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# Internationalisation of a contemporary Hindu Movement

Between universalist ambition and nationalist orientations:  
the case of *The Art of Living Foundation (Vyakti vikas Kendra)*  
and its transnational community<sup>1</sup>

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The Art of Living Foundation, also known in India as Vyakti Vikas Kendra<sup>2</sup>, is a new religious movement whose popularity has not ceased to grow in the whole Indian sub-continent, and beyond. Founded and carried out by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar – “the fastest growing guru in the market place of happiness”<sup>3</sup> – the movement promotes a spirituality accessible to all, based on simplified yogic practices and a philosophical teaching of neo-vedantic inspiration. Thus, the guru intends to join together a transnational community around an universal spirituality, transcending individual religious backgrounds.

The internationalisation of the movement, born into a Hindu substrate, implies a series of reforms and adaptations, carried out by the guru, in order to reach both an Indian audience and an international one. Therefore, in this article, I propose to question the categories of reform, in the perspective developed in this panel. In order to do so, I will examine these various processes of transformation (rejection, simplification, and innovation), which allow Sri Sri Ravi Shankar to achieve his universalist designs, as well as the limits of such an adaptation.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented on the occasion of the 21<sup>st</sup> *European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies*, at the Panel 41 – “Religious Reform Movements in South Asia from Nineteenth Century to the Present” convened by Dr Gwilym Beckerlegge (The Open University, Manchester), on Thursday, July 29th 2010. I would like to thank Professor Beckerlegge for not only giving me the opportunity to present my research at his panel but also for his guidance.

<sup>2</sup> “Vyakti Vikas Kendra” can be translated by Centre for Individual Development.

<sup>3</sup> This expression is quoted from a newspaper article. Prasannarajan, S., “The Art & Smile of Sri Sri”, *India Today*, 12 November 2001, pp. 64-74.

First, I will look at the genesis of the movement, within its cultural background to understand the guru's dialectic of rejection-innovation in relation with Hindu traditions, and the way he uses, paradoxically, these traditions as a resource of charismatic legitimation. Likewise, I will analyse the process of simplification at work in the fields of yogic practices and philosophico-spiritual teachings. Then I will focus on the salient features of the transnational community, as well as its setting up around the figure of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, thus questioning the guru-disciple relation within the movement. The overall issue of community identity will be also discussed through an analysis of the guru's unifying concept of "service to humanity". Lastly, I will examine the guru political stands on the Indian national scene and its reception by the transnational community, stressing this way the apparent contradiction between the universalist ambition of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's spiritual project and the Hindu national interest he seems to defend.

### *Birth of a guru*

Born into a modest family of *Iyer* Brahmins of Tamil Nadu, the young Ravi Shankar has been taught early in a traditional way. The official biography of the master, which circulates inside and outside the movement, is very short. Special attention is paid to his life and image, thanks to his most devoted followers in charge of communication within the movement. The emphasis is put on wonderful unverifiable anecdotes and details, to the detriment of the most ordinary events of his biography. Thus, it produces extraordinary facts around the figure of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, in order to build his biography into a hagiography, which will be the basis of the communication strategy of the movement both internally and externally.

Not surprisingly, only few verifiable biographical elements are available on the past of the guru. Drawing on the official biography's outline, a French journalist close to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has written an apologetic biography (Gautier, 2002) in which two elements can nevertheless illuminate the past of the young master. According to the author, the young Ravi Shankar would have had as a professor of Sanskrit, Pandit<sup>4</sup> Sudhakar Chaturvedi, freedom fighter and faithful companion of Mahatma Gandhi. However, if the journalist does not miss to note the strong friendship between the Mahatma and Sudhakar Chaturvedi, he does not mention the fact that the Pandit was an Ārya Samāj's dignitary, a Hindu reform movement very active in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. The young Ravi Shankar was, undoubtedly, in contact with the reformist ideals of the Ārya Samāj through Sudhakar Chaturvedi, while he was his student. The ideological similarities between The Art of Living Foundation and Ārya Samāj are many, both at religious and social levels. Like Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), founder of Ārya Samāj, Sri

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<sup>4</sup> Honorary title derived from the Sanskrit "paṇḍita", awarded to scholars who are well versed in philosophy and Hindu scriptures.

Sri Ravi Shankar denounced the discrimination based on the caste system. He explained that this discrimination was the result of a wrong exegesis of the Vedas. He is opposed to idolatry too and advocates an absolute monism. He also stands up for gender equality.

But it is without any doubt with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008), founder of Transcendental Meditation, that the young Ravi Shankar seems to have found a traditional legitimacy and a structure that gave him the main features of his future own organisation while allowing him to start out his carrier as a guru. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar prefers to remain quiet over his years spent with Maharishi, and aside from a few facts related by François Gautier, writings on this episode of his life are missing. The young master had met Maharishi, after completing his studies in 1975, during a conference in Bangalore. From then on, he would have followed him and travelled extensively with him in Europe. Within this movement, Ravi Shankar had the title of Pandit and was responsible for organising major community gatherings as well as the organisation of Vedic sacrifices, the *yajña*. He quit the Transcendental Meditation in 1980, and it seems that when he created his own foundation, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar drew heavily his inspiration from Maharishi's movement. The structural organisation of The Art of Living Foundation closely resembles that of the Transcendental Meditation: in both movements, teachers are trained to go and teach techniques throughout India and the world. Another troubling detail: the name Sri Sri Ravi Shankar gave to his movement bears a strange resemblance to the title of one of Maharishi's major writings: *Science of Being and The Art of Living* (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, 1963).

### *Hindu tradition as a source of legitimacy*

Paradoxically, if Sri Sri Ravi Shankar refuses to see Maharishi as his guru, he seems to have found, at his side, a traditional lineage of masters he could link himself to. Indeed, he often refers to the "Holy Tradition of Masters" who has transmitted the Vedic knowledge from Nārāyaṇa (Vishnu "resting on the waters") and / or Sadā-śiva (Shiva "the Eternal") to him. This lineage is none other than the *Advaita guru paramparā*, the guru lineage of *Advaita Vedānta*, one of the six philosophical schools of Vedānta whose doctrine was expounded by Sankara in the 8th century AD. In the depiction of the *Advaita guru paramparā* used at The Art of Living Foundation, Sankara and his four disciples can be distinguished in its centre as well as down in the foreground, the former Shankaracharya<sup>5</sup> of Jyotirmath, Swami Brahmananda Saraswati of whom Maharishi was a close disciple (though without having been ordered *samnyāsi*, "renouncer"). However, the Maharishi did not appear in this succession of masters, as if Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, in accordance with orthodox Shankarian tradition, had considered that Maharishi, as a non-Brahmin, could not be included in this sacred lineage (Avdeeff, 2004: 327). Thus, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar displays his inclusion in a process of continuous knowledge transmission, initiated by the gods in

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<sup>5</sup> Shankaracharya is the title given to the *samnyāsi* (monk, renouncer) at the head of one of the monasteries whose foundation is attributed to Sankara (see Cenkner 1983).

mythical times in order to assure him a spiritual legitimacy (Klostermaier, 1994: 348-349), while expelling Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the controversial "link" (see Figures 1 & 2 below).

Inscription within a *paramparā* is, however, not the only way Sri Sri Ravi Shankar uses tradition as a resource of legitimacy. He is also fully integrated into the Hindu traditional landscape thanks to the many contacts and friendships he has made with leading figures of the Hindu traditions. Recognition by peers is also an important step in the process of legitimizing the authority of the charismatic guru. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar regularly receives in his ashram in Bangalore saints and leaders of various Hindu traditions, as in January 2003 during the so-called *World Conference On Spiritual Regeneration and Human Values*, organized on the occasion of the inauguration of the conspicuous meditation hall, *The Vishalakshi Mantap*. Moreover, repeatedly, the founder of The Art of Living Foundation has appeared publicly with a prominent figure of traditional Hinduism, the Shankaracharya of Kanchi (Jagadguru Shankaracharya Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swamiji). The master, also, shows himself with spiritual leaders of other traditions, like the Dalai Lama. This kind of meeting, highly publicised, with a spiritual leader like the Dalai Lama who enjoys an international audience, gives to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar a spiritual legitimacy not only in India but also in the rest of the world where traditional Hindu figures remain relatively unknown.



Figure 1: Picture of the Transcendental Meditation's *Advaita guru paramparā*.

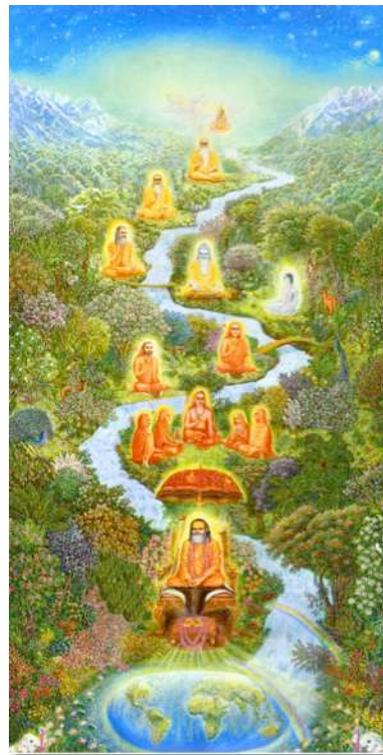


Figure 2: Picture of The Art of Living's *Advaita guru paramparā*.

Apart from these traditional processes of legitimation, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar presents himself as the holder of a new and exclusive knowledge, the *Sudarshan Kriya*, a breathing-control technique that would have been revealed to him during a ten days silence period. The very originality of yogic teachings provided by The Art of Living Foundation is based on this personal revelation that the master intends to pass on to all mankind. This mix of tradition and innovation that wants to incarnate Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is clearly expressed through the guru's recurrent dialectic: « *Tree is beautiful because it has old roots and new branches – You need a combination of all.* » (Murarka, 2003: 128). Yet, he denies any personal charisma linked to an eventual “enlightenment” during this period of silence, and leaves it to his most ardent devotees to assert the contrary. Therein lies all the ambiguity of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s figure. He presents himself simply as a humanist, or as "a child who refuses to grow up", but does not hesitate to adorn himself with a double “*Sri*”<sup>6</sup>, and be called "His Holiness" in his official meetings and travels abroad. If this “official” title is now well established and routinely used in brochures and external communication, within the community of disciples Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is affectionately known as "Guruji".

### *Repackaging<sup>7</sup> traditional yogic techniques*

Showcase of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s foundation, yogic breathing control techniques, *prāṇāyāma*, are at the core of the master's teachings. On its Internet website and prospectus, The Art of Living Foundation does not present *Sudarshan Kriya* as a spiritual technique to reach *mokṣa* (the release of the individual soul from the cycle of rebirth), but rather as a tool to improve daily life. With an appropriate vocabulary, a sophisticated external communication, and the continuous use of scientific and medical justification (like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in his time), the emphasis is put on the therapeutic dimension of the practice at the expense of the traditional philosophico-religious aspect, which is totally obscured. Like the *Sudarshan Kriya*, the *Sahaj Samadhi*, the other main technique proposed by The Art of Living Foundation, is presented as a technique to cleanse and purify the mind, whose primary goal is therapeutic. If the *Sudarshan Kriya* is said to be the result of a revelation, the origin of the *Sahaj Samadhi* seems to be linked to Transcendental Meditation. Indeed, as admitted by some *Sahaj Samadhi* teachers, former teachers of Transcendental Meditation who have followed Sri Sri Ravi Shankar when he quit Maharishi's movement, The Art of Living Foundation’s meditation technique is very similar to Transcendental Meditation’s one. Like Maharishi’s meditation technique, *Sahaj Samadhi* uses a personal mantra given by a teacher. During the *Sahaj Samadhi* course, the teacher transmits a mantra to the follower. The teacher whispers the mantra in the ear of the

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<sup>6</sup> The Sanskrit word “Śrī”, found also written Sri or Shri is an honorific title of reverence, veneration. Ravi Shankar argues that the use of the double “Sri” before his name, is primarily for convenience, to distinguish himself from the famous musician Ravi Shankar.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow here the term « repackaging » from Cushman et Jones, 1998: 138.

practitioner, after having performed a puja to the "Holy Tradition of Masters". This puja is performed in front of a picture of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and a small reproduction of *Advaita guru paramparā*, in order to pay tribute to all the masters of the tradition who have preserved and passed on this knowledge to present times. The mantras used by the *Sahaj Samadhi* technique are *bīja-mantras*, that is to say root mantra, or germ-syllables with which other mantras are made (Padoux and Alper, 1989). *Bīja-mantras* are monosyllabic and are considered as primordial sounds. They do not have precise meanings, but each *bīja-mantra* is regarded as a particular cosmic energy, which is symbolised by a great divinity of the Hindu pantheon. The Art of Living Foundation's teachers only highlight the sound aspect of the mantra and its effect as a meditative support, but they do not speak at all about its esoteric meaning. All the esoteric dimension of *Sahaj Samadhi*, which is based on the use of *bīja-mantras*, and that of the *Sudarshan Kriya*, which is also based on the use of a particular mantra<sup>8</sup>, is obscured by the teachers. The Hindu beliefs lying behind these two practices are thus erased to the benefit of a dimension much more scientific and psychotherapeutic (Tardan-Masquelier, 2005: 39-40), more suited to the "rational mind". By expurgating them from their magico-religious appearance and highlighting their therapeutic aspect, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar extracts the practices taught in the foundation from their traditional Hindu context, making them universal and profitable on a global scene.

This universal inclination of the master's teaching is thus based on the adaptation of traditional values and practices as well as the popularisation of a doctrine of neo-Vedantic inspiration designed to make it accessible to as many people as possible. (Altglas, 2005: 97-98). He intends to teach the breathing and meditation techniques to all without any distinction of origin, nationality, religion, culture or even gender. Learning breathing or meditation techniques does not require any sacrifice, nor even any long lasting submission to the guru. However, participation to the The Art of Living Foundation's course is not free for all: applicants must pay to be allowed to participate. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar replaces the traditional values of effort and personal investment by a financial one, which he said to be more suited to today's society, particularly to Westerners. This shift to a financial value, seen as "an investment and not as a barrier to the sincere seeker", allows Sri Sri Ravi Shankar to expand his courses offer to an ever-growing international clientele.

In parallel with yogic practices, teaching's master attaches importance to the practice of devotion, bhakti, and neo-Vedantic teachings. A perfect embodiment of this doctrinal combination, satsang in the presence of the master alternates devotional chants sessions, bahjans, with question and answer sessions. Disciples ask personal questions to which Sri Sri Ravi Shankar answers in a humorous way, by simple philosophical maxims often taking the form of slogans, taken from Vedantic Philosophy. Moreover, in the different courses offered by the foundation, teachers use this kind of aphorisms as "key" that must be memorised by the disciples and applied every day, in order to improve their daily lives.

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<sup>8</sup> This mantra is "Soham", a main mantra of Advaita Vedānta.

This inner-worldly and practical orientation of Vedanta philosophy is the fundamental characteristic of neo-Vedanta, the "modern" rereading of Vedantic texts initiated by Swami Vivekananda in the late nineteenth century (Hummel, 1988: 16; Halbfass, 1995; Beckerlegge, 2000: 52-59). Like Vivekananda, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar asserts that enlightenment is accessible to all, whether one is a renouncer or engaged in social life, thus opening this practical philosophy to a wide audience.

### *Severing traditional ties between guru and disciples: a guru-centric structure*

For a privileged few, the relationship with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is personal and direct. They are mostly international professors regularly travelling with the guru. They could also be ashramites, or disciples who joined the movement at the very beginning. These rare disciples have developed, at some point in their lives, a strong and intimate relationship with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. However, for the great majority of disciples, it is not possible to live in his immediate surroundings like these privileged few. The other disciples, and especially newcomers, must then create a different kind of relationship with their guru. According to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the true disciple must not consider the relationship to the master as a normal human relationship: *"The Master is not a relationship, the Master is the Presence"* (Murarka, 2003: 159). The guru means by these words that the master-disciple relationship does not necessarily require physical presence with his disciples. For many disciples – not to say devotees – the relationship between them and the guru is, above all, a heart-to-heart relationship and exclusively a personal one (Weber, 1995: 204), a relationship whose climax is darshan<sup>9</sup>. Somehow, this intimate and personal relationship with the guru bypasses the established religions and goes beyond the personal religious affiliations of the disciples, notably in the Western context. With this conception of guru-disciple relationship, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar can build and sustain a fervent community scattered geographically and "religiously", without his physical presence being constantly required. Consequently to this spatial expansion of the movement, the close and direct master-disciple relationship weakens in favour of collective initiations on the occasion of big gatherings (Jaffrelot 1996: 457). He also disrupts the traditional master-disciple way of teaching by allowing his teachers, who are not necessarily Brahmins, to spread his teachings to an audience, which would have traditionally been also excluded. Doing so, he breaks the chain of traditional knowledge transmission.

Within the community, it is not uncommon to hear during a random conversation, the word "devotee" to describe an individual particularly committed to the master. This term "devotee" reflects a prevalent reality in the movement: the personal commitment is gauged in terms of devotion to the master and his cause. However, this internal assessment of an individual's dedication to the cause of the master cannot hide a more composite

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<sup>9</sup> Darsan is the beholding of an auspicious deity, a person or an object. In our case, darsan is the visual contact with the guru.

sociological reality. If at first glance, there seems to be no ‘official’ statutes within the movement, except that of teacher, it is however possible to distinguish different types of membership (see fig. 1 below), using the categorisation model developed by Bird and Westley (1985: 160-161).

Gravitating at the periphery of the movement emerges a first subset of individuals characterised by a low commitment, virtually non-existent (see Figure 3 below). These casual “consumers” (Avdeeff, 2010: 175), the “affiliates” and other “clients” of the Bird and Westley’s categorisation, attend the local branches of the movement, more or less regularly, for a conference, a collective practice, or even a satsang. They may occasionally go for a short stay in one of the ashrams of the foundation, but their commitment towards the movement stays weak. Likewise, for some of them, the figure of the guru can be totally obscured, thereby excluding any spiritual dimension to their personal development. Then, there are “regular followers” who can be likened to a certain extent, to the “members” of the previously mentioned category. This second subset is the pool of forces of the movement. These followers are usually very active in both the humanitarian projects and in the local branches of the movement, where they assist the teachers in the organisation and the conduct of courses. Kingpin of the community proselytism, they regularly involve themselves in the distribution of advertising leaflets or posters in the streets, announcing a public meeting or an “Art of Living Course – Part I”. In a large majority, they conceive their personal engagement with the master as a spiritual journey. They may choose to stay at the ashram for a few months or more to deepen the master’s teaching, a period during which they become “ashramites”. In their daily lives, they try as much as possible to comply with SSRS’s precepts and lifestyle, and they never miss the opportunity to meet him during his worldwide travels. As for the teachers, they form a third sub-set of clearly identifiable ones by their “official” status within the foundation. Although he does not ordain samnyāsi<sup>10</sup>, or renunciators, in his movement, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar continuously trains teachers who are in charge of the dissemination of his teachings throughout the world. There are two types of teachers in The Art of Living Foundation: the teachers who teach volunteers alongside their professional lives, mostly in their region of residence, and “full-time teachers”, paid by the foundation, who support the spreading of the movement in an particular country and/or who give international courses around the world, according to the needs of the foundation. True executives of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s business, the teachers fulfil their office with exaltation. As they confess themselves, they are dedicated “a hundred percent” to their guru and his cause, seeing that commitment as an exceptional opportunity to spiritually rise “in the grace of the master” to the “service of divine”.

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<sup>10</sup> Some samnyāsi joined individually Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as teachers and/or prestigious ambassadors of the movement like Swami Saraswati Swatantranand (who also lends his ashram in Rishikesh to The Art of Living Foundation), and more recently Swami Mahesh Giri as well as Swami Sadyojathah.

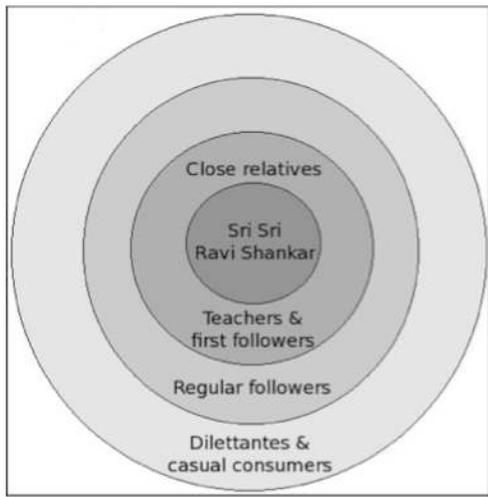


Figure 3: Guru-centric structure of The Art of Living Foundation.

*“Service to humanity”: a transnational community united to change the world*

Like in other modern Hindu movements<sup>11</sup>, ethic of social service is central to The Art of Living Foundation. This “service to humanity” is the result of a gradual shift from religious individual behaviours of bhakti (devotion) and seva (selfless service) to a collective moral (Lépinasse 2007, 98). The Art of Living Foundation’s strong humanitarian orientation appears as the concrete expression, in social service, of this moral of universal love, which is at the core of the guru's universalistic message. Thus, the transnational community gathers around the value of social service. The involvement in humanitarian activities is a pillar of the guru's teachings and one of the main activities of the community. Indeed, based on the *Bhagavadgita*, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar regularly emphasizes the need to practice diligently the path of Karma Yoga, the practice of selfless action, as a means to improve oneself and the world. *Karma Yoga* thus completes the range of “improvement tools” offered by the master, while ensuring to his social and educative projects an abundant dedicated workforce. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar intends to mobilise his followers around humanitarian projects across the sub-continent and abroad. Devotion (bhakti) as well as total commitment to the “divine” and by extension to the master – according to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar both are the same – takes the form of a total commitment to humanity as suggested by the motto “*We care for the world, we care for you*” (Beckerlegge, 2000: 99). And the master is in no shortage of ideas when it comes to harnessing his disciples' energy on a wide range of socio-educative projects: the *Prison Smart* project, which helps prisoners, the *Care for Children* project, which helps Indian children who are not sent to

<sup>11</sup> This ethic of social service is also central in many other modern Hindu movements like Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Samstha and Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (Lépinasse 2007), as well as Mata Amritanandamayi Mission (Warrier 2003), to name a few.

school, the *5H* program which helps the poorest Indians, and many other projects: assistance to tribal populations (*Sri Sri Tribal Welfare*), rural economic development (*Sri Sri Mobile Agricultural Inst.*) or help to disaster victims (*Disaster Relief*). All these projects are conducted under the banner of the humanitarian branch of The Art of Living Foundation: the *International Association for Human Values (IAHV)*, an international association which aims to spread “human values” worldwide<sup>12</sup>. Thus, this humanitarian orientation – sustained by a collective moral based on a mix of bhakti and seva – enables to federate, on a global scale, the disciples on educative and social joint projects, strengthening the sense of community, exemplified by the slogan put forward by the movement: "One World Family".

### *Paradox of an internationalised Hinduism: universalism versus nationalism*

The universal message of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar carries within it a strong inclusivist dimension: all faiths have their place in the community (Beckerlegge, 2000: 98). The guru refers to the concept of "universal truth" that all religious traditions are a specific aspect, acknowledging thereby the “incommensurable” philosophical contribution of each religion to humanity (Lebelley, 2003: 165). He does not hesitate also to enrich his teachings by some parables of Jesus, picked in the Gospels<sup>13</sup>. He dismisses all religious exclusivism:

*“Christ does not belong to Christians - Christ belongs to humanity.  
Krishna does not belong to Hindus - He belongs to Humanity.”*  
(Lebelley, 2003: 194)

The reappropriation of symbols and values from other religious traditions, a common feature in modern Hinduism, participates fully to the inclusive approach of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. This does not prevent the master's message from staying focused on Vedantic philosophy, external traditions are simply absorbed like when he says that the *Veda* were the matrix of Catholicism and Islam. Of course even if in India Sri Sri Ravi Shankar defends regularly religious plurality and if he is seen as the champion of reconciliation between Hindu and Muslim communities, his position on the proselytism of Christian missions, particularly in South India, remains very clear. For example, he protested against the evangelising message of the Pope (the Bishop of Rome) during his visit to India in 1999. Besides, some educational and social projects undertaken by the foundation like aid for school children (Care for Children), for rural populations (*Sri Sri Mobile Agricultural Inst.*) or tribal (*Sri Sri Tribal Welfare*) seem to be aimed at the containment of conversions to Christianity as suggested by this extract from the house journal of the movement:

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<sup>12</sup> This concept of “human values” bears a strong resemblance to the Ramakrishna Math and Mission's concept of “human rights” highlighted by Beckerlegge (2000: 99).

<sup>13</sup> Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is not an exception. Many contemporary Hindu gurus do not hesitate to quote in their teachings some Christ's parables (Ceccomori, 2001: 361).

*"Recently some of our devotees called us for a free medical camp, and an Art Excel course for our gopi girls. [...] Oh, by the way, the christian conversions seem to have stopped in the surrounding area. We are inviting the converts to our satsangs. It is only a matter of time. "* (Rishimukh, March 2003: 12)

In the same ideological line, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar calls for reconciliation between upper caste people and Dalits (former Untouchables). According to him, time has come for unification of the Hindu community, beyond the traditional social divides, in order to cope with divisive forces that are Muslim and Christian traditions. He presents this union as the *sine qua non* of progress and prosperity of a strong Indian nation (should we say Hindu?) seen as downgraded both on the national and the international scenes. This political discourse and the resulting social action carried out by the volunteers of the foundation, echo the political vision of Swami Vivekananda and the preaching activities conducted in the Dalit and Tribal communities by political and religious organisations from the Hindu-nationalist trend inspired by Hindutva<sup>14</sup> (McKean, 1996: 84-85), such as the *Viśva Hindū Pariṣad* (Heuze, 2003: 111). In India, the widening of The Art of Living Foundation's ideological orientation is associated with incursions, more and more intense, of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar on the political scene, although he firmly denies being a politician. Indeed, whether through national media or official statements issued by the "Office of Communication" of the master, the guru does not hesitate anymore to take public positions on domestic issues regarding religious interests and Hindu identity. Well established in the religious Hindu landscape (his double "Sri" is now fully vested), courted by politicians and businessmen throughout India, recognised on the international religious scene (the title "His Holiness" hoisted him to the same level as the Pope or the Dalai Lama), Sri Sri Ravi Shankar became interested in public affairs, at a local level first, in 2003 when he openly criticized the policy of the Karnataka state government which he accused of giving more money to mosques and churches than to Hindu temples. Then, the come back to power of the Congress Party in 2004, was the opportunity for Sri Sri Ravi Shankar to take a public position, and on several occasions against the policy of Manmohan Singh's government, especially during management of important politico-religious and community crises<sup>15</sup>. Recently, taking advantage of the Indian parliamentary elections in May 2009, the master has clearly shown his hostility against the government (coalition led by the Congress

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<sup>14</sup> Political concept forged in the 1920s by the Indian nationalist politician Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966).

<sup>15</sup> In 2004, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar rose strongly against the arrest of the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram then suspected of complicity in murder. In 2007, he criticized the government's handling of the Ayodhya crisis, between Muslim and Hindu communities. The same year, forwarding religious arguments, he denounced the government's plan to dig the Sethusamudram canal between the southern part of India's peninsula and Sri Lanka. Finally, more recently, in early 2009, he strongly criticized the position of India in the management of the Sri Lankan crisis.

Party). Without providing explicit support to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)<sup>16</sup>, the political party inspired by Hindutva ideology, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar however called, during a television interview, the Indian people to vote massively to change the leadership in place, for the proper development of the nation.

If the political and identity turn that takes the message of the master in India contrasts sharply with the universal aspect of spirituality, which he sells to the world, nevertheless it seems to find a good reception among the Indian community of disciples. Mostly from the middle-class, the Indian followers of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar are young, active, fully engaged in the worldly life in search of well-being, both material and spiritual, desirous to go back to the values of a fantasised Vedic past. Thus, beyond the figure of a guru, many Indian disciples see in Sri Sri Ravi Shankar a leader able to turn around a country they see ruined, both materially and spiritually by centuries of foreign domination, through his project of "regeneration of ancient Vedic values". This regeneration scheme is illustrated concretely in India by Sri Sri Gurukul campus which aims to train a new generation of Pandits in *Veda*, *Agama*, *Shilpa Shastra* (temple architecture), *Jyotiṣa* (astrology), Thirumurai (ancient Tamil Scriptures) and Sanskrit. Hardly noticeable in his teachings for the Western public, the identity dimension of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's message is however not entirely absent from his speeches in the West, and it is subtly distilled in a less political manner than in India. In the way of neo-Hindu's gurus (McKean, 1996: 167), the dialectic of the guru uses the hackneyed dichotomy of a rationalist, materialist and individualist West totally opposed to a "holistic" and mystical East, full of traditions and old values. This caricatural worldview seems to win the unanimous support of his Western disciples. These same disciples nodding and smiling to some master's humorous remarks like this one: "*Switzerland has cheese, Germany has marzipan, and India has spirituality.*" It is also common to hear the master repeating to an audience totally devoted to his cause, that the Oriental civilization, with its values (Vedic), must regenerate a sick and stressed Western society. The good reception of such a vision of India by many Western disciples is not so surprising if one takes into account their great ignorance of the Indian reality. Indeed, generally moulded by esoteric readings and lives of yogis, like the best-seller *Autobiography of a Yogi*, many Western followers of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar have a biased and fragmented vision of India, conducive to promoting adherence to the master's discourse. Few, however, have been to India, and among those rare individuals many went there during a trip organised by the movement in its Indian ashrams; the Western audience's interest focusing principally on the master's therapeutic and spiritual offer.

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<sup>16</sup> The "Indian People's Party" founded in 1980, of national-Hindu trend, is a leading political parties of India.

## *Conclusion*

The Art of Living Foundation appears as a new Hindu movement on an Indian scale as well as a transnational spiritual movement involved in the wider phenomenon of religious globalisation in the world. Outstanding export product, the spiritual and therapeutic offer that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar supplies, is the result of a skilful process of simplification and "déséthnisation" of values and practices originally from Hinduism. This repackaging, coupled with a clear and humorous pedagogy, gives a thrust to the guru's teachings beyond the strictly Hindu religious framework from which they originate. The universal nature of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's message has enabled him to assemble a transnational community of followers, providing to the foundation dedicated volunteers as well as an abundant workforce ready to take over and spread his teachings throughout the world and to maintain an ever growing organizational structure. But this inclusivist spirituality with universalistic aims seems to take in India a significant identity turn through the political discourse of a Sri Sri Ravi Shankar who seems to be inclined to vigorously defend Hindus interests. The transnational community itself reflects this paradox and reveals a well marked split between Western and Indian followers, both at the level of representations and expectations embodied by the master's figure. If the Indian disciples, overall, seem to accommodate themselves with the identity discourse of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as a Hindu leader, the Western disciples, for their part, do not seem to be aware of – or not interested by - this facet of their guru. Indeed, the great majority of Western followers, in a more consumerist approach of selective appropriation of the therapeutic and spiritual offer, does not feel concerned by the Indian subcontinent's politico-religious issues. Incarnation of two seemingly contradictory logics, The Art of Living Foundation appears as a transnational movement participating fully to the process of religious globalisation, but also as a major actor in the enduring phenomenon that is the Hindu revitalisation in contemporary India, providing thereby its contribution "to the global picture of the politicisation of religion"<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> See Heuzé, 2003: 126.

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