom laws, scattered his ashes to the Ganges and Yamouna rivers, close to the sacred city of Varanasi. See G. Tillery, *Working Class Mystic: A Spiritual Biography of George Harrison*, Quest Books/Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton 2011, p. 148; P. Doggett, *You never Give Me Your Money: The Beatles After the Breakup*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York 2009, p. 332.

it belongs, Radha Krishna Temple, released in 1971 from the Beatles' Apple Records label.

Apart from the Beatles, though, elements of Hinduist religiosity can be traced in the music and songs of other solo musicians or groups. For example, we are referring to two songs written by the jazz clarinetist Tony Scott, "Homage to Lord Krishna" (1967) and "Hare Krishna [Hail Krishna]". The second comes from the 1968 album *Music for Meditation and Other Joys*; The Frugs from their 1968 album *Tenderness Junction*, in which the poet Allen Ginsberg also participated; God Rama's mantra accompanies the song "We Will Fall" written by The Stooges, which comes from their first album that bears at its title the group's name (1969). Many relevant features can also be traced in the discography of the British guitarist John MacLaughlin, known also by the Sanskrit name Mahavishnu, who founded the group Mahavishnu Orchestra (1970). In 1971, John MacLaughlin recorded in the U.S.A. an album with the title *My Goal's Beyond*, inspired by his decision to follow the teachings of the Indian guru Sri Chinmoy, whom he had met with one year before through his manager, Larry Coryell. He dedicated the album to Sri Chinmoy, with one of the latter's poems inscribed to its box. After the album's release, John MacLaughlin got the nickname Mahavishnu.

Another important case is the American jazz composer and performer Alice Lucille Coltrane (1937-2007), also known as Swamini Turiyasangitananda or simply Turiya, who, among other things, founded the Vedantic Center (1975) and the ashram Shanti Anantam (1983) in California, and had been an ardent spiritual leader of Hinduism. It would suffice for us to mention the titles of some of her albums, like *Huntington Ashram Monastery* (1969), *Journey in Satchidananda* (1971), *Universal Consciousness* (1971), *Radha-Krishna Nama Sankirtana* (1977), *Turiya Sings* (1982, 2021), *Divine Songs* (1987), *Translinear Light* (2004) and *Kirtan: Turiya Sings* (2021).

Likewise, if not to such a great extent, the diffusion of Hinduist spirituality *θρησκευτικότητας* could be traced in the compositions of the British psychedelic rock band Kula Shaker. The band's name was inspired by the name of Vishnu devotional poet Kulasekhara (ca. 9th c. AD), one of the twelve Ālvārs – a group of Vaishnavite mystical poets

from south India, that was active between the 6th and 9th century AD. Especially his first album, which its title is simply *K* and was released in 1996, contains many Vedic mantras, and appellations of God Krishna, while the titles of many songs are typical Sanskrit terms, like “Govinda”, “Sleeping Jiva”, “Tattva”. On the album’s cover art, surrounded by many other personalities of world history related to the letter *K*, Krishna and his beloved companion Rada are the dominating figures.

Apart from the above mentioned, some sporadic references to Hinduist religiosity and especially to the Hare Krishna movement are to be found in Fleetwood Mac’s song “Miles Away” where the mantra “Hare Krishna” is heard the same goes for the album *I Am What I am* (1971) by Ruth Copeland, to *Zen Arcade* (1984) by the American punk rock band Hüsker Dü, and the *Break Up the Concrete* (2008) by Pretenders. Finally, the song “Bow Down Mister” by the British composer and singer Boy George, which he composed under the pseudonym “Angela Dust”, was performed by the band *Jesus Loves You*, of which he was the founder. It was the band’s first song with religious content, which Boy George composed after a trip he made to India, where he found inspiration in the teachings of Hare Krishna’s movement. The song was released on the 11th of February 1991 as the fourth single from the album *The Martyr Mantras*; the phrase “HARE KRISHNA” is inscribed on its cover. It was a big hit, not only in the UK but also in many countries of continental Europe, especially in Austria and Germany, where it had made it into the Top Ten.

Epilogue

By concluding the presentation of the Hinduist religiosity’s diffusion, we could add that this is taking place in many other ways – TV and cinema commercials, advertisements by travel agencies, webpages of a lot of Hinduist organizations and associations, publishing of books focusing on self-improvement, health care, and prevention (e.g. Ayurveda), prose and poetry editions. All these happen in a constantly changing world, which is facing innumerable challenges and problems, many of

which have been created by humans themselves; in a world plagued by selfishness, rivalries, wars, forced or voluntary population moves, ethnic conflicts, often mired in religious disputes and intolerance; a world where local traditions constantly confront or come in terms with the modernist or even postmodernist imperatives and considerations.

Nevertheless, the specter of the ever-changing and evolving technology is hovering over everything. We could surmise that the diffusion of Hinduist religiosity –as of any other religiosity, ideology, or culture– will continue to unfold and become easier through rapid technological progress. Yet, in the question if this diffusion is responsible for people's conversion to another religion, in this particular case Hinduism, our answer would be negative. We believe that conversion takes place mainly through spreading, and it certainly becomes easier in places ravaged by the confusion of views and ideas, the lack of education, the partial knowledge –or even ignorance– of the historical forces that have shaped a certain culture, religion, nation or state, and where –for different reasons– the pillars of religious faith have been shaken, of which the historical presence and process are connected with a particular geographical space – in our case, of Orthodox Christianity with that of Greece's. Because of the fact that Christianity's presence remains powerfully potent within the boundaries of this particular space, we should be very careful about our predictions.