

## THE “AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT”

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This is not going to be an orthodox, conventional autobiography. It is not an autobiography at all, just fragments of a life reflected in a thousand of mirrors.

(Osho Rajneesh 1984, 237)

### Abstract

Indian spiritual autobiographies pivot on the idea of spiritual enlightenment: by transcending the ego, the self puts an end to the cycle of reincarnation. On the one hand these works reflect an individual experience, and on the other hand they mirror the society and culture that forms its background. In this paper I examine two “enlightened” autobiographies, Paramhansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) and Osho Rajneesh’s *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood* (1984), from the viewpoints of ideational content and rhetoric, in order to show the difference between Yogananda’s sacred outlook, which G.K. Shandya interprets from a post-colonial vantage point, and Osho’s secular spiritual perspective, which has a cross-cultural character and includes key aspects of the Western worldview. In the field of spiritual life writing no less than in general, the movement from the cultural moment of 1946 to 1984 reflects the modernization of the Indian tradition and consists in a change of emphasis from hierarchy to individualism.

Though little known to the average reader, Rajneesh’s autobiography is noteworthy as it represents an original reinterpretation of spiritual enlightenment from the viewpoint of Western individualism. Conversely, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1945) is a staple of Indian spirituality, and privileges cultural continuity and tradition. Apart from their artistic merit, the interest of these books lies a) in the paradox that they are purportedly written by self-realized

and hence “egoless” authors, and b) in the fact that they belong to a period in which the process of decolonization came to fruition, and India took a stance with regard to the scientific and individualistic outlook that constitutes “secular modernity.” As for method, my framework draws on *Modernization of the Indian Tradition*, in which Yogendra Singh analyses social change along the lines of a culturological conception. In this perspective, what matters is not only *reality per se*, but also the subjective *representation of ideas* of reality. The focus is on how Indian minds have adapted to the revelation of Western culture: *Autobiography of a Yogi* and *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood* are important examples of adaptive reaction because they represent the viewpoints of pivotal figures of the Indian tradition: the gurus. Accordingly, I interpret Osho’s work and Yogananda’s work, respectively, in the light of what Singh calls “Modernization” and “Indian Renaissance.”

### **The “Autobiography of Spiritual Enlightenment”**

When we examine the autobiographies of my authors, we notice a contradiction: Osho’s account is more humanly convincing than Yogananda’s, and hence nearer to what today we recognize as life writing. *Autobiography of a Yogi*, by comparison, is more stereotyped. Yet, while Yogananda insists on the actuality of what he writes (however outlandish it may be), Rajneesh, who is far more plausible, undermines any notion of his own veracity by declaring that a self-realized person *cannot have an autobiography*, because his ego has disappeared. The past cannot exist for a self-realized narrator who lives moment-by-moment, like a little child: that is why Osho considered Yogananda’s autobiography a fairy tale and a hoax. Paramhansa’s position is didascalical and unproblematic, and rests on the pre-modern bedrock of memory: “‘I remember’ gives the strongest sort of belief support available to what is being said” – writes James Olmes in his seminal essay on autobiography and memory (Olmes 1998, 298). Conversely, in Rajneesh’s life writing we don’t have the

conception that recollections are “things” to be found in the mind, but the insistence on the *experience* of remembering; we are not confronted with an author made omniscient by esoteric knowledge, but with a narrative participatory performance and a happening; we are not mystified by an “enlightened” autobiography, but challenged by the paradox of an autobiography *of* (not only *about*) self-realization. In *Autobiography of a Yogi* the main tropes are physical immortality, and the ancientness of the scriptures – symbols of a past that refuses to go, and that takes ontological precedence over the present. In *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood*, youth is sacred, not old age: the past is subsumed by the present, and the narrative acts as much as a vision than as a story.

In fact, the paradoxes I have mentioned have many implications. Silence is one of the metaphors that have represented spiritual enlightenment down the ages. A man who becomes totally silent, maintains Osho, loses all boundaries, all definitions. If he were to write an autobiography, it would be the story of the whole existence, and it would have no beginning and no end. Moreover, an unenlightened author may *want* to say the truth about himself, but he *would not be able to*, because he would lack the awareness to do that; while an enlightened writer would have an experiential understanding of his being, but not the desire to make use of it. The Eastern tradition makes clear that a person is self-realized when he is no longer identified with his memories and desires – a fact that in principle abolishes both the motivation and the substance of an autobiography. Traditionally, in India, even an ordinary pious man (not to mention a saint) would refrain from drawing attention to his person: it would be considered *ashistata*, bad manners. Yet Rajneesh is not afraid to be considered an egoist and authors a life writing that centers on his own unrestrained and exceptional individuality, while Yoganada does all he can to erase himself, show his humbleness, and fulfill a reader’s expectations about sainthood.

By looking at what motivates these contradictions, we understand why today Yogananda looks dated to a modern (and particularly a Western) reader, while Osho has what is needed to appeal to the public he addresses. Osho is far from being the speaking or writing subject of an autobiography in the traditional sense. What we read in his pages is as much about the implications of being a self-realized author as it is about the meaning self-realization acquires when it takes place in a modern context. Two aspects are worth noting: 1) the protagonist fulfills his potential by challenging society and becoming a true individual; and 2) self-realization deconstructs<sup>1</sup> the author as a fixed and stable entity. The former aspect is familiar in the European *Bildungsroman*, but appears innovative in the Indian autobiographical context of the 1970s and '80s. The latter points to an affinity between Osho's standpoint and the modernist dilemma about selfhood. In fact, from James Olmes' *Memory and Narrative* we learn that the self-centered works that Modernism has produced (Samuel Beckett's are a prime example) are premised on the idea that the ego is an illusion which memory can no longer keep together and uphold: "Not I!" cries out one of Beckett's narrative alter-egos. In Modernism the notion of selfhood is in question, and contemporary Western self-centered narrative shows a subject that has lost the ontological stability it used to enjoy when it was grounded in a sacred worldview. Three quotes from *Memory and Narrative* will help clarify this point and its connection with the argument I am advancing.

1) On one occasion, the Modernist novelist and essayist Christa Wolf is reported to have said about one of her novels: "The book is autobiographical, but I do not feel any identity with my character" (Olmes 1998, 259). Rajneesh intimates exactly the same thing

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<sup>1</sup> "Deconstruction" is the translation and reinterpretation of *Destruktion*, a concept from Heidegger's *Being and Time* that Derrida applied to textual reading. Heidegger's term referred to the exploration of the categories that tradition has imposed on a word, and the history behind them.

with similar words in his autobiography, although he is not pointing to estrangement or alienation, but to the fact that to be self-realized means to lose definition and character. An enlightened person's memory may keep functioning as far as practical matters are concerned, and yet may no longer necessarily provide a sense of continuity between past and present. 2) On another occasion, Wolf affirms that "What is past is not dead, is not even past. We cut ourselves off from it; we pretend to be strangers" (Olmes 1998, 257). In Osho's autobiography of self-realization only the present *really* exists, and the past endures merely as a part that belongs to it: it exists *as* mind. An unenlightened albeit exceptionally gifted writer like Wolf will feel that the past is not past because she is identified with her mind: *any* identification, however painful, is better than the vertiginous freedom entailed by living totally in the present, without memories or expectations. 3) In "The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel" (one of the critical essays that make up Theodor W. Adorno's *Notes on Literature*), the author writes: "In fact the contemporary novels that count, those in which *an unleashed subjectivity turns into his opposite* through its own momentum, are negative epics. They are testimonials to a state of affairs in which *the individual liquidates himself*, a state of affairs which converges with the pre-industrial situation that once seemed to guarantee a world replete with meaning" (Olmes 1998, 281, italics added).

In Rajneesh's life writing we find plenty of evidence of "unleashed subjectivity": "Wrong or right, he declares, "I have never asked anybody whether I am right or wrong. Wrong or right, if I want to do it I want to do it and I will make it right. If it is wrong then I will make it right, but I have never allowed anyone to interfere with me. That has given me whatsoever I have – nothing much of this world, no bank balance, but what really matters: the taste of love, of truth, of eternity... In short, of oneself" (Osho Rajneesh 1984, 78). This statement speaks volumes: it comes hardly as a surprise that Osho's critics have labeled his attitude "pathological narcissism." The end result of so drastic a self-affirmation, though, is

not solipsism, and a sense of psychological disintegration and despair – which Adorno identifies as the negative epics of contemporary narrative. Meditation makes all the difference. Unleashed subjectivity turns into its opposite in the person of the blissful self-realized narrator, who proclaims he has become a non-ego because he has stopped identifying with his body and his mind. Western secularism and Eastern spirituality merge in Osho to suggest a different conclusion to the negative socio-cultural trends adumbrated by Modernism, while the pre-industrial world replete with meaning that Adorno mentions belongs to the past, and constitutes the traditional background of Yogananda's autobiography.

To be sure, Rajneesh's autobiographical stance does resonate with a feeling of existential emptiness: on becoming awake and aware, an enlightened person finds that he has nothing to say or to write about himself: it was all a dream. Crucially, though, in the perspective of self-realization, when the lie of the ego is exposed also despair vanishes, and gives way to a longing to love and to share. For Gautama Buddha compassion is the ultimate flowering of spiritual enlightenment, and motivates the last desire that keeps a realized person from leaving the body: to do *all he can* to help others. This desire, in Osho, has both an autobiographical and a political impact: on the one hand it becomes "enlightened" self-narrative; and on the other hand it turns into an all-out militant attitude that resembles the existential revolt of Camus' *The Rebel*, and is at odds with Yogananda's well-wishing and ideologically tame social reformism. Yogananda's attunement with a pre-modern Christian outlook is evident in his discourse on miracles. In a cross-cultural perspective, his naive assuredness in tackling the task of writing an "enlightened" autobiography mirrors St. Augustine's trust in the correspondence between the inner world of memory and the outer world of the cosmos and of society that surrounds the subject: both are God's creation. Both remembrance and language (the two wings of autobiography) can be absolutely trusted, and

the author finds inspiration and guidance in the Scriptures: individual and collective memories are essentially one and the same. Given that spiritual autobiographies are defined by their rhetorical intention (to persuade and lead to salvation in the West; to show the path to self realization, and win disciples for a guru in the East), today Rajneesh's strategy looks more effective than Yoganada's as it addresses individuals and is in tune with the changes in collective awareness that are brought about by modernization. Yogananda is not aware of any psychological complexity, so he does not consider the implications of being a self-realized writer – but we learn much from what Osho has to say on this matter:

No biography can penetrate to the depths, particularly the psychological layers of a man. Especially if the man has come to the point where the mind is no longer relevant to the nothingness hidden in the center of an onion. You can peel it layer by layer, of course with tears in your eyes, but finally nothing is left, and that is the center of the onion; that is from where it had come in the first place. No biography can penetrate to the depths, particularly of a man who has known the no-mind also. I say "also" consideredly, because unless you know the mind, you cannot know the no-mind. This is going to be my small contribution to the world. (Osho Rajneesh 1984, 235)

The mind is made by memory, the Muse of autobiography. When one transcends the mind, memory remains only as a useful mechanism. While describing the nature of his autobiographical project, Rajneesh imparts to his disciples a lesson about watchful detachment – the path that leads to emotional freedom. For him existential recollection is a meditative emotional catharsis that the guru performs as a teaching: how to relive consciously the pains (and joys) of the past, and in so doing, drop the burden of their emotional charge. "I

want to unburden myself totally before I leave,” says Rajneesh, “so that I can leave just as I have come – with nothing, not even a memory” (Osho Rajneesh 1984, 192). The disciple is implicitly invited to do the same with his own life, and this process is compared to the peeling of an onion: in the end you are left with the nothingness that is your true nature, your original face. To get to no-mind and have a taste of no self, maintains Osho, you must first know your mind, and face the discomfort of this encounter. His work shows the implications of aiming at psychological depth in the context of a spiritual autobiography in which Eastern mystical insights, and Western psychological sophistication complement each other. You cannot be authentic if you don’t transcend the false identity you borrow from society and stop living in the past – the scriptures are not a help, but an obstacle. The task is not easy: individuality is risky; a fearless attitude is needed. That is why Osho often quoted Gurdjieff’s saying that man is born with no soul, and must create one through his own conscious efforts.

At the level of style, the link between past and present on the one hand, and the narrator and his audience on the other hand can be profitably examined in the light of the dichotomy between oral and written forms that our two authors exemplify. Yogananda’s prose is repetitive and formulaic, and fits in the rhetoric scheme of the *exemplum* validated by a preexisting tradition. His English draws on the prose of the Bible, his models are the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*, the images he uses are stereotyped, and the written form predominates in a highly organized text that leaves little space to authenticity. As it happens, the real protagonist of the book is not the young Mukunda, but the ancient Hindu scriptural tradition itself. Throughout the book, the context of religious erudition (a collective and sacred element that the author tries to present as “scientific”) prevails on the narrative text. The events Yogananda relates may have been triggered by real experiences, but are then represented in a very conventional way. The conflict between the wish to tell the truth and the desire to regulate it is uncritically resolved in favor of the latter, because veracity does not



reside in the individual, but only in the collective and the archetypal. The author communicates with his public through the medium of his mind, firmly rooted in a sacred and a-temporal perspective; his message is one of words, not of silences. Contrariwise, Rajneesh's books are transcriptions of his lectures, and also in his life writing (in which crucially the present takes center stage by the side of the past) the flavor of orality can be distinctly felt. *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood* is the record of a series of *talks* given in 1984, which appear also in *Autobiography of a Spiritually Incorrect Mystic*, published in 2000 and edited by Sarito Carol Neiman under Osho's supervision: the latter compilation adds to the former the account of Osho's experience of enlightenment. The recollection of the past is intimately interwoven 1) with the author's pronouncements about himself, truth, religion, culture, and society; 2) with a dialogic dimension, and a live interaction with the disciples who listen and ask questions; and 3) with hints to the factual circumstances of the lecture: "Nothing is in my hands except the arms of my chair," says Osho, for instance, "and you can see how I am clinging on to them, feeling them to see if I am still in the body" (Osho Rajneesh 1984, 152).

Rajneesh does not tire of repeating that his real message is not carried by the meaning of his words, but by the moments of silence that happen between them. He emphasizes that he does not plan in advance and that he is spinning his tale in a deep let go: "Each moment opens up many ways. Whichever you choose you will repent" (Osho Rajneesh 1984, 302). The plot of his story is not linear, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, but goes round in circles. The very word *Glimpses* that we find in the title makes us aware of the flowing and unsystematic character of the reminiscence: a chance gathering of past moments, which come back into existence in front of a captive audience as if they were animated by an independent volition. Osho's account of the origin of his narrative mastery reminds one of Yaşar Kemal's apprenticeship as a novelist, when he started his career of narrator by telling the anecdotes of

the Turkish brigand lore before rustic listeners:

I love stories, and all this started with my Nani. She was a lover of stories too. Not that she used to tell me stories, just the contrary; she used to provoke me to tell her stories, all kinds of stories and gossips. She listened so attentively that she made me into a storyteller [...] She is responsible: all credit or blame, whatsoever you call it, goes to her. I invented stories to tell her just so she would not be disappointed, and I can promise you that I became a successful storyteller just for her sake. (Osho Rajneesh 1984, 168)

Unlike Yogananda's written word, which comes from the mind and is addressed to the mind, Osho's utterance comes from the heart and aims at creating a shared space of attention that love – not intellectual effort – keeps together: while you are thinking you cannot listen, your thoughts are a disturbance. Yogananda wants to impress and aims at persuading his readers with his display of erudition. Osho speaks like the child he once was, anxious to entertain his grandmother, and basks in the affection of his disciples – who learn the art of meditation by paying undivided attention to the sound of his voice. A quote from Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language* helps explain the rhetorical reasons that cause Osho to prefer the oral to the written form:

Writing, which would seem to crystallize language, is precisely what alters it. It changes not the words but the spirit, substituting exactitude for expressiveness. *Feelings are expressed in speaking, ideas in writing.* In writing, one is forced to use all the words according to their conventional meaning. But in speaking, one varies the meanings by varying one's tone of

voice, determining them as one pleases. Being less constrained to clarity, one can be more forceful. And it is not possible for a language that is written, to retain its vitality as long as one that is spoken. (J.-J. Rousseau 1966, 21-22, italics added)

Osho speaks, Yogananda writes. The former is interested in feelings, in real human beings, and in the message of the here-and-now that only silence conveys. The latter aims at expressing timeless ideas through codified authoritative words. Indeed, the difference between the two authors' oral and written autobiographies is the same we find between an alive and a dead language: the former is more vital because it is less self-referential, more in tune with its audience, and is made more effective by the charismatic presence of the speaker – that is why Rajneesh refused not only to write, but also to tape his talks without having a public before him. Yogananda's language is removed from contemporary usage, it bears the stamp of its sacred models, Sanskrit and Latin, and it is meant to create awe and a distance from ordinary reality that only suspension of disbelief can bridge. Osho's language is underpinned by an opposite rhetorical strategy: indeed, all Rajneesh's lectures are peppered with jokes. Their purpose is clear: to stigmatize sanctimony and seriousness, to encourage a fresh and unconventional outlook on life, and to provoke laughter, which diverts vital energy from the mind to the body, and helps one to be more awake and relaxed.

Moreover, the works I examine have in common the structural characteristic that their narrative episodes are set against a philosophic or ideational background. What in *Telling Lives in India* Arnold and Blackburn call the “version of truth” of an author is part and parcel of that author's autobiographical project: it complements it with a distinctive worldview and a persuasive intellectual dimension, and it reflects the general relationship between the “autobiography of self-realization” and erudition. Paramhansa is not an

intellectual. His temperament is devotional and his knowledge is second hand, not a personal discovery: yet he considers it a primary source of spiritual and intellectual legitimation. In spite of his declarations to the contrary, the yogi's stance towards the Hindu mythology and scriptures is inherently pre-modern and a-critical; and his appeal to experience and to science is merely instrumental to the preservation of his sacred outlook. Yogananda's position is epitomized by the account he gives of his encounter at Karapatri with a young wandering sadhu, "noted for his intelligence," "an enlightened soul." First he extols the man's virtues, and describes him as "a pundit unusually learned in the *Vedas*," "a master of scriptures," "a true representative of this land of giants." Then he asks the sadhu about the source of his extraordinary knowledge: does it come from scriptural lore, or from inward experience? The answer is significantly noncommittal: "fifty-fifty" (Paramhansa Yogananda 2005, 388-89).

Any percentage of dogmatism is incompatible in principle with a true experiential approach – would argue Rajneesh – both in the inner and in the outer domain. Osho was a gifted academician, and published much more than Yogananda. Though his scholarship is an original synthesis of Eastern and Western knowledge, he subordinates it to his own experience of self-realization, and refuses to comply with any kind of consistency or logic. In spite of his modest origins, by his own efforts and merit he gained access to the post-independence Indian Westernized intellectual élite, but he always went against the grain of academic correctness. Seriousness, according to Rajneesh, is a disease of the ego. A serious mind is bound to be consistent and knowledgeable, but a coherent person will never be free, because he will feel obliged to conform to his own past actions and ideas. Indeed, in *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood* the author claims that logic belongs to the textbooks while contradictions are the very fabric of life. Gautama Buddha (to make just a few examples) is extolled on one occasion for his compassion, and in another is condemned as "chauvinistic" because he hesitated before beginning to initiate women into discipleship. Krishna is praised

for his enlightenment, musicality, and joy, but also blamed as a militarist for talking Arjuna into waging war and committing murder: the episode is taken from the *Bhagavat Gita*, where it is meant to illustrate the law of *karma*, but Rajneesh presents it in a totally different light. In fact, Osho's dislike for coherence goes beyond a declaration of principle, and extends by implication to all systematic knowledge. If we bear in mind that dogmatic and comprehensive intellectual systems have had their heyday in the Middle Ages, we can see how that aversion qualifies Rajneesh's modern secular perspective as much as a mythic and scriptural inflection characterizes Yogananda's sacred and encyclopaedic standpoint. Indeed, two aspects of the ideational framework of Osho's autobiography are worth noting: 1) Rajneesh exhibits a primacy of rhetoric over logic, and 2) unlike Yogananda (who bows to the scriptures), he claims that the source of his knowledge is *entirely* experiential.

1) In Aram Veerer's *Edward Said: the Charisma of Criticism*, the author gives a description of Said's polemic strategy as Menippean satire that applies also to Osho's outlook. "Menippean satire," writes Veerer, "deals less with people than with mental attitudes [...] and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent" (Veerer 2010, 64-65). Rajneesh, like Said, was a charismatic controversialist, a master in the art of exposing the contradictions of his opponent's position without trying to present a coherent standpoint, which could be criticized on the same grounds of inconsistency. In his autobiography, he assumes an approach that is similar to Said's, but professedly adopts it to achieve a spiritual end: to show that existence cannot be apprehended through reason, that the mind must be set aside, and that life is not a problem to solve, but a mystery one should surrender to. Intellectual coherence is not only a blunt polemic tool, but also an existential blunder. 2) In *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood*, Rajneesh is quite outspoken about his interpretive approach. The interpretations he gives of the great masters of the past and the great intellectual figures of the present are guided by his intuitive understanding of reality, not by

scientific objectivity. His readings are subjective and creative: a trait that reminds one of Emerson, but is far more controversial. Osho claims that the knowledge revealed by a self-realized guru is entirely experiential in the most radical sense: he can talk about Buddha because he *is* Buddha; he can talk about truth because he *is* truth – any academic claim to the contrary notwithstanding.

In short, the rhetoric and structure of Osho's life writing differs from Yogananda's inasmuch as 1) it has an oral flavour; 2) it carries modern existential implications; 3) it embraces contradictions; and 4) is structured on the Rousseauan assumption that feelings convey a deeper message than ideas. In spiritual terms, the heart is closer to our true identity than the mind: it is easier to reach the silence at the centre from the emotional layer of our being. The communion between the guru and his audience begins with emotional empathy and comes to fruition with meditative silence, while the mind is entertained with intellectual arguments that in the end prove to be futile. Moreover, a) the unsystematic and ideological character of Osho's life narrative shows a modern awareness of the nature and the limitations of memory and language that is alien to *Autobiography of a Yogi*; and b) Beckett's declaration "there is no I" reflects the most fundamental insight of Eastern spirituality, and can be found both in Yogananda and in Osho. However, while in the former author it is an abstract declaration of traditional wisdom addressed to a distant reader, in the latter it is a live experience that the master shares with his audience.

### **The Secular, the Sacred, and the Modernization of the Indian Tradition**

A clarification of my take on the contrast between a secular and sacred perspective is in order because in *Some Spiritual Autobiographies in English* G.K. Sandhya gives a different interpretation of Yogananda: in the context of post-colonial discourse, *Autobiography of a Yogi* is a secular and political work. Indeed, it is *political* because it can

be read as a nationalist text: by showing the consonance between Kriya Yoga and the Theory of Relativity, it proves the modern relevance of the Hindu worldview and counters Western cultural hegemony. It is *secular* because it allegedly “demystifies” miracles. Ostensibly, Yogananda’s “law of miracles” debunks the mechanistic view of the universe peculiar to pre-Einsteinian physics, which is seen as a ideological prop of Western hegemony: the consciousness of a yogi embraces the whole universe, which is made of light, so “his mass is infinite,” and he acquires supernatural powers. Conversely, I postulate that 1) Yogananda’s discourse is *sacred* inasmuch as it is functional to a society that I call *traditional* since it is holistic and hierarchic, and it has scriptural religion as its cultural/ideological foundation, and 2) Rajneesh’s spiritual perspective is *secular* because it is *individualistic*, and does not rely on the authority principle. Therefore, according to this definition of modernity, it is *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood*, and not Yogananda’s *Autobiography*, which can be read as *political* in the modern sense of the word. Accordingly, I refer to the definitions that Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and Charles Taylor give of “secularism” and “the sacred” respectively in *Nations and Nationalism*, *Imagined Communities*, and *A Secular Age*, and I hold that these ideas may be generalized in a cross-cultural perspective. Most importantly, Taylor’s *A Secular Age* outlines the process by which a society comes to be seen as a collection of individuals, and is no longer considered as an organic entity. An archaic world is characterized by the concept of *embedment*: the boundaries between human beings, the society they live in, the cosmos, and the gods are non-existent. In the Axial Age (from the eight to the third century B.C.E.) we have a first and partial *disembedment* – a minority phenomenon that concerns the intellectual and religious élites, and does not influence common people and society at large.

The outlook that obtained in Europe in the Middle Ages can be still understood through the notion of *enchantment*: people believed in miracles, in forces and in supernatural

beings. They thought (like Yogananda) that the supernatural could manifest itself in magic objects, in places, and in persons. Religious ritual and belief did not primarily concern the individual, but were a factor of social cohesion. In Taylor's words, in time the *porous self* of the enchanted outlook gives way to a *buffered* self: the modern individual. While the pre-modern world is organized around the concepts that social hierarchy is sacrosanct because God wills it, and corresponds to a spiritual hierarchy in the cosmos, the new outlook is shaped by the notion that God is not a personal entity. Indeed, one of Taylor's central assertions is that the understanding of God goes through different stages: from the idea of a supreme being with powers of agency and personality we arrive at Feuerbach's assertion that the potentialities we have attributed to God are really human potentialities – a statement that Osho emphatically agrees with. For Charles Taylor the cultural revolution of the 1960s is the last stage of the process of secularization in the West. Moral and spiritual individualism begins then to be complemented by “expressive individualism,” which centers on the widespread conviction “that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own” (Taylor 2007, 475). *A Secular Age* helps delineate the angle of my paper on two counts: a) it defines interpretive terms like embedment, enchantment, and the new moral order; and b) it gives an explanation of the sacred outlook and of the concepts of secularism and individualism that can be transposed to the Indian context of my authors. In fact, in *Modernization of the Indian Tradition* Yogendra Singh writes that holism and hierarchy are structural traits that Medieval Europe and pre-modern India have in common. With its abundance of miracles, amulets and saints, *Autobiography of a Yogi* shows evidence of embedment and enchantment, and is set against the naïve background of taken-for-granted belief, which Taylor considers a distinctive trait of the traditional worldview. Indeed, while Yogananda discredits criticism toward his “enchanted” sort of spirituality by portraying the skeptics in an unfavorable light, the belief in



a personal God is one of the Rajneesh's prime polemic targets, and in *Glimpses of a Modern Childhood* the protagonist comes through as a model of expressive individualism.

As it happens, Yogendra Singh's *Modernization of the Indian Tradition* is a work of pivotal importance that was published in 1973, at midpoint between the appearance of *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) and *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood* (1984), and is well suited to serve as a guide to that cultural and historical period. In Singh's account, the Indian Renaissance and Westernization are cultural trends that exemplify respectively a resistant and an accepting encounter of Hinduism with foreign models. The Renaissance includes Dayanda Saraswati (1824-1883), Vivekananda (1863-1902), and Gandhi (1869-1848), and focuses on maintaining the traditional values by *marginal* adaptations to Western culture. Yogananda (who held the Mahatma in great esteem) can be included in it. Westernization includes Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) and Nehru (1889-1964), and aims at the institution of a new Great Tradition of Modernization comparable to the Hindu Great Tradition. Rajneesh (who in his autobiography makes no mystery of preferring Nehru to Gandhi) can be ascribed to the modernizers' fold on account of his political, spiritual, and philosophical views.

In brief, "modernization" is the process by which a traditional culture based on a sacred outlook becomes secular, *i.e.*, more centered on the individual. Under the impact of a foreign power, the main attributes of Hinduism integrate with, or give way to, a parallel set of attributes of the Western post-Enlightenment civilization. There is a shift from hierarchy to equality, from holism to individualism, from continuity to historicity, and from transcendence to rationalism and secularism. Interestingly, Singh writes from the vantage point of a diachronic and trans-cultural perspective: by looking at medieval Europe we can understand traditional India, and the way modernization took place in the former foreshadows a *similar* development in the latter. On the one hand modernization shares in some common characteristics in different ages and everywhere in the world, and on the other hand it is

affected by the idiosyncratic historical circumstances in which it comes to pass: these two aspects, however, are not mutually exclusive as it is implied by the post-colonial school of thought. “Modern society,” we read in Singh’s essay, “has evolved from that of the Middle Ages, which at first sight certainly appears to be a society of the traditional type, more like the Indian than like the modern. The conception of the *universitas* ... is certainly akin to the Hindu conception of *dharma* and the hierarchical interdependence of the several social statuses” (Singh 1973: 3). Likewise, the *Glossary of Hinduism Terms* defines *dharma* as “the order that makes life and universe possible, and includes duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues and right way of living,” while the related meaning of the Latin word *universitas* is “the whole,” “the total,” “the universe,” and “the world.”

In the West the feudal hierarchic system collapsed under the impact of the Reformation, the philosophy of the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, but in India before the arrival of the English nothing of the kind paved the way for modernization. The flaws of the caste system began to be addressed only at the time of the Western-inspired social reform movements, but when Yogananda and Rajneesh composed their life writings, caste was still very much alive. Today (as we learn from Jamshed Ansari) it has adapted to the new political situation, and has undergone profound changes: in this renewed form, it remains a major factor of social cohesion (Ansari 2014). In the past, however, Western culture was as holistic and hierarchic as any other traditional culture: “The medieval political life,” writes Singh, “depended on the link between hereditary and spiritual rank in society, control over land as the principal economic resource, and the exercise of public authority. The group and estate-based rights were similar to caste-based rights as acknowledged by the Hindu tradition” (Sing 1973, 114).

As far as hierarchy and the caste system are concerned, Louis Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus* is a useful complement to Singh’s work. Dumont’s work problematizes the

individualist point of view, and throws useful light on my argument inasmuch as Yogananda and Rajneesh were in different ways influenced by Western thought, and wrote their autobiographies mostly to address foreign readers and prospective disciples. The author explains that the cardinal principles that the West has embraced as from the Age of Reason are equality and liberty, which are both underpinned by the modern idea of individuality. Egalitarianism, however, is an ideology; it does not state an actuality: “*qua* political and moral ideal is a declaration of faith beyond dispute,” but “*qua* adequate expression of social life is a naïve judgment” (Dumont 1970, 4). In defense of hierarchy, the author warns that caste is a fact of life, and it should be accepted as such. Indian civilization is a form of the universal, because subordination and conformity are intrinsic to human nature; and individual consciousness originates in social training. *Homo Hierarchicus* claims (against Osho) that self-sufficient individuality is a myth, that an individualistic society has never existed, and that man is best conceived as “a more or less autonomous point of emergence of a particular collective humanity” (Dumont 1970, 5). The “emergence” of the individual from society is partial and fragile, and doesn’t have deep roots: nowadays no less than in the past it depends on contingent external circumstances. In fact, in the West the modern individual has come into existence as the bearer of political rights, *i.e.*, as the normative subject of representative institutions. In the sub-continent a similar process began when the British introduced the modern rule of law, it came in part to fruition in 1949, when the new Constitution created the premises for a comprehensive change of Indian society, and it continues to this day. Democracy and universalism, though, break what Dumont calls “the social chain of hierarchized interdependence” and “traditional particularism,” which give man embedment: a sense of rootedness, stability and meaning. Political freedom makes one both more responsible and more vulnerable: “Democracy throws man back upon himself alone” (Dumont 1970, 18). That is why modern individualism has no place in *Autobiography of a*

*Yogi*, and about thirty years later is still a matter of defiance on the part of the protagonist of *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood*, who admits to being a dropout from his society, and takes pride in his aloneness.

As it happens, the most pointed political novels of the last century show that the gregarious instinct has such deep psychological roots that true individuals are still hard to find *anywhere* in the world. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (which was published in 1948, shortly before Yoganada's death and Rajneesh's spiritual enlightenment) brings home that conformity is to blame no less than external coercion for all kinds of authoritarian governments. In fact the dystopian world that the author describes is a modern-day Western society based on caste, in which personhood is a scandal and dangerous anomaly. If Modernism foreshadows the deconstruction of the individual, for Dumont the very concept of an independent individuality is misleading. This, however, does not mean that political and existential freedom is illusion, nor does it imply that Yogananda's sacred discourse is the only answer to the existential crisis of the West that we can find in Indian spirituality. Indeed, Singh affirms that Hinduism is not monolithic, and offers alternative schemes of thought: it *concentrates* on the ritual theme, but it is not *exhausted* by it. Among the collectivistic institutions of the Indian tradition, a very important one is renunciation, which has a distinctive individualistic orientation: "The traditional Indian social system did recognize the legitimacy of social and cultural innovation through the institutionalized role of the renouncer or *sannyasin*, who was liberated from the norms of social hierarchy or caste through spiritual transcendence, and also authorized to re-interpret the meaning of tradition and thereby change it" (Singh 1973, 21).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, which is based on "Sacred Discourse and Secular Spiritual Perspective in the Life

Narratives of Paramhasa Yogananda and Acharya Rajneesh,” the doctoral dissertation I defended at the Fatih University of Istanbul in June 2016, I have argued that Yogananda’s work gives voice to a hierarchical outlook rooted in the Hindu scriptures: in an age of global change, it advocates a return to the past. Conversely, Osho’s autobiography holds that meditation joined with the unconditional affirmation of one’s individuality is the spiritual path that best answers to the new circumstances brought about by modernity, and shows affinity with the views of Modernism and contemporary political theory. Indeed, Yogananda tries to balance himself between the *experience* of meditation on the one hand, and *faith* in the scriptures on the other hand, which is dogmatic and grounded in a collectivity-oriented outlook. Rajneesh brings to fruition a potentially revolutionary seed that lies at the core of Hinduism, by declaring the primacy of *personal* spiritual experience as a transcendent foundation to the self: “To be an individual,” says Osho, “is to be liberated, is to be enlightened” (Osho Rajneesh 2000, 179). In fact, what in *Autobiography of a Yogi* is affirmed as the doctrinal knowledge that “all is one” (non-duality), in *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood* is lived as an immediate and empowering *existential* realization: since all is God, when you trust yourself you trust God.

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