SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF HINDUISM AS A RELIGION

PROFESSOR HERVEY D. GRISWOLD
Forman Christian College, Lahore, India

The term "Hinduism" is taken as a general name to designate the form of religion dominant in India throughout the historical period, however much the general form may be broken up into particular sects. In this large sense of the term, Hinduism has been an enormous force in the world's history. India for the last three thousand years has been one of the most densely populated portions of the earth, and during most of the Christian centuries that form of Hinduism which proved historically fitted for export, namely, Buddhism, has powerfully influenced the whole Mongolian world. It is safe to say that during the last two thousand years, at least, Hinduism, as defined above, has influenced the life of nearly one-third of the human race.

In further elucidation of the religious significance of India in the world's history, it may be pointed out that there are on earth only two birthplaces or creative centers of the world's great religions, namely, *Palestine-Arabia* and *India-Persia*. And two races alone have been religiously creative, the Semitic race, producing Hebraism, Christianity, and Muhammadanism, and the Aryan race, producing Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism. These six highly organized and developed religions are all found in the Indian Empire, and their statistics according to the census of 1911 in round numbers are as follows:

1. Aryan religions	
a) Hinduism	220,000,000+
b) Buddhism	10,000,000+
c) Parseeism	100,000
2. Semitic religions	
a) Muhammadanism	68,000,000
b) Christianity	3,876,000
c) Judaism	21,000

Thus it will be seen at a glance that the Indian Empire is remarkable, not only as a birthplace of religions, but also as a

meeting-place and arena of conflict for all the great religions of the world. For example, in most non-Christian countries the chief opponent of Christianity is either Buddhism alone or Islam alone, but in the Indian Empire Christianity is confronted at once by Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, the three strongest non-Christian religions.

It may not be without interest in this connection to remind ourselves that we of the West are largely Aryan, at least in language, and probably in blood as well, and that though we are now Semitic in religion, yet originally we were Aryan in this also, the original religion of most of us being Teutonic, Celtic, Slavonic, Roman, or Greek. The primitive Aryan religions of Europe have all been superseded by religions of Semitic origin, but in Asia Aryan religion still exists in full vigor. And India as the home of Hinduism and the birthplace of Buddhism has this permanent interest for all whose general connection is Aryan, that whatever of religious creativeness slumbered in the Aryan race in India and Persia alone came to full and abiding fruition. The earliest Aryan sacred scriptures are the Rig-Veda and the Avesta. And while the religions of Aryan Europe all fell before the triumphant western march of Semitism, the Aryan religions of India and Persia still influence the life of nearly one-third of the human race. Of the three great religious conquests of history, two consist of the Semitic conquest of Europe and the two Americas through Christianity, and the Semitic conquest of the Nearer East through Islam. The third is constituted by the Aryan conquest of the Farther East through Buddhism.

This general statement of the significance of Hinduism in the world's history is by way of introduction to a more concrete and definite characterization of it.

1. Hinduism has always had *the general animistic or pantheistic tendency to deify whatever is.*

This tendency may be illustrated from every period of its history. In the Rig-Veda, the earliest literary monument of Hinduism, divine honor is paid to heaven and earth, sun, wind, fire, dawn, rivers, mountains, trees, sacrificial implements, the cow, dead ancestors, etc., "gods many and lords many," any one of them being worshiped singly or all of them combined. The test for the selection

of objects for worship was a pragmatic one. Whatever force or object of nature was useful to man or striking in appearance or effects was a candidate for apotheosis. Just as in the Roman church there are conditions which must be fulfilled before the minor divinity of sainthood can be conferred, so in the Vedic age there were pragmatic tests which had to be fulfilled before the major divinity of godhead could be conferred. Take, for example, Agni, the Vedic fire-god. The uses of fire are manifold. It banishes darkness, dispels the goblins of the night, and frightens away enemies. It is the secret of vegetation and the growth of food. As heat it has to do with generation and life. Fire serves as a means for cooking, and in its character as the fire on the altar it was the center of the Vedic ritual. Given then an animistic or pantheistic attitude toward nature, and the apotheosis of fire is almost inevitable. The points of view which led to such apotheosis are presented with striking fulness and detail in the Agni-hymns of the Rig-Veda. Professor Max Müller has written a biography of Agni in his *Physical Religion*. But there is room for a still more penetrating psychological interpretation of Agni. Keeping in mind then the pragmatic test of usefulness and striking appearance, we can understand at once why such physical phenomena as the thunderbolt, the rain-cloud, fire, sun, wind, soma, the sacrificial liquor, dawn, etc., received deification.

Now the Vedic point of view has been the general point of view of Hinduism throughout its whole history. The Vedic presuppositions and the Vedic methods of apotheosis have been determinative and prophetic. Only last summer in a conversation with an orthodox Brahman in Kashmir I discovered that he regarded everything in nature, down to separate stick and stone and blade of grass, as possessed each by its own spirit. "Otherwise how could it exist at all?" he asked. This view of the Kashmiri Pandit reveals a fundamental characteristic of Hinduism, namely, a *radical* doctrine of the immanence of God. If the Christian believes that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself" (II Cor. 5:19) and accordingly worships Christ as *the* incarnation of God, the Hindu believes that God is in sun, moon, wind, and thunderbolt, in cow, monkey, and serpent; in the *pipal* tree and the *tulsi* plant, in

Ram and Krishna, and he accordingly worships any or all of these as manifestations and incarnations of God. The underlying presupposition is the thoroughgoing immanence of God in nature. And since everything is a manifestation of the divine, it is left to the particular society or individual to select an *ishta devata*, or preferred god, each according to his own good pleasure. This thoroughgoing immanence is not to be construed as an equal immanence. Things differ in excellence. "One star differeth from another star in glory"; one animal, from another animal; one tree, from another tree; one man, from another man. Such differences are correlated, presumably, with the amount of the divine essence present in the things compared. The better the object or personality, the more of the divine essence presumably present. Hence the Hindu belief that God is present in a unique degree in the unique things of earth, e.g., in the ice-*linga* of the Amar Nath cave as compared with all other pieces of ice, in Ram and Krishna as contrasted with all other heroes, in the Brahman caste in comparison with all other castes, and in the Hindu people as distinguished from all other peoples.

2. A second general characteristic of Hinduism is *the tendency to syncretism.*

This also is abundantly illustrated in the Rig-Veda. As Hillebrandt well says, Vedic mythology is not a system, but a conglomerate, a kind of mythological "confusion of tongues," which arose through the coming together and fusion of the traditions of different clans (*Vedische Mythologie*, B. III, s. xii). In all probability each separate Vedic clan had originally its own tribal god, or at least had a simpler pantheon than that provided by the Rig-Veda collection in its final form. There is a good deal of evidence for the belief that the hymns to the "all-gods" as well as many hymns to dual gods are the work of mediatory theologians, *Vermittlungstheologen*, as Hillebrandt calls them. Consider the parallel situation in Israel in the days of Solomon and Ahab. Israel had its own tribal god *Yahweh*, but on account of the foreign alliances, both political and matrimonial, of Solomon and Ahab there was an incoming flood of religious syncretism, which threatened to destroy the old religious landmarks altogether. *Yahweh* was in danger of being

placed on the same level with Baal and Ashtoreth of the Sidonians, Chemosh of the Moabites, and Milcom of the Ammonites. And in spite of the strong protest on the part of Elijah and other prophets, syncretism almost carried the day. But in Vedic India there was no protest, so far as is known, against such a mediatory tendency. In fact, syncretism is according to the very genius of Hinduism. For example, in the *Indra-Agni* hymns of the Rig-Veda Agni is assimilated to Indra and Indra to Agni. The *Bhagavadgita* is also a monument of religious syncretism. And *Buddha* was taken into the Hindu system and made one of the incarnations of *Viṣṇu*. If everything alike is a manifestation of God according to the principle of radical immanence, then each people or tribe has a right to worship anything in heaven, on earth, or under the earth, according to its own sovereign taste and pleasure. This helps to explain the boundless hospitality which Hinduism has always shown toward every conceivable form of religious belief and practice. For it too is missionary—in its own way. It annexes, not individuals, but whole tribes and communities. The history of India up to the tenth Christian century is largely the history of the spread of Aryan religion and culture throughout the whole land. The conversion of a tribe to Hinduism meant its acknowledgment of the supremacy of the Brahmans and its enrolment as a separate caste in the Hindu system. These were the essentials. As regards religious faith and practice, the newly Hinduized tribe would be free to make any adjustment it pleased—usually a compromise between its own gods and the gods of the Hindu pantheon. Thus it will be seen that in the long process of the Aryanization of India the non-Aryan peoples must have contributed to the joint stock of religious customs and traditions almost as much as they received.

Now on similar terms Hinduism would be quite willing to absorb every people on earth. Thus Hinduism presents itself as a kind of gigantic religious octopus which is ready to swallow up any and every thing within its reach. Now there is syncretism and syncretism. There is no fault to be found with the syncretism which proves all things and holds fast that which is good, whatever its source may be. Such syncretism is critical and rational, and is one of the main sources of religious progress. But the trouble with the

syncretism of Hinduism is just this, that it is *uncritical*. The supreme tests for admission to the fold of Hinduism are not moral or intellectual, but *social*—the adoption of caste-organization and the acknowledgment of Brahman supremacy. The essential element in Hinduism, then, is not belief, but social organization. This fact explains why it is that the Hindu finds fault with the Christian missionary, not for preaching Christ in India, but only for *baptizing*. It is the disruption of the Hindu social system rather than a change of belief, which is feared.

The Hindu tendency to syncretism explains also the interesting religious fusions which are the result in India of the meeting of different faiths. For example, *Sikhism* and the *Kabirpanth* are the fruit of the contact of Hinduism with Islam; and the *Brahmo Samâj*, *Prârthnâ Samâj*, *Chet Rami Sect*, and even the *Arya Samâj* and the *Deva Samâj* are the fruit of the similar contact of Hinduism with Christianity. Neo-Vedantism also represents the old Vedantism as modified by modern influences, especially by Christianity. Among the more notable Neo-Vedanta preachers who have visited the West, both Swami Vivekananda and Swami Ram Tirath were graduates of mission colleges. They represent an interesting by-product of Christian work in India.

3. A third characteristic of Hinduism is *the contrast which it accepts and justifies between "hieratic" and "popular" religion.*

This contrast already appears in the earliest or Vedic stratum of Hindu religion. The Rig-Veda (including the *Sâma* and *Yajur* Vedas which are largely extracts from the *Rig*) is on the whole hieratic or priestly. The *Atharva-Veda*, on the other hand, is "demotic" and represents the magic practices, spells, incantations, etc., of popular religion. But notice that the Rig-Veda and the Atharva-Veda were both alike received into the Hindu canon. The stamp of divine authority was affixed, not only to the textbook of priestly religion, but also to the textbook of popular religion. It is as if the Old Testament contained, in addition to the prophetic writings, an equal portion devoted to the popular practices of sorcery, incantation, and witchcraft as seen, for example, in the raising of Samuel by the witch of Endor. Prophetic religion in Old Testament times had a long fierce struggle with popular religion,

but there was never any such reconciliation with popular religion as is seen in the inclusion of both the Rig-Veda and the Atharva-Veda in one (and that too the most sacred) canon of Hindu holy scripture. The Hindu sacred books which are accessible to the West through translations are, on the whole, repositories of "hieratic" religion, e.g., the Four Vedas (including *Mantras*, *Brahmaṇas*, and *Upaniṣads*), the Law-books, the Six Systems of Philosophy, the Bhagavadgita, the Epics, etc. Popular religion consists of the more or less unwritten practice of the ignorant masses of India, as described, for example, in Crooke's *Popular Religion of Northern India*. The most important doctrines of Hindu "hieratic" religion are the doctrines of *Brahma* and *mâyâ*, the identity of the individual soul with the Supreme Soul, transmigration, and *karma*. It is usually found that the crudest form of popular religion is shot through with more or less of hieratic doctrine, especially with the doctrines of transmigration and *karma*. Here too the Hindu tendency to syncretism is illustrated. But the point to be emphasized is that the existence of popular religion, however crude and even immoral it may be, is justified by Hinduism on the ground that it represents a necessary stage of progress in the soul's development. And so there has been as yet no large effort on the part of learned Hinduism to correct the errors and crudities and immoralities of popular religion. The theory has been that no interference is necessary, since through the operation of transmigration and *karma* every soul, however debased, will by means of repeated births finally attain to its proper goal. Hence extra-caste altruism has no real root in Hinduism. The supreme duty of every man is faithfully to follow the rules of his caste.

4. A fourth characteristic of Hinduism is *the dominance of the religious point of view in all the affairs of life*, or the supremacy of the religious consciousness.

In Hinduism more fully perhaps than even in orthodox Judaism religion embraces the whole of life. One explanation of this is that the separation which has been made in the West between social custom and religion has never taken place in India. In the long course of the conversion of India to Hinduism each tribe and community brought, not only its religious practices, but also its social customs

into the Hindu system and all alike received in time a religious sanction. The cake of custom has been broken in the West, but in the East it still remains intact. Hence Christianity and Hinduism touch common life differently. The principle of Christianity is, "Whether ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31). But the principle of Hinduism is, "Whether ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all" according to fixed rule and established custom. Liberty prevails in Christianity; legalism, in Hinduism. This explains why Eastern peoples in general and Hindus in particular seem at first sight so religious. It is because their religion consists so largely in the punctilious performance of an elaborate body of religiously consecrated custom touching every detail of life.

In view of this fact some abatement should be made from the emphasis placed in recent days on the Hindu religious consciousness. Nevertheless, after all reasonable deduction has been made, it still remains true that the Indian consciousness is primarily and fundamentally, not political, economic, or artistic, but *religious*. The vast Sanskrit literature of India is almost entirely religious. The great movements of India have been religious movements. India's influence on the outside world has been religious only. The great characters of India, so far as recorded, have been religious. India has been religiously creative in the past and may again be so in the future. To this day every strong religious personality in India cherishes the ambition of religious creativeness. All of which means that the people of India are richly endowed with the religious instinct and consciousness.

5. A fifth characteristic of Hinduism is *great reverence for the ideal of renunciation and great capacity for sacrifice*.

There is no land on earth where there is such reverence for the religious mendicant and such readiness on the part of multitudes for a life of extreme hardship and even of self-inflicted torture as in India. But here too the reverence for the ideal of renunciation is too often an uncritical and undiscriminating reverence, which is responsible for the existence in India of no less than five and one-half millions of mendicants, vast numbers of whom are certainly not religious in any sense, and as a non-producing element in the population are a serious economic drag on the community. In like

manner the capacity for self-sacrifice in connection with religion has too often realized itself in selfish and unpractical ways, the religious devotee usually being supremely concerned about his own salvation alone, and seeking it by a process of self-annihilation rather than of self-development. But if the time ever comes when India's religious creativeness, and spiritual passion, and capacity for sacrifice are linked to worthy ends, then the long travail of India's religious experience will finally justify itself by bearing much fruit. At any rate, the ideal of renunciation for spiritual ends and the capacity for sacrifice must be reckoned among the spiritual assets of Hinduism.

6. A sixth and last characteristic of Hinduism to be mentioned is *the existence in it of aspirations and anticipations still largely unfulfilled and unsatisfied.*

Such aspirations appear already in the Rig-Veda. Practically every one of the nine or ten hymns addressed to *Varuna* contains a confession of sin and a cry for pardon. Thus there is the clearly expressed aspiration for pardon and restored fellowship with Deity. But the consciousness of having found pardon and restored fellowship is not so clear. This may account for the fact that the penetential type of hymn practically ceased with the *Varuna*-hymns of the Rig-Veda. A vital experience of forgiveness was not rooted in the Indian religious consciousness.

Of the ten incarnations of *Viṣṇu* nine according to Hindu belief have already come and the tenth as opposed to all the rest is to be a *Niṣkalankh Avatâr* or *sinless incarnation.* The Hindu expectation of a sinless incarnation yet to come is as pathetic as the Jewish expectation of a messiah yet to come. It is a testimony to the Hindu hope that the final incarnation as sinless will deal adequately with the problem of sin.

The profoundest formula of the most rigidly monistic type of the *Vedânta* is *Aham Brahma*, "I am Brahma." Whatever else this formula may mean, it voices the aspiration of the saintliest thinkers of India for a union with Deity so close as to be equivalent to *identity.* It expresses the longing of the Indian heart for release from the trammels of the phenomenal world, and participation in the changeless perfection of the Absolute.

Such then is Hinduism as treated in barest outline. As we have

seen, Hinduism is a generic term for the totality of the religious and social customs found in India, so far as they are organized by the adoption of caste and the recognition of the social and religious supremacy of the Brahmans. As a system then Hinduism is as vast and amorphous as the sea. It is based upon a radical theory of the immanence of God in all things. Its method of growth and development is through syncretism. Its whole tendency has been to touch with religious sanction whatever is, consecrating some of the worst things as well as the best. But at the same time the vast and chaotic fabric of Hinduism is shot through with profound ideas and illumined here and there with lofty aspirations and splendid gleams of insight. Hinduism has always been rich in scholars and ascetic saints.

It is difficult to estimate Hinduism's contribution to the world. As the mother of Buddhism she has profoundly influenced the Mongolian nations. In her emphasis on the immanence of God she is helping to correct the tendency in some lands to an equally exaggerated doctrine of transcendence. But perhaps, when all is said, Hinduism's greatest contribution to the religious progress of humanity will prove to be a negative one. Through her very hospitality to every form of religious belief and practice Hinduism has been a sphere for an exhaustive series of religious experiments. If she has not discovered the way for the regeneration of India and of the world, she has at least revealed the inadequacy of the religious experiments which she herself has tried. Her greatest service, perchance, is as a preparation for something better. If, in spite of the fact that Judaism seemed to be the greatest obstacle to the spread of Christianity, Paul could say: "The law is our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ," then we are perhaps justified in saying the same thing of Hinduism, namely, that it is a *preparatory discipline* for Christianity. Hinduism will doubtless bring with it its noblest traits and points of view, for Christ "came not to destroy, but to *fulfil*." Hence in the final form of India's religion we may be sure that not one single grain of wheat garnered in all its history will be cast away. But more than this, we may be sure, positively, that the religious creativeness, the spiritual passion, and the capacity for sacrifice of the Indian people will then be called out by worthy ends and will flow forth to quicken and enrich the world.