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RELG 213 – Hinduism

My Ideas on Wendy Doniger’s Ideas on Hindu Ideas on American Ideas on Hinduism (or Response Paper 6)

Chapter 23: “Hindus in America” of Wendy Doniger’s *the Hindus* is, in my opinion, fair and balanced. She begins by describing the anecdotal concept of “Reverse Colonization”, through which numerous Hindus have come to America and impacted its culture (though she remarks on the fact that this is quite unlike the traditional colonization we have come to know and love which entails economic exploitation and, often, violence). From this idea we move outwards and explore American ideas of Hinduism (or, more often than not, what they have made of it) and, furthermore, Hindu ideas of American ideas of Hindu. This response will focus on parallels between American (or more generally Western) understanding and portrayal of Hinduism with armchair historical analysis of transition periods in Hinduism.

In her book, Doniger remarks “American born Hindus are more susceptible to the narrow presentation of Hinduism offered by their relatives and friends” (651). Indeed, it is far too easy to forget the dynamic and ever-changing nature of things, and to believe that things are as they are because they have always been so. This is especially true of Hinduism. If there is one thing I have learned this semester, it is that the “religion” is constantly in flux; always morphing and evolving in response to its current climate (sometimes, quite literally, the natural climate, as can be observed in the close ties between the earliest traces of the tradition and natural occurrences such as rain and flood). With this in mind, I was less inclined to sympathize with outcries at the American bastardization of the Hindu tradition (a tradition that would be quite difficult to pin down without the aid of sweeping generalizations).

Indeed, with the advent of sweeping globalization and speed with which we are able to communicate across the globe, the speed with which ideas propagate and morph is ever increasing. What Doniger describes in this chapter is something that has always been happening, but in fast-forward.

In *the Hindus*, Doniger expresses multiple sides of the conversation about on the Americanization of Hinduism. She writes frankly, addressing “the more grotesque misconstructions made by people who have no commitment to any form of Hinduism but simply pick up pieces of the mythology or art and use them for purposes that are, at best, crassly commercial…” (650). I am able to sympathize with the offense taken when one feels that one’s beliefs are being trivialized by others for their profit, however, this is in no means a practice of the modern age alone. It is simply a different manifestation of what I believe has been the driving force for many a shift in ideology. Revisionist readings and interpretations of holy text and traditions has always been a tool for those with influence to perpetuate the status quo and those without power to attempt to change it. In the past (and still today), we find this driven by political and religious authority, but now the primary vehicle for this effect is in the economic sector. Making money off a caricature of Hinduism in America is the result of globalization combined with this age-old effect. It looks and feels different because the manipulation is not coming from within as usual but from without (a society nearly a world away). Furthermore, Hindus are forced to take a different look at Hinduism than they may be used to the that may be valuable.

All of this is not to say that I am fully in support of the appropriation of any culture of religion. The point here is that there is nothing new under the sun. It isn’t the product of a morally bankrupt age of evil (the height of the *kali yuga*, if you will). It is an age-old phenomenon that is more pronounced as a result of globalization and technology.

Impressions of the Course

This course has been very enriching to me. It is one of favorites, thus far, in college. It has been my first non-Math, non-Computer Science (non-Physics) course in two semesters, so right off the bat it has been a refreshing change of pace (I came to university and nearly forgot how to write!). On one level, I have learned a tremendous amount about Hinduism and Indian culture and history. On another level, I have been pushed to adjust and refine the lenses through which I view other cultures.

With regards to learning about Hinduism, this course was quite comprehensive. We were given a great overview of the history of India and Hinduism, diving into detail when necessary. With the overview, I was able to put different aspects of the subject into a better perspective. Understanding how early Vedic culture and theism compares and contrasts with, and influences philosophy and ideology of the Vedanta and beyond brings a whole new level of understanding. We are able to see the progression that leads to where we are today and this is the most important tool to understand any subject.

On a higher level, I was challenged to engage with the material, in ways beyond the purely academic. I had to repeatedly step across cultural and temporal boundaries to attempt to understand what motivates certain traditions and beliefs. This forced me to acknowledge the parallels between my own experiences and those we find throughout Hinduism.