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## ORIENTALISM AND THE MODERN MYTH OF "HINDUISM"

RICHARD KING

### Summary

Is there really a single ancient religion designated by the catch-all term 'Hinduism' or is the term merely a fairly recent social construction of Western origin? This paper examines the role played by Orientalist scholars in the construction of Western notions of Indian religion by an examination of the origins of the concept of 'Hinduism'. It is argued that the notion of 'Hinduism' as a single world religion is a nineteenth century construction, largely dependent upon the Christian presuppositions of the early Western Orientalists. However, exclusive emphasis upon the role of Western Orientalists constitutes a failure to acknowledge the role played by key indigenous informants (mostly from the *brāhmaṇa* castes) in the construction of modern notions of 'the Hindu religion'. To ignore the indigenous dimension of the invention of 'Hinduism' is to erase the colonial subject from history and perpetuate the myth of the passive Oriental. The paper concludes with a discussion of the accuracy and continual usefulness of the term 'Hinduism'.

[I]t would appear that there is an intrinsic connection between the 'Hinduism' that is being constructed in the political arena and the 'Hinduism' of academic study.<sup>1</sup>

Today, there are perhaps two powerful images in contemporary Western characterizations of Eastern religiosity. One is the continually enduring notion of the 'mystical East' — a powerful image precisely because for some it represents what is most disturbing and outdated about Eastern culture, whilst for others it represents the magic, the mystery and the sense of the spiritual which they perceive to be lacking in modern Western culture. The depravity and backwardness

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<sup>1</sup> Friedhelm Hardy (1995), "A Radical Reassessment of the Vedic Heritage — The *Ācāryahrdayam* and its Wider Implications," in Vasudha Dalmia and H. von Stietencron (1995), *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (Sage Publications, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London), p. 48.

of the Orient thus appears to sit side by side with its blossoming spirituality and cultural richness. Both of these motifs have a long historical pedigree, deriving from the hopes and fears of the European imagination and its perennial fascination with the East.

The second image of Eastern religion — one indeed that is increasingly coming to the fore in Western circles, is that of the 'militant fanatic.' Such a characterization also has a considerable ancestry, being a contemporary manifestation of older colonial myths about Oriental despotism and the irrationality of the colonial subject. The particular nature of this construct is of course heavily influenced by the secularist perspective of much of modern Western culture. The image of the militant fanatic or religious 'fundamentalist,' whilst frequently interwoven with 'the mystical' characterization (particularly in the emphasis which Western commentators place upon the 'religious' dimension of conflicts such as Ayodhyā in India), it is rarely explicitly associated with the notion of 'the mystical East' precisely because modern Western understandings of 'the mystical' tend to preclude the possibility of an authentic mystical involvement in political struggle. The other-worldly Eastern mystic cannot be involved in a this-worldly political struggle without calling into question the strong cultural opposition between the mystical and the public realms. The discontinuity between these two cultural representations of the East has frequently created problems for Western and Western-influenced observers who find it difficult to reconcile notions of spiritual detachment with political (and sometimes violent) social activism.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in the modern era we find Hinduism being represented both as a globalized and all-embracing world-religion and as an intolerant and virulent form of religious nationalism. Despite the apparent incongruity of these two representations, I will argue in this paper that one feature which both characterizations share in common is the debt they owe to Western Orientalism. My argument does not entail that the modern concept of "Hinduism" is *merely* the product

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<sup>2</sup> See Mark Juergensmeyer (1990), "What The Bhikkhu Said: Reflections On The Rise Of Militant Religious Nationalism," in *Religion* 20, pp. 53-76.

of Western Orientalism. Western influence was a necessary but not a sufficient causal factor in the rise of this particular social construction. To argue otherwise would be to ignore the crucial role played by indigenous Brahmanical ideology in the formation of early Orientalist representations of Hindu religiosity.

### *Orientalism and the Quest for a Post-Colonial Discourse*

[A]nthropologists who would study, say, Muslim beliefs and practices will need some understanding of how "religion" has come to be formed as concept and practice in the modern West. For while religion is integral to modern Western history, there are dangers in employing such a normalizing concept when translating Islamic traditions.<sup>3</sup>

This statement by Talal Asad can be equally well applied to the study of Asian culture in general. In recent years scholars involved in such study have become increasingly aware of the extent to which Western discourses about Asia reflect power relations between Western and Asian societies. In the postcolonial era, it has become imperative, therefore, to examine this relationship with critical acumen.

In 1978 Edward Said published his ground-breaking work, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*.<sup>4</sup> In this book, Said launched a stinging critique of Western notions of the East and the ways in which "Orientalist discourse" has legitimated the colonial aggression and political supremacy of the Western world.

Said's work, however, is notable for a number of obvious omissions. His analysis of French, British and, to a limited degree, American

<sup>3</sup> Talal Asad (1993), *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (John Hopkins University Press, London), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Said's work is clearly indebted to earlier works which have focused upon the Western construction of images of Asian culture and its people. Important works here are Raymond Schwab (1950), *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Discovery of India and the East, 1680-1880* (English translation, 1984, Columbia University Press, New York) and John M. Steadman (1969), *The Myth of Asia* (Macmillan, Basingstoke). However, the first work which appears to focus upon the way in which Orientalism functions ideologically as a support for colonial hegemony is Anwar Abdel Malek's (1963), "Orientalism in Crisis," in *Diogenes* 44.

Orientalism does not touch upon the strong tradition of Orientalist scholarship in Germany, where it was not accompanied by a colonial empire in the East. In fact, Sheldon Pollock has shown how German Orientalist analysis of Indian Vedic lore, profoundly affected Germany by furnishing a racially-based, Indo-European myth of the pure Aryan race, which could subsequently be used to distinguish the Semites as "non-Aryan."<sup>5</sup> Thus, not only has Said's work ignored important currents within European Orientalist discourse, it has also tended to ignore the ways in which such discourses affect the colonizer as well as the colonized.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the examples of German Orientalists on the one hand, and Japan on the other, cast doubt upon Said's thesis that Orientalist discourse is always associated with an imperial agenda, since Germany had no Eastern empire to manipulate and control, and Japan was subjected to Orientalist discourses without ever being colonized by the West.<sup>7</sup>

Sheldon Pollock's discussion of German Orientalism suggests that the authoritative power of such discourses could equally be applied at home to create a powerful 'internal narrative,' in this case instrumental in the construction of a German national consciousness, and ultimately in the hands of the National Socialists in "the colonization and domination of Europe itself." Jayant Lele has argued that as well as its obvious consequences for Asia, Orientalism also functions to insulate the Occident from the self-analysis which would be involved in a proper engagement with the cultures and perspectives of the non-Western world. He further suggests that Orientalist discourses censure attempts to analyse the West in a self-critical and comparative manner,

<sup>5</sup> Sheldon Pollock (1993), "Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj," in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia), pp. 76-133.

<sup>6</sup> One should note here that insofar as Said ignores the effect of Orientalist narratives upon the colonizer he does not follow Foucault's analysis which attempts to demonstrate the sense in which discourses construct both the subject and the object.

<sup>7</sup> Richard H. Minear (1980), "Orientalism and the Study of Japan," in *Journal of Asian Studies* XXXIX, No. 3, pp. 507-517.

by misrepresenting both Asian and Western culture. Thus, "through a culturally imposed stupefaction of the people" both Western and non-Western people are manipulated and subjugated through the "same project of control and exploitation."<sup>8</sup> This is a point rarely noticed by critics of Orientalism, namely, that in representing the Orient as the essentialized and stereotypical "Other" of the West, the heterogeneity and complexity of both Oriental and Occidental remain silenced.<sup>9</sup>

Critics of Said's work have suggested that he places too much emphasis on the passivity of the native,<sup>10</sup> and that he does not really discuss, nor even allow for, the ways in which indigenous peoples of the East have used, manipulated and constructed their own positive responses to colonialism using Orientalist conceptions. Homi Bhabha's notion of 'hybridity' for instance reflects an awareness that colonial discourses are deeply ambivalent and not susceptible to the constraints of a single uni-directional agenda. Thus, Bhabha argues, the master discourse is appropriated by the native whose cultural resistance is manifested through the mimicry and parody of colonial authority.<sup>11</sup> In

<sup>8</sup> Jayant Lele (1993), "Orientalism and the Social Sciences," in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Ashis Nandy (1983), *The Intimate Enemy* (Oxford University Press, Delhi), pp. 71-74. Nandy, by way of a broadly psychoanalytic account of cultural interchange, suggests that the Orientalist projection of the East as the West's inverse double or "other" is a reflection of the suppressed 'shadow' side of Western culture. It is in this sense that we can see how the Enlightenment subordinated the poetic, the mystical, and the feminine elements within European culture and projected such qualities onto the Orient.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance, Benita Parry (1992), "Overlapping Territories and Intertwined Histories: Edward Said's Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism," in M. Sprinker (ed.) (1992), *Edward Said: A Critical Reader* (Blackwell, Oxford), p. 34. See also Peter van der Veer (1993), "The Foreign Hand. Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and Communalism," in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, p. 23, and Rosalind O'Hanlon (1989), "Cultures of Rule, Communities of Resistance: Gender, Discourse and Tradition in Recent South Asian Historiographies," in *Social Analysis* 25, p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Homi Bhabha (1985), "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," in *Critical Inquiry* 12, pp. 144-165.

similar fashion Richard G. Fox has pointed to the ways in which Sikh reformers in the 1920's accepted Orientalist stereotypes of the Sikh, and yet used them to create a mass movement in opposition to British colonialism.<sup>12</sup> The same transformation can be seen in the Hindu context, where Orientalist presuppositions about the "spirituality" of India etc. were used by reformers such as Rammohun Roy, Dayānanda Saraswati, Swāmi Vivekānanda and Mohandas K. Gandhi in the development of an anti-colonial Hindu nationalism. This no doubt reflects not only the level of permeation of Orientalist ideas amongst the native population of India (especially the colonially educated intelligentsia), but also the fact that such discourses do not proceed in an orderly and straightforward fashion, being in fact adapted and applied in ways unforeseen by those who initiated them. Thus, Orientalist discourses were appropriated by native Indians in the nineteenth century and applied in such a way as to undercut the colonialist agenda, which, Said suggests, is implicated in such discourses.

We have already seen that Said's own negative appraisal of Orientalism does not appear to leave room for indigenous appropriations of Orientalist discourses for positive, anti-colonial goals. Equally, his work places little emphasis upon what Clifford calls a "sympathetic, nonreductive Orientalist tradition."<sup>13</sup> Richard Fox refers to this strand as "affirmative Orientalism" and has in mind such Western apologists for Indian culture as the Theosophist Annie Besant, Hindu convert Sister Nivedita, and apostle of non-violence, Tolstoy etc.<sup>14</sup> In this context, one should examine what is probably the most scathing critique of Said to date. David Kopf attacks Said for "dropping names, dates and anecdotes" and for adopting a method "which is profoundly structural

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<sup>12</sup> Richard G. Fox (1992), "East of Said," in Sprinker (ed.) (1992), *ibid.*, p. 146. But see Peter van der Veer (1994), *Religious Nationalism. Hindus and Muslims in India* (University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London), pp. 53-56, where it is argued that Sikh identity was utilized but not constructed by the British.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford (1988), *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), p. 261.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Fox (1992), *ibid.*, p. 152.

and synchronic” and thus “diametrically opposed to history.”<sup>15</sup> Whilst Kopf sees a great deal of merit in Said’s work, he decries the use of the term “Orientalism” to “represent a sewer category for all the intellectual rubbish Westerners have exercised in the global marketplace of ideas” (p. 498). Kopf, in fact, believes that Said has provided an overly negative and one-sided analysis, which fails to take into account the positive elements within Orientalist discourses. He suggests that modern Orientalism was born in Calcutta in 1784 with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and that, as such, British Orientalism can be said to have given birth to the Bengal Renaissance since it “helped Indians to find an indigenous identity in the modern world” (p. 501). Kopf suggests that these Orientalists “were men of social action, working to modernize Hindu culture from within” (p. 502). These are to be contrasted, Kopf argues, with the anti-Orientalist Westernizers, as represented by the staunch Anglicist Thomas B. Macauley, for whom “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”<sup>16</sup> Kopf comments, “It is curious to me that Said completely ignores this very group of proto-imperialists who were anti-Orientalist. It is their ideology and not that of the Orientalists which Said reviews in his work” (p. 503).

If we examine Kopf’s position more closely we shall see the source of dispute and confusion between him and Said. Kopf praises the modernizing efforts of the Orientalists who,

served as avenues linking the regional élite with the dynamic civilization of contemporary Europe. They contributed to the formation of a new Indian middle

<sup>15</sup> David Kopf (1980), “Hermeneutics versus History,” in *Journal of Asian Studies* XXXIX, No. 3, May 1980, p. 499. Rosane Rocher also argues that Said’s approach “does to orientalist scholarship what it accuses orientalist scholarship of having done to the countries East of Europe; it creates a single discourse, undifferentiated in space and time and across political, social and intellectual identities.” Rosane Rocher (1993), “British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectic of Knowledge and Government,” in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>16</sup> Macauley’s *Minute of Education* (1835), quoted in Kopf (1980), *ibid.*, p. 504, but originally quoted in Kopf (1969), *British Orientalism and The Bengal Renaissance* (University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London), p. 248.



class and assisted in the professionalization of the Bengali intelligensia. They started schools, systematized languages, brought printing and publishing to India, and encouraged the proliferation of books, journals, newspapers, and other media of communication. Their output was urban and secular. They built the first modern scientific laboratories in India and taught European medicine. They were neither static classicists nor averse to the idea of progress, and they historicized the Indian past and stimulated consciousness of history in the Indian intellectual.<sup>17</sup>

What is striking about this description of the activities of British Orientalists in India is that Kopf praises them so unequivocally, whilst critics such as Said (and I would include myself here) find such activities deeply problematic. Kopf's dispute with Said is really a debate about the extent to which one can differentiate modernization from westernization. Kopf's view is that the two can be easily differentiated and that the Orientalists were solely in favour of modernization, whilst Anglicists like Macauley were fervently in favour of both.<sup>18</sup> Thus, according to Kopf "nineteenth century Europe was not so much the source of modernity as it was the setting for modernizing processes that were themselves transforming Western cultures," and that for the Orientalist, "the important thing was to set into motion the process of modernization through which Indians might change themselves according to their own value system."<sup>19</sup>

However, it seems at best naively simplistic, and at worst downright false, to suggest that we can drive a firm wedge between westernization and modernization. What usually counts as "modernity" seems to be bound up with attitudes and social changes that derive from the European Enlightenment. Thus, despite the claimed cultural and political

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<sup>17</sup> David Kopf (1969), *ibid.*, p. 275, quoted by the author in Kopf (1980), *ibid.*, pp. 502-503.

<sup>18</sup> David Kopf (1969), *ibid.*, pp. 275-276.

<sup>19</sup> David Kopf (1969), *ibid.*, pp. 277-278. For Kopf then it is merely a historical accident that the social process of modernization began in Europe (p. 276). However, even if this were the case, it is still naive to believe that one can export the results of this process without also exporting those features which are peculiarly European in nature.

neutrality of the language of “modernization,” and their dispute with the Anglicists, Kopf’s (affirmative) Orientalists were still involved in the Europeanization of the Orient, and, even when they appeared to be promoting the vernacular and the indigenous, their methods, goals and underlying values presupposed the supremacy of European culture. That this is so can be seen even by an examination of the quotations which Kopf elicits as evidence of the Orientalists’ opposition to westernization. Thus, he quotes H. H. Wilson, whom he describes as “one of the greatest Orientalists” as promoting the cultivation of Sanskrit so that native dialects may “embody European learning and science.”<sup>20</sup> Again, W. H. MacNaughten is quoted as attacking the westernizer’s position on the grounds that “if we wish to enlighten the great mass of the people in India we must use as our instruments the Languages of India. . . our object is to impart ideas, not words . . .”<sup>21</sup> Thus, despite Kopf’s protestation to the contrary, the Orientalists were also acting in complicity with European imperial aspirations even if their rhetoric was less confrontational, aggressive and condescending. The complexity of the issues surrounding the Anglicists vs. the Orientalists in the postcolonial era is reflected, for instance, in Gayatri Spivak’s refusal to endorse a blanket return to “native” languages in India. It is perhaps important to note that English has become increasingly “nativized” in colonial and postcolonial India, and still represents a much greater potential for international interaction (albeit due to British imperial hegemony) than the ‘native’ languages. Nevertheless, Spivak suggests an “inter-literary” approach, arguing that “the teaching of English literature can become critical only if it is intimately yoked to the teaching of the literary or cultural production in the mother tongue.”<sup>22</sup>

The colonial prejudices of such ‘eminent scholars’ of the Orient as William Jones and James Mill (father of John Stuart Mill), is evident in their work. William Jones has been described as the Western

<sup>20</sup> David Kopf (1980), *ibid.*, p. 505.

<sup>21</sup> David Kopf (1969), *ibid.*, p. 250, quoted again in Kopf (1980), *ibid.*, p. 504.

<sup>22</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993), “The Burden of English,” in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, p. 151.

scholar most responsible for first introducing a "textualized" India to Europeans.

The most significant nodes of William Jones' work are (a) the need for translation by the European, since the natives are unreliable interpreters of their own laws and culture; (b) the desire to be a law-giver, to give the Indians their "own" laws; and (c) the desire to "purify" Indian culture and speak on its behalf. . . . In Jones' construction of the "Hindus", they appear as a submissive, indolent nation unable to appreciate the fruits of freedom, desirous of being ruled by absolute power, and sunk deeply in the mythology of an ancient religion.<sup>23</sup>

As Tejaswini Niranjana suggests, "This Romantic Orientalist project slides almost imperceptibly into the Utilitarian, Victorian enterprise of 'improving' the natives through English education."<sup>24</sup> James Mill's three volumed *History of British India* (1817) continues to be influential in its monolithic approach to Indian culture, its homogenizing references to "Hinduism," and its highly questionable periodization of Indian history.<sup>25</sup>

It is naive of Kopf to believe that all Orientalists were opponents of westernization. He fails to see both the polyphonic nature and multiple layers of colonial discourse, nor does he seem to have attempted to lift the veil of rhetorical subterfuges which often occlude imperialistic motivations. Consequently, Kopf argues that "Orientalism was the polar opposite of Eurocentric imperialism as viewed by the Asians themselves. . . . If Orientalism was merely the equivalent of imperialism, . . ." he asks, ". . . then how do we account for the increasingly nostalgic view of Orientalists nurtured by later generations of Hindu intelligentsia?"<sup>26</sup> Our answer to this question has already been put forward in the recognition that the 'Hindu intelligentsia' were themselves influenced by the West's stereotypical portrayal of "the Orient."

<sup>23</sup> Tejaswini Niranjana (1990), "Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English," in *Economic and Political Weekly* XXV, No. 15, April 14th 1990, p. 774.

<sup>24</sup> Tejaswini Niranjana (1990), *ibid.*, p. 775.

<sup>25</sup> See Romila Thapar (1992), *Interpreting Early India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi), pp. 5-6; 89; Peter van der Veer (1993) in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.), *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> David Kopf (1980), *ibid.*, p. 505.

The extent to which the Anglicist Macauley was successful in his aim “to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,”<sup>27</sup> will become readily apparent later when we consider the development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the notion of a single religious entity known as “Hinduism.” The notion of a Hindu religion, I suggest, was initially constructed by Western Orientalists based upon a Judaeo-Christian understanding of what might constitute a religion. This construct, of course, was subsequently adopted by Hindu nationalists themselves in the quest for home rule (*swaraj*) and in response to British imperial hegemony.

### *Orientalism and Indology*

Edward Said’s examples are mainly taken from the “Middle-Eastern” context, no doubt a reflection of his own Palestinian origins, and it has been left to others to explore the implications of his work further afield. In recent years, with the publication of Wilhelm Halbfass (1988), *India and Europe. An Essay in Understanding*, and Ronald Inden (1990), *Imagining India*, the Orientalist problematic has been discussed in relation to the study of Indian religion and philosophy.<sup>28</sup> Inden, for instance, suggests that Indological analysis functions to portray Indian thoughts, institutions and practices as aberrations or distortions of normative (i.e., Western) patterns of behaviour.<sup>29</sup> According to Inden, Indological discourse transforms Indians into subjugated objects of a su-

<sup>27</sup> Macauley (1835), ‘Minute on Indian Education,’ quoted in Tejaswini Niranjana (1990), “Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English,” in *Economic and Political Weekly* XXV, No. 15, April 14th 1990, p. 778.

<sup>28</sup> For a recent collection of works responding to Halbfass’ interventions in the Orientalist debate see Eli Franco and Karin Preisendanz (eds), (1997), *Beyond Orientalism. The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies* (Rodopi, Amsterdam, Poznań Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities), 673 pp.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald Inden (1986), “Orientalist Constructions of India,” in *Modern Asian Studies* 20, No. 3, p. 411.

perior (i.e. higher-order) knowledge, which remains in the possession of the Western Indological expert. This is because Indological works do not provide merely descriptive accounts of that which they study, but also provide commentaries which claim to *represent* the thoughts and actions of the Indian subject in such a manner as to communicate their general nature or "essence" to the Western reader. Inden is also critical of 'hegemonic' accounts which provide reductionist and causal explanations for the "irrational" behaviour of Indians (irrational in the sense that it requires explanation to the rational Westerner). Such reductionist accounts suggest that

Indian civilization is, thus, unlike the West, fundamentally a product of its environment, and a defective product at that. European civilization is the product of rational human action. Especially since the so-called Enlightenment the West has been guided by scientific reason in shaping its institutions and beliefs. . . . Modern science has acquired privileged knowledge of the natural world. It has made a 'copy' of that external reality unprecedented in its accuracy. The institutions of the West have therefore come more closely to conform to what is, in this discourse, 'natural'. Traditional and non-Western societies have, because of their inaccurate or false copies of external reality, made relatively ineffective adaptations to their environments. They have not evolved as fast as the modern West.<sup>30</sup>

Inden, however, seems to overstate his case at times. I do not accept that all explanations of Indian thought and behaviour imply the irrationality of Indians. Explanations are necessary because Indian culture is different from Western culture in many respects; rejecting Orientalist projections of an "Other", will not smooth over these differences. Providing an insightful account of Indian thought for the Western reader, whilst it may involve some distortion of the material under consideration is necessary for this reason and not because Europeans are superior or more rational than Indians. Equally, reductionist accounts can be, and increasingly are being, applied to Western history and culture itself. In fact, one might argue that the current wave of postmodern anxiety about the foundations of Western

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<sup>30</sup> Inden (1986), *ibid.*, p. 441, 415.

civilization is partly a consequence of historicist and reductionist analysis being applied reflexively to the West itself!

Inden, thus provides us with a highly polemical and generally negative account of Indological scholarship.<sup>31</sup> His analysis, however, is insightful on innumerable occasions and contains a number of salient points. He suggests that Indological scholarship in the past has been dominated by the privileged voice of the 'positivist' and the 'empirical realist'.<sup>32</sup> Inden, at times reminiscent of the neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty and the philosopher of science Paul Feyerband, rejects what he describes as the 'positivist' claim that there is "a single, determinate reality" and that the tools of Western science have privileged access to that reality through forms of knowledge which directly correspond or 'mirror' it.

I reject the duality of knower and known presupposed by this episteme. It is my position that knowledge both participates in the construction of reality and is itself not simply natural (in the sense of necessary and given), but, in large part, constructed.<sup>33</sup>

Inden also suggests that the essentialism inherent in most Orientalist discourses should be comprehensively refuted. This is the tendency within most Indological accounts to claim to have uncovered the "essence" of the object under consideration, through careful scholarly analysis. Thus, works which purport to explain the "Oriental mind-set" or the "Indian mentality" etc., presuppose that there is a homogenous, and almost-Platonic "essence" or "nature" which can be directly intuited by the Indological expert. Inden is correct, in my view, to attack

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<sup>31</sup> Richard G. Fox criticizes Inden for his condemnation of "all South Asian scholarship as Orientalist". According to Fox, Inden's work displays just those stereotyping tendencies in his approach to Orientalist scholarship as he attacks in the scholarship itself, though this may reflect a lack of appreciation on Fox's part of the extent to which even "affirmative Orientalism" contributes to European hegemony over the East. See Richard G. Fox (1992), "East of Said," in M. Sprinker, *ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>32</sup> Inden (1986), *ibid.*, p. 440.

<sup>33</sup> Inden (1986), *ibid.*, pp. 444-445. As with Edward Said, we can clearly see the influence of Foucault on Inden's work.

such essentialism, rooted as it is in the Enlightenment belief in a unified human nature, not just because it misrepresents the heterogeneity of the subject-matter, but also because of the way in which such essentialism results in the construction of a cultural stereotype which may then be used to subordinate, classify and dominate the non-Western world.

Inden's work, however, is also interesting for his critical analysis of "affirmative Orientalism." This strand of Orientalist discourse, labelled 'romantic' by Inden because of its indebtedness to European Romanticism, is generally motivated by an admiration for, and sometimes by a firm belief in, the superiority of Eastern cultures. The romantic image of India portrays Indian culture as profoundly spiritual, idealistic and mystical. Thus, as Peter Marshall points out

As Europeans have always tended to do, they created Hinduism in their own image. Their study of Hinduism confirmed their beliefs and Hindus emerged from their work as adhering to something akin to undogmatic Protestantism. Later generations of Europeans, interested themselves in mysticism, were able to portray the Hindus as mystics.<sup>34</sup>

We would do well to note the reason why Inden criticizes the Romantic conception of India as the 'Loyal Opposition.' This reflects the fact that 'Romantic Orientalism' agrees with the prevailing view that India is the mirror-opposite of Europe; it continues to postulate cultural "essences" and, thus, perpetuates the same (or at least similar) cultural stereotypes about the East. The Romanticist view of the Orient, then, is still a distortion, even if motivated at times by a respect for the Orient. As such, it participates in the projection of stereotypical forms which allows for a domestication and control of the East.

What is interesting about the "mystical" or "spiritual" emphasis which predominates in the Romanticist conception of India is not just that it has become a prevalent theme in contemporary Western images of India, but also that it has exerted a great deal of influence upon the

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Marshall (1970), *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), p. 43-4, quoted in Inden (1986), *ibid.*, p. 430.



self-awareness of the very Indians which it purports to describe. Some might argue, as David Kopf clearly does, that such endorsement by Indians themselves suggests the anti-imperial nature of such discourses, yet one cannot ignore the sense in which British colonial ideology, through the various media of communication, education and institutional control has made a substantial contribution to the construction of modern identity and self-awareness amongst contemporary Indians.

European translations of Indian texts prepared for a Western audience provided to the 'educated' Indian a whole range of Orientalist images. Even when the anglicised Indian spoke a language other than English, 'he' would have preferred, because of the symbolic power attached to English, to gain access to his own past through the translations and histories circulating through colonial discourse. English education also familiarised the Indian with ways of seeing, techniques of translation, or modes of representation that came to be accepted as 'natural'.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps the primary examples of this are the figures of Swāmi Vivekānanda and Mohandas K. Gandhi.<sup>36</sup> Vivekānanda (1863-1902) founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, an organization devoted to the promotion of a contemporary form of Advaita Vedānta (non-dualism), placed particular emphasis upon the spirituality of Indian culture as a curative to the nihilism and materialism of modern Western culture. In Vivekānanda's hands, Orientalist notions of India as "other worldly" and "mystical" were embraced and praised as India's special gift to humankind. Thus the very discourse which succeeded in alienating, subordinating and controlling India was used by Vivekānanda as a religious clarion-call for the Indian people to unite under the banner of a universalistic and all-embracing Hinduism.

Up India, and conquer the world with your spirituality. . . Ours is a religion of which Buddhism, with all its greatness is a rebel child and of which Christianity is a very patchy imitation.

<sup>35</sup> Tejaswini Niranjana (1990), "Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English," in *Economic and Political Weekly* XXV, No. 15, April 14th 1990, p. 778.

<sup>36</sup> Mohandas Gandhi, too, was also influenced by Western, Orientalist conceptions of India, only really discovering the fruits of India's religious traditions through the Romanticist works of the Theosophical Society. For a discussion of this and its relevance to the Orientalist debate see Fox (1992), in Sprinker (1992), *ibid.*, pp. 152f.



The salvation of Europe depends on a rationalistic religion, and Advaita — non-duality, the Oneness, the idea of the Impersonal God, — is the only religion that can have any hold on any intellectual people.<sup>37</sup>

Colonial stereotypes thereby became transformed and used in the fight against colonialism. Despite this, stereotypes they remain! Vivekānanda's importance, however, far outweighs his involvement with the Ramakrishna Mission. He attended (without invitation) the First World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, delivering a lecture on Hinduism (or at least on his own conception of the nature of Hinduism and its relationship with the other "world-religions"). Vivekānanda was a great success and initiated a number of successful tours of the United States and Europe. In the West he was influential in the reinforcement of the Romanticist emphasis upon Indian spirituality, and in India Vivekānanda became the focus of a renascent intellectual movement, which might more accurately be labelled "Neo-Hinduism" or "Neo-Vedānta" rather than "Hinduism."

*The Myth of Homogeneity and the Modern Myth of 'Hinduism'*

Scepticism about the applicability of globalized, highly abstract and univocal systems of thought onto the religious experience of humankind (as manifested by the "world-religions" approach to the study of religions) has been expressed by scholars like Wilfred Cantwell Smith on the grounds that such an approach provides us with an overly homogenized picture of human cultural diversity.<sup>38</sup> We can see the implications of this more clearly if we question the claim, supported by such figures as Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Vivekānanda,

<sup>37</sup> Swāmi Vivekānanda, *Collected Works*. Vol III, p. 275 and II, p. 139.

<sup>38</sup> With regard to our current discussion Cantwell Smith states that, "The term 'Hinduism' is, in my judgement, a particularly false conceptualization, one that is conspicuously incompatible with any adequate understanding of the religious outlook of Hindus." (W. Cantwell Smith [1964], *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 61). More recently Friedhelm Hardy (1990) has suggested, "That the global title of 'Hinduism' has been given to [this variety of religions] must be regarded as an act of pure despair." (*The Religions of Asia*, Routledge, London/New York, p. 72).

that there is a single religion called “Hinduism,” which can be meaningfully referred to as the religion of the Hindu people.

The notion of “Hinduism” is itself a Western-inspired abstraction, which until the nineteenth century bore little or no resemblance to the diversity of Indian religious belief and practice. The term “Hindu” is the Persian variant of the Sanskrit *sindhu*, referring to the Indus river, and was used by the Persians to denote the people of that region.<sup>39</sup> The Arabic ‘*Al-Hind*,’ therefore, is a term denoting a particular geographical area. Although indigenous use of the term by Hindus themselves can be found as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, its usage was derivative of Persian Muslim influences and did not represent anything more than a distinction between ‘indigenous’ or ‘native’ and foreign (*mleccha*).<sup>40</sup> For instance, when Belgian Thierry Verhelst interviewed an Indian intellectual from Tamil Nadu he recorded the following interchange,

Q: Are you a Hindu?

A: No, I grew critical of it because of casteism. . . . Actually, you should not ask people if they are Hindu. This does not mean much. If you ask them what their religion is, they will say, “I belong to this caste.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> H. von Stietencron argues that this usage of the term is attested to in Old Persian cuneiform inscriptions from the time of Darius I, who expanded his empire as far as the Indus in 517 B.C.E. H. von Stietencron (1991), in Günter D. Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (eds.) (1991), *Hinduism Reconsidered* (Manohar Publications, New Delhi), p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Romila Thapar (1989), “Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity,” in *Modern Asian Studies* 23, No. 2, p. 224 (reprinted in Thapar [1992]). See also Narendra K. Wagle (1991), “Hindu-Muslim interactions in medieval Maharashtra,” in Sontheimer and Kulke (eds.) (1991), *ibid.*, pp. 51-66, and Joseph T. O’Connell (1973), “Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava symbolism of deliverance from evil,” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93, No. 3, pp. 340-343.

<sup>41</sup> Thierry Verhelst (1985), *Cultures, Religions and Development in India: Interviews Conducted and recorded by Thierry Verhelst*, 14 to 23-1-1985. A PhD working group on Religions and Cultures, Brussels: Broederlyk Delen, Mimeo, p. 9 quoted in Balagangadhara (1994), p. 16.

Indeed, it is clear that the term "Hindu," even when used by the indigenous Indian, did not have the specifically religious connotations which it subsequently developed under Orientalist influences until the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> Thus, eighteenth century references to "Hindoo" Christians or "Hindoo" Muslims were not uncommon.<sup>43</sup> As Romila Thapar points out in her discussion of the reception of Muslims into India, "The people of India do not seem to have perceived the new arrivals as a unified body of Muslims. The name 'Muslim' does not occur in the records of the early contacts. The term used was either ethnic, *turuska*, referring to the Turks, or geographical, Yavana, or cultural, *mleccha*."<sup>44</sup> One should also note the distinctively negative nature of the term, the primary function of which is to provide a catch-all designation for the "Other," whether negatively contrasted with the ancient Persians, with their Muslim descendants, or with the later European Orientalists who eventually adopted the term. Indeed the same is apparent from an examination of modern Indian law. For example the 1955 Hindu Marriage Act, section 2 (1) defines a 'Hindu' as a category including not only all Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs but also anyone who is not a Muslim, a Christian, a Parsee or a Jew. Thus even in the contemporary context the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' are

<sup>42</sup> Partha Chatterjee, in fact, argues that the notion of "Hindu-ness" has no specifically religious connotation to it and that "The idea that 'Indian nationalism' is synonymous with 'Hindu nationalism' is not the vestige of some premodern religious conception. It is an entirely modern, rationalist, and historicist idea. Like other modern ideologies, it allows for a central role of the state in the modernization of society and strongly defends the state's unity and sovereignty. Its appeal is not religious but political. In this sense the framework of its reasoning is entirely secular." See Partha Chatterjee (1992), "History and the Nationalization of Hinduism," in *Social Research* 59, No. 1, p. 147.

<sup>43</sup> R.E. Frykenberg (1991), "The emergence of modern 'Hinduism' as a concept and an institution: A reappraisal with special reference to South India," in Sontheimer and Kulke (eds.) (1991), *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> Romila Thapar (1989), *ibid.*, p. 223 (reprinted in Thapar [1992]).

essentially negative appellations, functioning as an all-inclusive rubric for the non-Judaeo-Christian 'Other'.<sup>45</sup>

"Hindu" in fact only came into provenance amongst Westerners in the eighteenth century. Previously, the predominant Christian perspective amongst the Europeans classified Indian religion under the all-inclusive rubric of Heathenism. On this view there were four major religious groups, Jews, Christians, Mahometans (i.e. Muslims), and Heathens. Members of the last category were widely considered to be children of the Devil, and the Indian Heathens were but one particular sect alongside the Africans and the Americans (who even today are referred to as American 'Indians' in an attempt to draw a parallel between the indigenous populations of India and the pre-colonial population of the Americas). Other designations used to refer to the Indians were 'Banians,' a term which derives from the merchant populations of Northern India, and 'Gentoos', which functioned as an alternative to 'Heathen.' Nevertheless, as Western knowledge and interest in India increased, the term 'Hindu' eventually gained greater prominence as a culturally and geographically more specific term.

The term "Hinduism," which of course derives from the frequency with which 'Hindu' came to be used, is a Western explanatory construct. As such it reflects the colonial and Judaeo-Christian presuppositions of the Western Orientalists who first coined the term. David Kopf praises this 'gift' from the Orientalists seemingly unaware of the Eurocentric agenda underlying it and the extent to which the superimposition of the monolithic entity of "Hinduism" upon Indian religious material has distorted and perhaps irretrievably transformed Indian religiosity in a westernized direction. Thus, he states that,

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<sup>45</sup> This has lead Frits Staal, for instance to argue that "Hinduism does not merely fail to be a religion; it is not even a meaningful unit of discourse. There is no way to abstract a meaningful unitary notion of Hinduism from the Indian phenomena, unless it is done by exclusion. . ." (Frits Staal [1989], *Ritual Without Meaning*, p. 397).

The work of integrating a vast collection of myths, beliefs, rituals, and laws into a coherent religion, and of shaping an amorphous heritage into a rational faith known now as "Hinduism" were endeavors initiated by Orientalists.<sup>46</sup>

The term "Hinduism" seems first to have made an appearance in the early nineteenth century, and gradually gained provenance in the decades thereafter. Eighteenth century references to the 'religion of the Gentoos,' (e.g. Nathaniel Brassey Halhead [1776], *A Code of Gentoo Laws*) were gradually supplanted in the nineteenth century by references to 'the religion of the Hindoos,' — a preference for the Persian as opposed to the Portuguese designation of the Indian people. However, it is not until the nineteenth century proper that the term 'Hinduism' became used as a signifier of a unified, all-embracing and independent religious entity in both Western and Indian circles. The Oxford English Dictionary traces "Hindooism" to an 1829 reference in the *Bengalee*, (Vol 45), and also refers to an 1858 usage by the German Indologist Max Müller.<sup>47</sup> Dermot Killingley, however, cites a reference to "Hindooism" by Rammohun Roy in 1816. As Killingley suggests, "Rammohun was probably the first Hindu to use the word Hinduism."<sup>48</sup> One hardly need mention the extent to which Roy's conception of the 'Hindu' religion was conditioned by European, Muslim and Unitarian theological influences. Ironically there is considerable reason therefore for the frequency with which Western scholars have described Roy as "the father of modern India."

Western Orientalist discourses, by virtue of their privileged political status within 'British' India, have contributed greatly to the modern construction of "Hinduism" as a single world religion. This was some-

<sup>46</sup> David Kopf (1980), *ibid.*, p. 502.

<sup>47</sup> See Max Müller (1880), *Chips from a German Workshop* II, xxvii, 304. See Frykenberg (1991), *ibid.*, p. 43, note 7. Clearly the term is in provenance by this time since we find Charles Neumann using the term 'Hindooism' in his 1831 work *The Catechism of the Shamans* whilst explaining the sense in which Buddhism is to be understood as "a reform of the old Hindoo orthodox Church" (p. xxvi).

<sup>48</sup> Dermot Killingley (1993), *Rammohun Roy in Hindu and Christian Tradition, The Teape Lectures 1990*, (Grevatt and Grevatt, Newcastle-upon-Tyne), p. 60.

what inevitable given British control over the political, educational and media institutions of India. If we note, for instance, the extent to which the British established an education system which promoted the study of European literature, history and science, and the study of Indian culture through the medium of English or vernacular translations of the work of Western Orientalists, if we also acknowledge the fact that all of India's universities were established by the British, and according to British educational criteria, we can see the extent to which Macauley's hope of an élite class of Anglicized Indians was put into practice.

*Christianity, Textualism and the Construction of "Hinduism"*

European colonial influence upon Indian religion and culture has profoundly altered its nature in the modern era. In particular I would like to highlight two ways in which Western colonization has contributed to the modern construction of "Hinduism" — firstly by locating the core of Indian religiosity in certain Sanskrit texts (the textualization of Indian religion) and secondly by an implicit (and sometimes explicit) tendency to define Indian religion in terms of a normative definition of religion based upon contemporary Western understanding of the Judaeo-Christian traditions. These two processes are clearly interwoven in a highly complex fashion and one might even wish to argue that they are in fact merely two aspects of a single phenomenon — namely the westernization of Indian religion. Nevertheless, they require some attention if we are to grasp the sense in which the modern conception of Hinduism is indeed a *modern* development!

Western literary bias has contributed to a textualization of Indian religion.<sup>49</sup> This is not to deny that Indian culture has its own literary traditions, rather it is to emphasize the sense in which Western presuppositions about the role of sacred texts in 'religion' predisposed Orientalists towards focusing upon such texts as the essential foundation for

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<sup>49</sup> In fact one could argue that in focusing one's critical attention upon Orientalist texts, the textualist paradigm which underlies them remains largely unchallenged. See for instance, Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), p. 5, where this point is made in passing but never properly addressed.

understanding the Hindu people as a whole. Protestant emphasis upon the text as the locus of religion, therefore, placed a particular emphasis upon the literary aspects of Indian culture in the work of Orientalists. Academics and highly educated Western administrators are already inclined towards literary forms of expression because of their training and so it is not that surprising to find Orientalists (both old and new) being drawn towards Indian literary materials as key sources for understanding Indian culture. Many of the early European translators of Indian texts were also Christian missionaries, who, in their translations and critical editions of Indian works, effectively constructed uniform texts and a homogenized written canon through the imposition of Western philological standards and presuppositions onto Indian materials.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the oral and 'popular' aspects of Indian religious tradition were either ignored or decried as evidence of the degradation of contemporary Hindu religion into superstitious practices on the grounds that they bear little or no resemblance to "their own" texts. This attitude was easily assimilated with the pūranically inspired, brahmanical belief in the current deterioration of civilization in the age of *kaliyuga*.

The textualist bias of Western Orientalists has had far reaching consequences in the increasingly literate India of the modern era. As Rosalind O'Hanlon (1989) writes

the privileging of scribal communities and authoritative interpreters of 'tradition' provided, on the one hand, an essential requirement of practical administration.

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<sup>50</sup> Frykenberg even goes as far as to suggest that Christian missionary activity was probably the largest single factor in the development of a 'corporate' and 'revivalist' Hinduism in India. See Frykenberg (1991), *ibid.*, p. 39. See also Vinay Dharwadker (1993), "Orientalism and the Study of Indian Literatures," in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, pp. 158-185 for an insightful discussion of the ways in which the various forms of "Indian literature" were studied according to the European literary standards of the time. Dharwadker also discusses the nature of nineteenth century European philology and its presuppositions (e.g., pp. 175; 181). Dharwadker also draws attention to the Sanskritic bias of the Western Orientalists. See also Rosane Rocher (1993), "British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century," in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, pp. 220-225 (especially p. 221), and Peter van der Veer (1993), in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, p. 40.



On the other, it formed a crucial component in colonialism's larger project itself for the textualization of cultures, for the construction of authoritative bodies of knowledge about Hindu communities as the means of securing 'freedom' to follow their own customs.<sup>51</sup>

William Jones for example, in his role as Supreme Court Judge in India, initiated a project to translate the *Dharmaśāstras* in the misguided belief that this represented the law of the Hindus, in order to circumvent what he saw as the 'culpable bias' of the native pandits. In taking the *Dharmaśāstras* as a binding law-book, Jones manifests the Judaeo-Christian paradigm within which he conceived of religion, and the attempt to apply such a book universally reflects Jones' 'textual imperialism.'<sup>52</sup> The problem with taking the *Dharmaśāstras* as pan-Indian in application is that the texts themselves were representative of a priestly élite (the *brāhmaṇa* castes), and not of Hindus *in toto*. Thus, even within these texts, there was no notion of a unified, Hindu community, but rather an acknowledgement of a plurality of local, occupational and caste contexts in which different customs or rules applied.<sup>53</sup> It was thus in this manner that

society was made to conform to ancient *dharmaśāstra* texts, in spite of those texts' insistence that they were overridden by local and group custom. It eventually allowed Anglicist administrators to *manipulate the porous boundary between religion as defined by texts and customs they wished to ban*.<sup>54</sup> (my italics)

There is, of course, a danger that in critically focusing upon Orientalist discourses one might ignore the importance of native actors and circumstances in the construction of Western conceptions of India. Here perhaps we should note the sense in which certain élitist com-

<sup>51</sup> Rosalind O'Hanlon (1989), *ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>52</sup> See Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> See Romila Thapar (1989), *ibid.*, pp. 220-221 (reprinted in Thapar [1992]). See also S. N. Balagangadhara (1994), *The Heathen in His Blindness: Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (E.J. Brill, Leiden), pp. 16-17 and chapters 3 and 4 in general.

<sup>54</sup> Rosane Rocher (1993), in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, p. 242.



munities within India (notably the scholarly *brāhmaṇa* castes), exerted a certain degree of influence upon the Western Orientalists, thereby contributing to the construction of the modern, Western conception of "Hinduism". The high social, economic and, to some degree, political status of the *brāhmaṇa* castes has, no doubt, contributed to the elision between Brahmanical forms of religion and "Hinduism." This is most notable for instance in the tendency to emphasize Vedic and Brahmanical texts and beliefs as central and foundational to the "essence" of Hindu religiosity in general, and in the modern association of 'Hindu doctrine' with the various Brahmanical schools of the Vedānta (in particular Advaita Vedānta). Indeed, Neo-Vedāntic rhetoric about the underlying unity of Indian religion has tended

to support the Westerners' preconceived notion that it was one religion they were dealing with. Since they were used to the Christian tradition of an absolute claim for only one truth, of a powerful church dominating society, and consequently of fierce religious and social confrontation with members of other creeds, they were unable even to conceive of such religious liberality as would give members of the same society the freedom, by individual choice, to practice the religion they liked.

As a result, Western students saw Hinduism as a unity. The Indians had no reason to contradict this; to them the religious and cultural unity discovered by Western scholars was highly welcome in their search for national identity in the period of struggle for national union.<sup>55</sup>

C.A. Bayly notes, for instance, the extent to which the administrative and academic demand for the literary and ritual expertise of the Brahmins placed them in a position of direct contact and involvement with their imperial rulers; a factor that should not go unnoticed in attempting to explain why Western Orientalists tended to associate Brahmanical literature and ideology with Hindu religion *in toto*.<sup>56</sup> It is clear that, in this regard at least, Western Orientalists, working under the aegis of a Judaeo-Christian religious paradigm, looked for and found

<sup>55</sup> H. von Stietencron (1991), in Sontheimer and Kulke (eds.) (1991), *ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>56</sup> C.A. Bayly (1988), *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), pp. 155-158.

an ecclesiastical authority akin to Western models of an ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the case of the Brahmanical ‘priests’ and pandits, already convinced of the degradation of contemporary Indian civilization in the present era of *kaliyuga*, these scholars generally found a receptive and willing religious élite, who, for that very reason remained amenable to the rhetoric of reform.

The Brahmanical religions, of course, had already been active in their own appropriation of non-Brahmanical forms of Indian religion long before the Muslim and European invasions. Brahminization, viz., the process whereby the Sanskritic, ‘high’ culture of the brahmins, absorbed non-Brahmanical (sometimes called ‘popular,’ or even ‘tribal’) religious forms, was an effective means of assimilating diverse cultural strands within one’s locality, and of maintaining social and political authority.<sup>57</sup> The process works both ways, of course, and many of the features of Sanskritic religion initially derived from a particular, localized context.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, in the case of the educated *brāhmaṇa* castes, the British found a loosely defined cultural élite that proved

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<sup>57</sup> Brahminization, or the general process whereby non-Brahmanical forms of Indian religion are colonized and transformed by hegemonic Brahmanical discourses, can be distinguished from the more general process of Sanskritization. The conflation of the two stems from a mistaken association of Sanskritic culture exclusively with the *brāhmaṇa* castes. As Milton Singer has suggested Sanskritization may follow the *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* or even the *śūdra* models (Milton Singer (1964), “The Social Organization of Indian Civilization,” in *Diogenes* 45, pp. 84-119.) Srinivas, in his later reflections upon Sanskritization, also points to the Sanādh Brahmins of Western Uttar Pradesh as evidence that the culture of the Brahmins is not always highly Sanskritic in nature. (See Srinivas [1968], *Social Change in Modern India* [University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London], p. 20. Whilst Brahminization in the widest sense, then, cannot be universally equated with Sanskritization, throughout this work I shall use the term ‘Brahminization’ as a short-hand term for Sanskritic Brahminization, that is to denote a particular species of Sanskritization.

<sup>58</sup> The ideological constructs and colonial nature of Brahmanical discourses, as represented in distinctions between *vaidik* (i.e. derived from the Vedas), *śāstrik* (derived from the *śāstras*), and *laukik* (worldly) forms of knowledge clearly demonstrates the sense in which the imperialist thrust of Orientalism is not an isolated historical or even an exclusively Western phenomenon. For a discussion of this see Sheldon Pol-

amenable to an ideology which placed them at the apex of a single world religious tradition.<sup>59</sup> If one asks who would most have benefited from the modern construction of a unified Hindu community focusing upon the Sanskritic and Brahmanical forms of Indian religion, the answer would, of course, be those highly educated members of the higher *brāhmaṇa* castes, for whom modern 'Hinduism' represents the triumph of universalized, Brahmanical forms of religion over the 'tribal' and the 'local'. Statistically, for example, it would seem that in post-Independence India the brahmin castes have become the dominant social group, filling 36 to 63% of all government jobs, despite representing only 3.5% of the Indian population.<sup>60</sup> As Frykenberg points out,

Brahmins have always controlled information. That was their boast. It was they who had provided information on indigenous institutions [for Western orientalis]. It was they who provided this on a scale so unprecedented that,

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lock (1993), in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, pp. 78; 96f; 107; 117, note 1.

<sup>59</sup> For a discussion of this in relation to the politics of translation see Richard Burghart (1991), "Something Lost, Something gained: Translations of Hinduism," in Sontheimer and Kulke (eds.) (1991), *ibid.*, pp. 213-225. See also Peter van der Veer (1993), in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, p. 23, 26-27, 40; Bernard Cohn (1968), "Notes on the History of the Study of Indian Society and Culture," in Milton Singer and Bernard Cohn (eds.) (1968), *Structure and Change in Indian Society* (Aldine, Chicago), pp. 3-28; Jonathan Parry (1985) "The Brahmanical Tradition and the Technology of the Intellect," in Joanna Overing (ed.) (1985), *Reason and Morality* (Tavistock Publications, London), pp. 200-225. Talal Asad (1993), provides a cogent discussion of the political implications of linguistic and cultural translation in the light of inequalities of power between the contexts of the translator and the translated (pp. 189-199). Thus, Asad notes that, "To put it crudely, because the languages of third world societies, . . . are seen as weaker in relation to Western languages (and today, especially to English), they are more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way around" (p. 190).

<sup>60</sup> See Khushwant Singh in *Sunday*: 23-29 December 1990, p. 19, quoted in Gerald Larson (1993), "Discourse About 'Religion' in Colonial and Postcolonial India," from Ninian Smart and Shivesh Thakur (eds.) (1993), *Ethical and Political Dilemmas of Modern India* (St. Martin's Press), pp. 189-190.

at least at the level of All-India consciousness, a new religion emerged the likes of which India had perhaps never known before.<sup>61</sup>

The Sanskritic “Brahmanization” of Hindu religion (itself representing one stage in the textualization process), was filtered through colonial discourses, thereby furnishing a new holistic and unified conception of the multiplicity of Indian religious phenomena throughout history. Such an approach remains profoundly anti-historical in its postulation of an ahistorical “essence” to which all forms of “Hinduism” are said to relate. As Said has suggested, such an abstract and synchronic approach is one way in which Orientalist discourses fundamentally distinguish the passive and ahistorical Orient from the active and historically changing Occident. In this manner, Orientals are effectively dehumanized (since denied an active role in the processes of history), and thus, made more amenable to colonial manipulation. As Romila Thapar suggests, this new Hinduism, furnished with a brahmanical base, was merged with elements of “upper caste belief and ritual with one eye on the Christian and Islamic models,” this was thoroughly infused with a political and nationalistic emphasis. Thapar describes this contemporary development as “Syndicated Hinduism,” and notes that it is “being pushed forward as the sole claimant of the inheritance of indigenous Indian religion.”<sup>62</sup>

This reflects the tendency, during and after European colonialism, for Indian religion to be conceived by Westerners and Indians themselves in a manner conducive to Judaeo-Christian conceptions of the nature of religion; a process which Veena Das has described as the ‘semitification’ of Hinduism in the modern era. Thus, since the nine-

<sup>61</sup> Frykenberg (1991), *ibid.*, p. 34. For discussions of the active part which native Indians played in the construction of Orientalist discourses see Nicholas B. Dirks (1993), “Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive” and David Lelyveld (1993), “The Fate of Hindustani: Colonial Knowledge and the Project of a National Language,” both in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, pp. 279-313 and 189-214.

<sup>62</sup> Romila Thapar (1985), “Syndicated Moksha,” in *Seminar* 313 (September), p. 21.

teenth century "Hinduism" has developed, and is notable for, a number of new characteristics, which seem to have arisen in response to Judaeo-Christian presuppositions about the nature of religion. This new form of organized or, "Syndicated Hinduism"

seeks historicity for the incarnations of its deities, encourages the idea of a centrally sacred book, claims monotheism as significant to the worship of deity, acknowledges the authority of the ecclesiastical organization of certain sects as prevailing over all and has supported large-scale missionary work and conversion. These changes allow it to transcend caste identities and reach out to larger numbers.<sup>63</sup>

In the contemporary era, then, "Hinduism" is characterized by both an emerging "universalistic" strand which focuses upon proselytization (e.g. Neo-Vedānta, Sathya Sai Baba, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, Transcendental Meditation, etc.) as well as so-called "fundamentalist," "revivalist" and "nationalist" strands that focus upon the historicity of human incarnations of Viṣṇu, such as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, the sacrality of their purported birthplaces, and an antagonistic attitude towards non-Hindu religions (notably the Indian Muslims).<sup>64</sup> One hardly need point to the sense in which these developments mimic traits usually associated in the West with the Judaeo-Christian traditions.<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, it would seem that the key to the West's initial postulation of the unity of "Hinduism" derives from the Judaeo-Christian presuppositions of the Orientalists and missionaries. Convinced as they were that distinctive religions could not coexist without frequent antagonism, the doctrinal liberality of Indian religions remained a mystery without the postulation of an overarching religious framework which could unite the Indians under the flag of a single religious tradition.

<sup>63</sup> Romila Thapar (1989), *ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>64</sup> See Daniel Gold (1991), "Organized Hinduism: From Vedic Truth to Hindu Nation," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds.) (1991), *Fundamentalisms Observed* (University of Chicago Press), pp. 531-593, for an outline of contemporary "fundamentalist" and "nationalist" trends in India.

<sup>65</sup> See Hans Bakker (1991), "Ayodhyā: A Hindu Jerusalem. An Investigation of 'Holy War' as a Religious Idea in the Light of Communal Unrest in India," in *Numen* XXXVIII, No. 1, pp. 80-109.

How else can the relatively peaceful co-existence of the various Hindu movements be explained without some sense of religious unity? Why else would Hindus of differing sectarian affiliations accept the existence of rival gods unless they belonged to the same religious tradition? Failure to transcend a model of religion premised on the monotheistic exclusivism of Western Christianity thereby resulted in the imaginative construction of a single religion called “Hinduism”. Of course, being able to classify Hindus under a single religious rubric also made colonial control and manipulation easier. The fact that the semblance of unity within India owed considerable debt to imperial rule seems to have been forgotten. The lack of an orthodoxy, of an ecclesiastical structure, or indeed of any distinctive feature which might point to the postulation of a single Hindu religion, was dismissed, and one consequence of this was the tendency to portray ‘Hinduism’ as a contradictory religion, which required some form of organization along ecclesiastical and doctrinal lines, and a purging of ‘superstitious’ elements incompatible with the ‘high’ culture of ‘Hinduism’.

This new *epistēme*<sup>66</sup> created a conceptual space in the form of a rising perception that “Hinduism” had become a corrupt shadow of its former self (which was now located in certain key sacred texts such as the Vedas, the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā — all taken to provide an unproblematic account of ancient Hindu religiosity). The perceived shortcomings of contemporary ‘Hinduism’ in comparison to the ideal form, as represented in the text, thus created the belief (amongst both Westerners and Indians) that Hindu religion had stagnated over the centuries and was therefore in need of reformation. The gap between original (ideal) ‘Hinduism’ and the contemporary beliefs and practices of Hindus was soon filled of course by the rise of what have become known as ‘Hindu reform movements’ in the nineteenth century — groups such as the Brahmo Samaj, the Ārya Samaj and the Ra-

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<sup>66</sup> I am using *epistēme* here in a broadly Foucaultian sense to denote that which “defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in practice” (Foucault [1973], *The Order of Things* (Pantheon, New York), p. 168).

makrishna Mission. Virtually all textbooks on Hinduism describe these groups as 'reform' movements. This representation, however, falls into the trap of seeing pre-colonial Hindu religion(s) through colonial spectacles. When combined with a highly questionable periodization of Hindu religious history (which ultimately derives from James Mill's *A History of British India*) the impression is given (i). that Hinduism is a single religion with its origins in the Vedas, (ii). that from the 'medieval' period onwards (c. 10th century onwards) Hinduism stagnated and lost its potential for renewal, and (iii). that with the arrival of the West, Hindus became inspired to reform their now decadent religion to something approaching its former glory. This picture of Indian history, as problematic as it is prevalent, reflects a Victorian and post-Enlightenment faith in the progressive nature of history. Thus, Hinduism in the twentieth century is allowed to enter the privileged arena of the 'world religions,' finally coming of age in a global context and satisfying the criteria of membership established by Western scholars of religion!

To illustrate the arbitrariness involved in the homogenization of Indian religions under the rubric of "Hinduism," let us briefly consider what happens if one applies the same *a priori* assumption of religious unity to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As von Stietencron argues, if one takes these three 'religions' to be sects or denominations of a single religion one can point to a common geographical origin in the Near East, a common ancestry (Abrahamic tradition), a common monotheism, a common prophetism, all three accept a linear and eschatological conception of history, uphold similar (though varying) religious ethics, work within a broadly similar theological framework with regard to their notions of a single God, the devil, paradise, creation, the status of humankind within the workings of history, as well as, of course, revering the Hebrew Bible (to varying degrees). On the other hand, however, there is no common founder of the three movements, probably no doctrine which is valid for all adherents, no uniform religious ritual or ecclesiastical organization, and it is not immediately clear that the adherents of these three movements



believe in the same God.<sup>67</sup> If we then consider the diversity of religious movements usually subsumed under the label "Hinduism" we will find a similar picture. Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that nineteenth and twentieth century "Hindus" have generally not objected to the postulation of a single religious tradition as a way of understanding their beliefs and practices, whereas Jews, Christians and Muslims generally remain very protective of their own group identities. This Hindu attitude does not merely reflect the colonization of their thought-processes by the Orientalists. Postulation of Hindu unity was to be encouraged in the development of Indian autonomy from British rule. *Swaraj* (home rule) was seen to be inconceivable without the unification of India along nationalistic and cultural lines. Not only that, although sectarian clashes have always occurred, in general Indian religious groups appear to have been able to live together in a manner unprecedented in the history of the Judaeo-Christian religions in the West.

Consequently, it remains an anachronism to project the notion of "Hinduism" as it is commonly understood into pre-colonial Indian history. Before the unification begun under imperial rule and consolidated by the Independence of 1947 it makes no sense to talk of an Indian 'nation,' nor of a religion called "Hinduism" which might be taken to represent the belief system of the Hindu people. Today of course the situation differs insofar as one can now point to a loosely defined cultural entity which might be labelled "Hinduism", or, as some prefer, "Neo-Hinduism" (though this latter term implies that there was a unified cultural entity known as "Hinduism" which can be pinpointed in the pre-colonial era). The presuppositions of the Orientalists cannot be underestimated in the process whereby nineteenth and twentieth century Indians have come to perceive their own identity and culture through colonially crafted lenses. It is clear, then, that from the nineteenth century onwards Indian self-awareness has resulted in the development of an intellectual and textually-based "Hinduism" which is

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<sup>67</sup> H. von Stietencron (1991), *ibid.*, pp. 20-21.



then 'read back' (if you pardon the 'textual' pun) into India's religious history. Indeed,

The construction of a unified Hindu identity is of utmost importance for Hindus who live outside India. They need a Hinduism that can be explained to outsiders as a respectable religion, that can be taught to their children in religious education, and that can form the basis for collective action. . . . In an ironic twist of history, orientalism is now brought by Indians to Indians living in the West.<sup>68</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the invention of "Hinduism" as a single "world" religion was also accompanied by the rise of a nationalist consciousness in India since the nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup> The modern nation-state, of course, is a product of European socio-political and economic developments from the sixteenth century onwards, and the introduction of the nationalist model into Asia is a further legacy of European imperialism in this area. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, to find that the very Hindu nationalists who fought so vehemently against British imperialist rule, themselves accepted the homogenizing concepts of 'nationhood' and 'Hinduism,' which ultimately derived from their imperial rulers.<sup>70</sup> It is difficult to see what alternative the

<sup>68</sup> Peter van der Veer (1993) in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>69</sup> See Partha Chatterjee (1992), "History and the Nationalization of Hinduism," in *Social Research* 59, No.1, pp. 111-149 and Chatterjee (1986), *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World. A Derivative Discourse* (Zed Books Ltd, London); Mark Juergensmeyer (1993), *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London). Of relevance here also is the work of David Lelyveld ("The Fate of Hindustani: Colonial Knowledge and the Project of a National Language," in Breckenridge and van der Veer [eds.] [1993], *ibid.*, pp. 189-214) on the role which Hindustani and Hindi played in the failed colonial project of constructing a national language in India. See also Arjun Appadurai's discussion of the way in which the quantification process initiated by gathering of statistical information for the Census etc., functions as a means of constructing homogeneity — ("Number in the Colonial Imagination," in Breckenridge and van der Veer [eds.] [1993], *ibid.*, especially pp. 330-334).

<sup>70</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the colonial roots of Indian nationalist consciousness, see Partha Chatterjee (1986), *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World — A Derivative Discourse?* (Zed Books Ltd., London). See also Chatterjee

anti-colonialists had, since the nation-state provides the paradigmatic building block of all contemporary economic, political and cultural interaction. Thus, as David Luddens has suggested, the authority of Orientalist discourses initially derived from colonialism,

... but it was reproduced by anti-imperial, national movements and reinvigorated by Partition, in 1947, and the reorganization of Indian states, in 1956; it thrives today on conflict expressed in religious and ethnic terms. In its reification of tradition and of oppositions between East and West, nationalized orientalism suffuses postcolonial political culture and scholarship that claims to speak for India by defining India's identity in a postcolonial world. ... Having helped to make nations in South Asia what they are, orientalism fuels fires that may consume them.<sup>71</sup>

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(1992), "History and the Nationalization of Hinduism," in *Social Research* 59, No. 1, pp. 111-149.

<sup>71</sup> David Ludden (1993) "Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge," in Breckenridge and van der Veer (1993), *ibid.*, p. 274. In relation to this a number of commentators have suggested that the problems associated with "communalism" are legacies of British imperial rule. Thus, Aditya Mukherjee argues that "Indian society was *not* split since 'time immemorial' into religious communal categories. Nor is it so divided today in areas where communal ideology has not yet penetrated. ... However, communalism as it is understood today, ... is a *modern phenomenon*, which took root half way through the British colonial presence in India — in the second half of the nineteenth century." See A. Mukherjee (1990), "Colonialism and Communalism," in Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.) (1990), *Anatomy of a Confrontation. The Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumī Issue* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex), p. 165. See also Romila Thapar (1989), *ibid.*, p. 209, and Gyanendra Pandey (1990), *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Oxford University Press). See also Arjun Appadurai (1993), "Number in the Colonial Imagination," in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds.) (1993), *ibid.*, pp. 314-340; Ludden (1993), *ibid.*, pp. 266-267; van der Veer (1993), *ibid.*, p. 39; Sheldon Pollock (1993), *ibid.*, p. 107; 123, note 42. From a Western secular perspective 'the problem of communalism' is understood as evidence of the existence of old religious allegiances which are in conflict with the secular perspective of modern nationalism. However, for a critique of the hegemony of the secular nationalist model of the West see Mark Juergensmeyer (1993), *ibid.*

Romila Thapar consolidates this position by pointing to the political consequences of the construction of a common Hindu identity. Thus, she argues that,

Since it was easy to recognize other communities on the basis of religion, such as Muslims and Christians, an effort was made to consolidate a parallel Hindu community. . . . In Gramsci's terms, the class which wishes to become hegemonic has to nationalize itself and the 'nationalist' Hinduism comes from the middle class.<sup>72</sup>

*The Status of the Term "Hinduism"*

Given the evidence which we have just considered is it still possible to use the term "Hinduism" at all? One might wish to argue that the term "Hinduism" is a useful construct insofar as it refers to the general features of "Indian culture" rather than to a single religion.

Julius Lipner has recently argued that scholars should retain the term "Hinduism" insofar as it is used in a non-essentialist manner to refer to Hindu culture and not to the idea of a single religion. Lipner suggests that the Western term 'Hinduism' when used in this sense is effective so long as it represents the 'dynamic polycentrism' of *Hindutā* (Hinduness).<sup>73</sup>

However, even Lipner's characterization of 'Hinduism' remains deeply indebted to Sanskrit Brahmanism. It is difficult to see, even on this view, why Buddhism and Jainism are not themselves part of *Hindutā*. Despite Lipner's explicit disavowal of an essentialist or rei-

<sup>72</sup> Romila Thapar (1989), *ibid.*, p. 230. Daniel Gold suggests that "Postcolonial Hindu fundamentalism can thus appear as a new colonialism of the victors. In representing an emergence of Indic group consciousness in new forms shaped by the colonial experience, it can easily lead to a tyranny of the majority. For it keeps the Western idea of religious community as an ideally homogenous group, but abandons the ideas of equality among communities and protections for minorities introduced with secular British administration. . ." (Gold [1991], *ibid.*, p. 580.)

<sup>73</sup> Julius J. Lipner (1996), "Ancient Banyan: An Inquiry in to the Meaning of 'Hinduness' in *Religious Studies* 32, pp. 109-126. Lipner's use of '*Hindutā*' reflects his explicit avoidance of the term '*Hindutva*' which has been appropriated in the political arena by Hindu nationalists (see pp. 112-113).

fied rendering of the term, his description of 'Hinduism' as "macro-cosmically one though microcosmically many, a polycentric phenomenon imbued with the same life-sap, the boundaries and (micro)centres seeming to merge and overlap in a complexus of oscillating tensions,"<sup>74</sup> is likely to continue to cause misunderstanding, just as it is also likely to be appropriated by the inclusivism of Neo-Vedānta (which attempts to subsume Buddhism [in particular] under the umbrella of an absolutism of the Advaita Vedānta variety) and Hindu nationalist groups alike. Although the modern Indian Constitution [article 25 (2)] classifies all Buddhist, Jains and Sikhs as 'Hindu,' this is unacceptable for a number of reasons. Firstly, because it rides roughshod over religious diversity and established group-affiliations. Secondly, such an approach ignores the non-Brahmanical and non-Vedic elements of these traditions. Fundamentally, such assimilation effectively subverts the authority of members of these traditions to speak for themselves. In the last analysis, Neo-Vedāntic inclusivism remains inappropriate for the simple reason that Buddhists and Jains do not generally see themselves as followers of sectarian denominations of "Hinduism."

Lipner's appeal to 'polycentricism' and perspectivism as characteristic of Hindu thought also fails to salvage a recognizable sense of Indian *religious* unity since it amounts to stating that the unity of "Hinduism" (or *Hindutā*) can be found in a relativistic recognition of perspective in a great deal of Hindu doctrine and practice. This will hardly suffice if one wishes to use the term "Hinduism" in a way which is in any meaningful respect classifiable as a 'religion' in the modern Western sense of the term. One might wish to postulate "Hinduism" as an underlying *cultural* unity but this too is likely to prove inadequate once one moves beyond generalized examination and appeals to cultural homogeneity. Yet even if one accepts "Hinduism" as a cultural rather than as a specifically religious unity, one would then need to acknowledge the sense in which it was no longer identifiable as an "ism," thereby rendering the term obsolete or at best downright misleading. To continue to talk of "Hinduism" even as a broad cultural phenomenon is

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<sup>74</sup> J. Lipner (1996), *ibid.*, p. 110.

as problematic as the postulation of a unified cultural tradition known as "Westernism." There are general features of both Indian and Western culture which one can pinpoint and analyse to a certain degree, but neither term should be reified.

Indologist Wilhelm Halbfass has attacked the claim that "Hinduism" is an Orientalist construction by appealing to the universality of the concept of *Dharma* in pre-modern Hindu thought.

We cannot reduce the meanings of *dharma* to one general principle; nor is there one single translation that would cover all its usages. Nevertheless, there is coherence in this variety; it reflects the elusive, yet undeniable coherence of Hinduism itself, its peculiar unity-in-diversity.<sup>75</sup>

According to Halbfass, despite specific "sectarian" allegiances (e.g. to Vaiṣṇavism or Śaivism) the theoreticians and literary representatives of these traditions "relate and refer to one another, juxtapose or coordinate their teachings, and articulate their claims of mutual inclusion or transcendence" in a manner indicative of a wider sense of Hindu unity and identity.<sup>76</sup> However, the 'elusive' glue which apparently holds together the diversity of Indian religious traditions is not further elaborated upon by Halbfass, nor is this 'unity-in-diversity' as 'undeniable' as he suggests. As we have seen, the nineteenth century Orientalists tended to postulate an underlying unity to Hindu religious traditions because they tended to view Indian religion from a Western Christian perspective. Halbfass at least is willing to admit that the reality of "Hinduism" is "elusive" and that the use of the term 'religion' to translate the concept of *Dharma* is problematic.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, in my view he fails to appreciate the sense in which the postulation of a single, underlying *religious* unity called "Hinduism" requires a highly imaginative act of historical reconstruction. To appeal to the Indian concept of *Dharma* as unifying the diversity of Hindu religious traditions is

<sup>75</sup> Wilhelm Halbfass (1988), *India and Europe*, p. 333.

<sup>76</sup> Wilhelm Halbfass, "The Veda and the Identity of Hinduism," in Halbfass (1991), *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought* (State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y.), p. 15.

<sup>77</sup> See Halbfass (1988), *India and Europe*, ch. 18.

moot since *Dharma* is not a principle which is amenable to a single, universal interpretation, being in fact appropriated in diverse ways by a variety of Indian traditions (all of whom tended to define the concept in terms of their own group-dynamic and identity). The appeal to *Dharma* therefore is highly questionable in the same sense that an appeal to the notion of the Covenant would be in establishing that Judaism, Christianity and Islam were actually sectarian offshoots of a single religious tradition.

Despite all of these problems, one might argue that there are a number of reasons why one should retain the term "Hinduism." Firstly, the term remains useful on a general, superficial and introductory level. Secondly, it is clear that since the nineteenth century, movements have arisen in India which roughly correspond to the term as it has been understood by Orientalists. Indeed, as I have argued, Orientalist accounts have themselves had a significant role to play in the rise of such groups. Thus, "Hinduism" now exists in a sense in which it certainly did not before the nineteenth century! Thirdly, one might wish to retain the term, as Lipner does, with the qualification that its radically polythetic nature be understood. Such an approach would need to be thoroughly non-essentialist in approach and draw particular attention to the ruptures and discontinuities, the criss-crossing patterns and 'family resemblances' which are usually subsumed by unreflective and essentialist usage of the term. Ferro-Luzzi, for instance, has suggested that the term "Hinduism" should be understood to be a 'polythetic-prototypical' concept, polythetic because of its radically heterogeneous nature, and 'prototypical' in the sense that the term is frequently used by both Westerners and Indians to refer to a particular idealized construct. Prototypical features of Hinduism function as such either because of their high frequency amongst Hindus (e.g. the worship of deities such as Śiva, Kṛṣṇa and Gaṇeśa, temple worship, the practice of *pūja* etc.), or because of their prestige amongst Hindus (e.g. the so-called 'high' culture of Hindus, i.e., the Brahmanical concepts of *dharma*, *samsara*, *karman*, *advaita*, *viśiṣṭādvaita* etc.), which remain important normative or prototypical paradigms for contemporary

Hindu self-identity, although only actually believed in by a minority. With regard to this latter category, Ferro-Luzzi suggests that,

Even though only a minority of Hindus believe in them or even knows them they enjoy the greatest prestige both among educated Hindus and Westerners. Besides, their influence upon Hindus tends to increase now with the spread of education [and literacy one might add]. The prototype of a Hindu might be a person who worships the above deities, visits temples, goes on a pilgrimage and believes in the above concepts. Undoubtedly, such persons exist but they are only a minority amongst Hindus.<sup>78</sup>

In my view, however, the problems deriving from the use of "Hinduism" make it inappropriate as a term denoting the heterogeneity of 'Hindu' religiosity in the pre-colonial era. Nevertheless, whatever one's view on the appropriateness of the term "Hinduism," the abandonment of essentialism, rather than facilitating vagueness and disorder, opens up the possibility of new directions in the study of South Asian religion and culture. Indeed, a proper acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of Indian religiosity, as provided by a postcolonial critique of homogenizing and hegemonic discourses (whether Western or Indian), also allows for the possibility of subaltern responses to dominant ideological constructs and the cultural and political elitism that they tend to support.

### *Conclusions*

As scholars such as Said and Ronald Inden have argued, the study of Asian cultures in the West has generally been characterized by an essentialism which posits the existence of distinct properties, qualities or 'natures' which differentiate "Indian" culture from the West. Western scholars have also tended to presuppose that such analysis was an accurate and unproblematic representation of that which it purported to explain, and that as educated Westerners they were better placed than Indians themselves to understand, classify and describe Indian culture.

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<sup>78</sup> G. Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1991), "The Polythetic-Prototype Approach to Hinduism," in Sontheimer and Kulke (eds.) (1991), *ibid.*, p. 192.



Simplistically speaking, we can speak of two forms of Orientalist discourse, the first, generally antagonistic and confident in European superiority, the second, generally affirmative, enthusiastic and suggestive of Indian superiority in certain key areas. Both forms of Orientalism, however, make essentialist judgements which foster an overly simplistic and homogenous conception of Indian culture. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Orientalist discourses are not univocal, nor can they be simplistically dismissed as mere tools of European imperialist ideology. Thus, the 'new' Indian intelligentsia, educated in colonially established institutions, and according to European cultural standards, appropriated the romanticist elements in Orientalist dialogues and promoted the idea of a spiritually advanced and ancient religious tradition called "Hinduism," which was the religion of the Indian 'nation'. In this manner, Western-inspired Orientalist and nationalist discourses permeated indigenous self-awareness and were applied in anti-colonial discourses by Indians themselves. However, such indigenous discourses remain deeply indebted to Orientalist presuppositions and have generally failed to criticize the essentialist stereotypes embodied in such narratives. This rejection of British political hegemony, but from a standpoint which still accepts many of the European presuppositions about Indian culture, is what Ashis Nandy has called 'the second colonization' of India.

In this regard, the nature of Indian postcolonial self-identity provides some support for Gadamer's suggestion that one cannot easily escape the normative authority of tradition, for, in opposing British colonial rule, Hindu nationalists did not fully transcend the presuppositions of the West, but rather legitimated Western Orientalist discourse by responding in a manner which did not fundamentally question the Orientalists' paradigm!

Through the colonially established apparatus of the political, economic and educational institutions of India, contemporary Indian self-awareness remains deeply influenced by Western presuppositions about the nature of India culture. The prime example of this being the development since the nineteenth century of an indigenous sense of Indian national identity and the construction of a single "world" re-



ligion called "Hinduism." This religion is now the cognitive site of a power struggle between internationally-oriented movements (such as ISKCON and the Rāmakṛṣṇa Mission) and contemporary Hindu nationalist movements (such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh). The prize on offer is to be able to define the 'soul' or 'essence' of Hinduism. My thesis has been that this 'essence' did not exist (at least in the sense in which Western Orientalists and contemporary Hindu movements have tended to represent it) until it was invented in the nineteenth century. Insofar as such conceptions of Indian culture and history prevail and the myth of 'Hinduism' persists, contemporary Indian identities remain subject to the influence of a westernizing and neo-colonial (as opposed to truly postcolonial) orientalism.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> This paper is part of a larger project examining the interface between post-colonial theory and the study of religion. See Richard King (1999), *Orientalism and Religion. Post-colonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East"* (Routledge, London and New York).