

New Discovery: An Unpublished Letter of Swami Vivekananda

A previously unknown letter by Swami Vivekananda to Rev. Hugh Reginald Haweis was recently discovered in London (UK). The letter is from Vivekananda's second visit to England in 1896 and is the only one known to have been written to a prominent Christian minister.

Rev. H. R. Haweis was a delegate of the Anglican Church at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, where he first met Vivekananda. His book *Travel and Talk* (1896) describes Vivekananda's speeches at the Parliament.

During Vivekananda's first visit to England, on 16 November 1895, he visited the home of Rev. Haweis as the speaker-of-honour. According to "The Queen" a ladies' newspaper that reported on the event, Vivekananda spoke on the possibilities of a universal religion, often discussed in the West.

The Reverend was a very popular and well known preacher and drew big crowds to his sermons (inc. regular evening sermons at Westminster Abbey). It is recorded that he admired and praised Vivekananda in his sermons and that he sent him a book (*The Key of Doctrine & Practice* - published in 1884) together with a letter dated 17 July 1896 which is described in detail in Marie Louise Burke's books - *Swami Vivekananda in the West - New Discoveries Volume 4*, pages 193-4:

Mr Haweis sent him a little book of his own sermons, inscribing it:

"To the Master Vivekananda from one who both reverences and admires his teachings, H.R.Haweis."

A note accompanying the gift read:

My dear Swami

With every sentiment of profound esteem & admiration I wish you heartily God speed and return to London. Your teaching is a kind peculiarly adapted to the Western mind & you are doing inestimable good – Allow me to ask your acceptance of the accompanying little booklet 10,000 of which are now in circulation. It is nothing but a few condensed short hand reports of my general teaching – Yours truly and faithfully H.R. Haweis

The source for the letter from Rev. Haweis dated 17 July 1896 is the Sara Chapman Bull papers.

The letter from Vivekananda to Rev. Haweis was attached inside the first edition of *Raja Yoga* written by Vivekananda and published in London on 13 July 1896. The book has the inscription "Hugolin Haweis" (Rev. Haweis' daughter). The letter is signed, as is the outer letter sheet. The book was probably given as a gift with the letter as it was published four days prior to the letter. The outer signature may also indicate this (a hand delivered letter would normally have the recipients name on the outer sheet).

Rev. Haweis' house was a short walk from where Vivekananda was staying at 63 St George's Road, London SW1 (now a blue plaque address - signifying the link to a famous person).

The exchange of letters took place before Vivekananda went on vacation to Switzerland on 19 July 1896.

Facsimile of Vivekananda's letter

63 St George's Road
London SW.
July 17th

Dear friend - Many many
thanks for your very instructive letters.
I have been going through a few
hours slowly and have already
learned a few great & beautiful lessons.
One specially where you insist that
the life of Lord Jesus is the only
commentary to His teachings and whereas
the teachings as recorded contradict -
the life we are sure that the record
was wrong. That is wonderful insight
and keen reason. I am here to read
the book several times over and learn
many a lesson. May the Lord speak
through you long - for the world needs
and hears more than ever inspired souls
left by ~~you~~ Jesus in the world.
Vivekananda

Transcription of Vivekananda's letter

63 St George's Road,
London SW

July 17th (1896)

Dear Friend

Many many thanks for your very instructive book. I have been going through a few pages already and have already learned a few great and beautiful lessons. **One specially where you insist that the life of Lord Jesus is the only commentary to his teachings and whenever the teachings as recorded contradict the life we are sure that the record was wrong.** That is wonderful insight and Keen reason. I am sure to read the book several times over and learn many a lesson. May the Lord speak through you long - for the world needs and never more than now, inspired souls like yourself.

Ever yours in the Lord

Vivekananda

The lesson Vivekananda refers to is described in Rev. Haweis' book The Key of Doctrine & Practice. This book matches perfectly the description in the note that accompanied Rev Haweis' book (quoted above).

The lesson is from the sermon "Hell" (page 46-47):

"But how about Christ's own words?"

1. *Remember that Christ's words have passed through half a century of oral tradition and more than one written account before they reach us in the earliest gospel, Mark.*
2. *That Christ used freely the old watchwords of Jewish theology, the prophetic images and popular beliefs, infusing into them His own higher teaching, but that He was often misunderstood (of which He repeatedly complained), therefore no doubt occasionally misreported, as He must have been, e.g.*

*Hence arises for us, in these latter days, a new canon of criticism and interpretation. It is this: **that whenever the reported words of Christ are in flagrant opposition to the events of human history, or to the spirit of His own teaching, or to the character and purposes of God to usward, as revealed in the general drift and tenour of the Gospels, there has been some mistake in the reporting or transmission.***"

In his lecture "Christ the Messenger", delivered by Vivekananda on 7 January 1900 in Los Angeles, we find an echo of the "great and beautiful" lesson.

Excerpts from the lecture:

*One gets sick at heart at the different accounts of the life of the Christ that Western people give. I do not know what he was or what he was not! One would make him a great politician; another, perhaps, would make of him a great military general; another, a great patriotic Jew, and so on. Is there any warrant in the books for all such assumptions? **The best commentary on the life of a great teacher is his own life.** 'The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head' ...*

He had no other occupation in life; no other thought except that one, that he was a spirit. He was a disembodied, unfettered, unbound spirit. And not only so, but he, with his marvellous vision, had found that every man and woman, whether Jew or Gentile, whether rich or poor, whether saint or sinner, was the embodiment of the same undying Spirit as himself. Therefore, the one work his whole life showed was to call upon them to realise their own spiritual nature. Give up he says, these superstitious dreams that you are low and that you are poor. Think not that you are trampled upon and tyrannised over as if you were slaves, for within you is something that can never be tyrannised over, trampled upon, never be troubled, never be killed. You are all Sons of God, immortal spirit. 'Know', he declared, 'the Kingdom of Heaven is within you'. 'I and my Father are one'.