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The Rise of “Hinduism”; or, How to Invent a World Religion with Only Moderate Success

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Does Hinduism exist? Posing the question

The bookshelves are full of books on “Hinduism,” on what it is or may be or on features of this world religion.¹ The publishers continue to advertise and clamor for works that fall under the rubric of “Hinduism.” Such works occupy parallel space in the shelves to books on Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and so on. We are told that there are about 900 million Hindus dispersed around the world, the vast majority of whom live in India.² The experts remind us that this is a very ancient religion, with roots delving deep beyond the second millennium BCE, when faiths such as Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism were nonexistent. They point out, further, that a religious culture of such antiquity cannot but have exercised through the ages a widespread influence, by action or reaction, by migration and absorption of peoples, on the civilizations of our world right up to the present day. They enumerate the areas in which the pressures of this influence have been discernible: for example, in helping shape in all sorts of complex ways the traditions

¹ This is a modified version of the inaugural Lecture on the History and Philosophy of Hinduism, delivered under the auspices of the Mahatma Gandhi Center for Global Nonviolence at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA, on October 13, 2005. While retaining the tone of a lecture in this essay, I have made some revisions and added references and footnotes.

² For a partial breakdown of numbers by country, see Woodhead, Fletcher, Kawanami, and Smith (2002, p. 17). Woodhead’s figure for India has been revised upwards in accordance with information given in *India Today International*, September 20 (2004, p. 9), which relies on data given by the 2001 Indian census.

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of Jainism, Buddhism, Indian Islam, and Sikhism; in dispersing the narrational context, characters, and ethos of the two great religious Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* (both, in large part, about two millennia old), to many cultures in Southeast Asia and beyond; in highlighting forms of renunciation and meditation in both the ancient and modern world—the ancient Greeks viewed with interest the beliefs of the gymnosophists or naked ascetics that were encountered in north-western India (see, for example, Halbfass, 1990, pp. 3, 12), while in modern times who has not heard of New Age religion, peppered as it is in some of its modes with Hindu ideas of meditative practice and belief? It is from the ancient Hindu system of *yoga* that the West has derived today so many techniques of self-help and healthy living.³ Words like *guru*, *ahimsā* (with special reference to the life of Mohandas K. Gandhi), *ātman*, *karman*, and *mantra* have been adopted into many non-Indian languages. These are but a few examples of the widespread embeddedness of Hindu influence in the world.

“Hinduism,” thus, may be accounted a world religion *par excellence*. It is a world religion because of its numerical magnitude, the global dispersal of its adherents, and its pervasive cultural influence. This runs parallel to the growing influence in the world today—economically, politically, and culturally—of India as a “Hindu” nation by default (“by default,” because India is not officially a Hindu state in the way, for example, Saudi Arabia is officially a Muslim one; by constitution India is a “secular” state, where “secular” means that no single faith is privileged over any other by act of parliament). An impressive record then: “Hinduism,” at least by perception, is a tradition of great antiquity, very large numbers, wide-ranging influence, and continuing relevance.

Possibly. “Possibly” because it is not obvious to me what “Hinduism” is or who a Hindu might be. The monolithic understanding of Hinduism sketched above is suspect to its very roots; it gives the impression that it is something given, “out there,” static—and that those who could claim to be “Hindu” all believe and act in a regimented fashion. But this is not how I see the phenomenon we describe as “Hinduism”: I see it as dynamic, elusive, changing—in and through the diverse beliefs and practices of its adherents. Nevertheless, it is in some danger of changing today more or less into the caricature I have outlined above.

In this essay I want to inquire into how Hinduism so-called has developed from the past, to try and pin down to some extent its elusive nature, and to warn of impending dangers. In the process I hope key questions will emerge about the nature of religion and its relationship to culture, questions which, if pursued seriously, at least with reference to Hinduism, may well change the way we view the world and relate to other human beings. Surely this will pay tribute to the Hindu Mahātmā—the action-thinker *par excellence*—who though so unlike his famous contemporary, Karl Marx, in ideology, may well have adopted the latter’s philosophical maxim as a rule of life: “the aim is not to understand the world, but to change it.”

A question of origins

Where does the word “Hindu” come from? Perhaps a glance at this question will show us a path through the tangle of aporias that faces us. Descriptions, not least self-descriptions, are psychologically significant. They help determine perceptions

³ For an account of this cultural transaction, see De Michelis (2004).

and identity; they set the tone for the intercourse of human relations. They are markers, not chiefly of origins, but of journeys in the making. They are also signifiers of particular histories. As such, they are susceptible to the change of renewed interpretations. So it is with the terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism.”

So, is “Hindu”—both as the element in “Hinduism” and as the descriptor of an individual or community—an “insider” term or an “outsider” term? First, let us look at origins.

“Hindu” derives from the Sanskrit word *sindhu*, an early word for “river,” “stream,” but which in particular referred to the life-giving waters of the great river (the Indus) fed by various tributaries in the foothills of the Himālayas and flowing 3180 km in the northwest of the subcontinent to the Arabian Sea. In a derived form—*saindhavaḥ*—the word referred to the peoples who lived around the river in the region known even today as “Sindh.” We speak of words that were in use over 3500 years ago in a language, namely, Sanskrit, of a people who called themselves “Āryans” (from the word, *ārya*, meaning “noble”). It is not for us to discuss here the original homeland of this people. As is well known, this is a contentious issue, not only from the point of view of scholarship, but also in the context of modern Indian politics. The point here is that in its origins “Hindu” to some extent was an insider word, used apparently by so-called Āryans themselves to refer to at least some groups among them. “To some extent” an insider word, because outsiders also used derivatives of the term *sindhu* to refer to the inhabitants surrounding the river (hence “Indus”) and living eastwards beyond its boundary in so far as these inhabitants seemed to be unified culturally. The ancient Persians and Greeks called these people(s) “Hindus” and “Indikoi,” respectively, and much later on, before and after the rise of Islam, the Arabs called the land beyond the great river al-Hind.

This *symbiosis* between insider and outsider uses of (derivatives of) the name *sindhu* continued in various ways. Thus the great poet-saint Kabīr (fifteenth–sixteenth century CE) is reputed to have said (Kumar, 1984, pp. 21, 31):

“Gorakh! Gorakh!”
cries the Jogī
“Rām! Rām!”
says the Hindu.
“Allah is One”
proclaims the Muslim.
But...
My Lord pervades all.
The god of Hindus resides in a temple;
The god of Muslims resides in a mosque.
Who resides there
Where there are no temples
Nor mosques?

Note the use of “Hindu” here. It is a differentiating term, not least in contradistinction to “Muslim.” Indeed, Kabīr himself can hardly be characterized as either Hindu or Muslim. This differentiating use of “Hindu,” with special reference to “Muslim,” very soon took on a homogenizing turn, separating Muslims as “outsiders” from “Hindus” as people following an indigenous way of life or *dharma*. When the British arrived and began to be a dominant political force in the latter half of the eighteenth century the words “Hindu” and “Hinduism” were used in the

same way on both sides of the divide—as markers of religious and cultural identity and as agents of standardization.⁴ There are modern implications of this usage to which I shall return. But there are several features of this brief semantic history that are indicative.

Some implications of current usage

First, the word “Hindu” did not start off as a specifically *religious* term, at least in the modern sense of *religious* as connoting a set of beliefs and practices pertaining to some transcendent realm or supreme being and attributable to a particular founder. There is no discernible human founder of Hinduism, as there is of Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism, for example. In this respect, Hinduism is anomalous. The term started life as basically a *cultural* expression, referring to the way or ways of life of a culturally unified and geographically designated people, in which “religious” phenomena of course were included.

Second, notwithstanding the point made above, “Hindu” (and “Hinduism”) have displayed a volatile history. They have been used to set individuals or groups apart on the basis of cultural orientations that were perceived to fall on one side or other of the insider–outsider divide with respect to subcontinental indigeness. In this way, these terms have functioned as collectivizing expressions. The value judgments attached to them have tended to be negative or neutral from the standpoint of the outsiders, but positive in the sense of expressing various forms of solidarity and “ownership” of indigenous culture from the point of view of the insiders. These are abstract observations, of course, and require fleshing out in terms of concrete histories, but they make a point crucial to the trajectory of these appellations.

Third, the English word “Hinduism” (and indeed “Hindu”) is of comparatively recent coinage; there is evidence that it acquired some currency in the late eighteenth century in England (Sweetman, 2003, p. 56n12). It was soon adopted by Indians writing and speaking in English (the noted reformer Ram Mohan Roy seems to have been among the first Indians to use the word in 1815). It has European counterparts, of course, but let us stick to English usage here not only for reasons of convenience but also because of the great influence English has had in subcontinental history. What has been problematic about the term “Hinduism” has been its abstract form, indicated by the suffix “-ism.” In his landmark work, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith has analyzed some conceptual implications of this abstractification. He notes that it has a tendency to “reify,” that is, to make a bloc reality in our minds of the thing denoted, so that we are encouraged to think that it is a static given (Smith, 1978, p. 51, especially chapters 2–3). In other words, it is a usage with essentializing tendencies. We imbibe the impression that “Hinduism” as a religio-cultural phenomenon has an essence with fixed properties to which Hindus, in so far as they are Hindus, subscribe. This abstractification puts Hinduism on a par with other reifications such as *Judaism*, *Buddhism*, *Christianity*, and so on, even Islam (which in this context is no more than a verbal mask substituting for the now-rejected “Mohammedanism,” the original English appellation for the traditions of Muslims).

⁴ For a careful discussion of earlier stages of the concept formation involved, not only with reference to the British, see Sweetman (2003).

These reifying terms do a serious injustice to the faiths they are meant to denote, especially to Hinduism. For they play a leading part in shaping a mind-set which assumes that there is a standard form of the religion denoted. There are two unfortunate consequences of this practice. First, it sets us off on a wild-goose chase to discover the fixed characteristics, primary or secondary, of the essentialized faith in question, thereby undercutting the rich diversity of actual belief and practice. At ground level, when we engage generally with real-life believers who describe themselves as belonging to this faith or that, we cannot help being struck by the amazing *lack* of homogeneity, both diachronically and synchronically, even within the parameters of a single denomination, in their religious beliefs and practices. This is more so in the case of Hinduism. But the second undesirable consequence, it seems to me, of using reifying appellations is that they categorize adherents of the faiths in terms of disjunctive dyads which express a range of ontological and evaluative judgments, judgments that turn on the contrast between so-called “true,” “real,” or “authentic” believers and those who are deemed to be “false,” “inauthentic,” “deviant,” or “aberrant”; in short, on the contrast between a “them” and an “us,” making of some groups of people a kind of despised “other.” History has shown how the use of power in applying such judgments has filled the world with intolerance, misery, and injustice.

Images of Hinduism

I remarked earlier that Hinduism seems to have suffered especially from this tendency to essentialize, to create a bigger gap between the fiction of a homogenizing label and the fact of a rich diversity of belief and practice than exists in the case of most other faiths. I cannot launch into a justification of this claim here. But I think the following observations will provide a salient clue to recognizing how misleading the appellation “Hinduism” can be as an index of standardization. Let me begin by referring to a dominant metaphor used by a wide range of commentators to describe the phenomenon we call Hinduism, namely, the metaphor of a “jungle.”

The examples for this usage, from early outsider efforts to both insider and outsider attempts of the present day, are legion; let me alight on but two. In an interesting article, Christopher Pinney writes as follows:

Ron Inden has recently noted that throughout orientalist scholarship probably the commonest metaphor for Hinduism was that of the jungle....This was clearly argued by Sir Charles Eliot (1862–1931) who claimed that “the jungle is not a park or garden. Whatever can grow in it does grow. The Brahmans are not gardeners but forest officers” (1992, pp. 168, 171).

A more recent example can be cited from the work of the well-known scholar, R. C. Zaehner. In his book, *Hinduism*, Zaehner writes:

Hinduism is a vast and apparently incoherent religious complex, and any writer on Hinduism...must choose between producing a catalogue or school textbook which will give the student the maximum number of facts within a very limited compass, or he will attempt, at his peril, to distil from the whole mass of his material the fine essence that he considers to be the changeless ground from which the proliferating jungle that seems to be Hinduism grows (1966, p. 3).

Such talk of a “proliferating jungle” to characterize Hinduism militates against the attempt to make of it the sum of parts (namely, the various denominations) that differ from each other only incidentally. Indeed, it is talk that evokes diversity, profusion, difference, even chaos. It indicates that there is no standard thing called “Hinduism”—just as there is no single tree or plant that is characteristic of the jungle—but it also indicates, as I have hinted, that there is no principle of coherence between the various parts that make up the whole.

On the one hand, the value of the “jungle” metaphor is to indicate a form of internal diversity in Hinduism that cannot be reduced to only extraneous differences, to what we may refer to, if we are to persevere with our jungle metaphor, as accidental changes within a species of faith. The internal profusion of Hindu belief and practice is deeper than that. But, on the other hand, if the jungle trope is taken too literally, it militates against any form of internal coherence at all. “Hinduism” becomes a label for a mere aggregate of beliefs and practices brought together by the vagaries of chance or circumstance. In that case, Hinduism as a phenomenon becomes so anomalous as to be outside the pale of comparison with such traditions as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and so on. Is there no cohesive principle to keep what might otherwise be an expanding aggregate of belief and practice nevertheless a recognizably *Hindu* aggregate of belief and practice? Is there no way of detecting a principle of unity which bestows a kind of coherence to the whole we are pleased to call “Hinduism”?

I believe that there is such a cohesive principle, which acts distinctively in the universe of Hindu belief and practice, and that we may explicate it in a way that may be both religiously and culturally illuminating. This does not mean that there will be no problem cases in recognizing what may be “Hindu” on occasion—all belief and practice systems are susceptible to such uncertainty—but it also means that we have grounds for using the appellation “Hinduism” (and “Hindu”) as a distinctive label of identification. Finally, and importantly, to alight on one principle of cohesive unity does not mean that there are no others, but this is a further question with which I shall not concern myself here.

So how do we proceed? The next stage would be to look for a regulative trope that is perhaps more apt in the case of Hinduism than the jungle metaphor. Still within the bounds of arboreal symbols, I propose the model of a banyan tree (*ficus benghalensis* or *ficus indica*). Indeed, in his article Pinney goes on to mention this very symbol in the course of his discussion. “All Asiatic botany,” he observes,

provided a store of metaphors about the vastness of the East, but the banyan stressed difference as well as fecundity and complexity since, as Bernard Cohn has noted, “it grew up, out and down at the same time.”... For this reason, Cohn suggests, it was unamenable to use in standard arboreal metaphors (Pinney, 1992, p. 171).

Nevertheless,

Photographers continued to make use of the [banyan] motif. Studios such as Skeen and Scowen in Colombo produced images from the 1870s onwards which partly decontextualized and emphasized the swirling lateral growths of the roots as though to affirm that the “East” was indeed a place where simple linear dendritic symbols could not apply (Pinney, 1992, pp. 171–172).

There is one photograph in particular Pinney provides (1992, p. 172, Plate 109), which illustrates well the tendency of an ancient banyan to extend aerial roots from lofty branches down to the ground below and which may eventually develop to look like established trunks in their own right, the whole structure resembling over time a grove of many trunks which in fact constitute a single tree with its overarching canopy of interlaced branches and leaves. This, it seems to me, is a more apt model of the unity in diversity that is the phenomenon we call Hinduism than that of the jungle. In fact, I had independently introduced it in my book *Hindus* in 1994 and then developed it in an article published in *Religious Studies* in March 1996, and elaborated it further in my chapter in *The Hindu World* (Mittal and Thursby, 2004). Pinney's mention of the symbol was drawn to my attention only later.

Pinney, the anthropologist, suggests an interpretation of the banyan in relation to Hinduism that seems more subtle and ambivalent than those indicated by his earlier colonial colleagues. Referring to a plate of two low-caste Camārs given on page 170 of his essay, he says,

Perhaps this photograph is placing the Chamars as a caste in a tangled web of otherness, of spirituality, belief, and ultimately of the immaterial, the familiar realm of the "Orient." This may be so, but it seems equally convincing to turn this around and see it as an admission of defeat by colonial discourse rather than as proof of its extraordinary power to say completely opposite things which ultimately have the same meaning (Pinney, 1992, p. 172).

In other words, the picture may be decoded as pointing to "the Hindus with their banyan tree, lost in the depths of the jungle, in a dark vegetation free of the deathly illumination and scrutiny of Western science" (Pinney, 1992, p. 172). Perhaps—though I expect his Orientalist co-anthropologists would be rather put out by this interpretation. I doubt if their own take on the picture was so consciously ambivalent. However, it is interesting to record an instance, again brought to my attention, of a colonial Christian theologian this time, using the model of the banyan in relation to Hindus in a more positive way, though in language characteristic here and there of the insensitivities of the period. But the model here is applied, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, to the development of the Christian Church over the ages. "Out of the most unpromising material," avers A. G. Hogg in his *The Christian Message to the Hindu*,

[Christ] created a Church which deliberately took the whole world for its field...and which, like a great, self-spreading banyan-tree, has from its branches sent down roots into one heathen soil after another—roots which are already thickening into new trunks that will support as heavy a weight as the parent-stem. Such is the community of the Kingdom of God (1947, pp. 71–72).

An advantage of these quotations is to give a clear indication of the observational characteristics of an ancient banyan: a "self-spreading" structure, internally one, yet with apparently diverse (sy)stems of growth and development; in short, an interactive, many-centered grid of organic unity. It is this "polycentric" dimension of the banyan that I have made my own and developed as a model for the religio-culturally unified but teeming profusion perceived as "Hinduism." We must inquire into this characteristic further.

The banyan model illustrated

Let me give three representative examples of what I mean. The first is taken from the way Hindus tend to identify the authority of canonical sacred texts or “scripture.” It is well known that historically the most authoritative scripture of the Hindus is the four Vedas (or collectively, the Veda). In their present form, these began to be redacted well over 3000 years ago, their final phase being formulated not long after the beginning of the Common Era. It is not necessary for our purposes to elaborate on the content of the four Vedas. We are interested in the authoritative role they played in transmitting soteriological knowledge. As is well attested both by Hindu experts in Vedic lore and by non-Hindu scholars, Vedic texts are frequently hard to decode semantically (and have been the subject down the ages of vigorous internal religious debate). It was not long before other texts arose, at first in Sanskrit, but later in various vernaculars or regional tongues, which claimed to transmit on a more accessible level Vedic meaning and authority. The important thing is that these texts too were referred to as “Vedas,” not indeed metaphorically—as when we might say with reference to, for instance, the Bible that certain other works have become the “Bible” of cookery, or of the PC user, or of the history of football or film (in this secondary application the meaning of “Bible” is non-literal or metaphorical)—but in a *literal* sense as a form of *alternative Veda, really transmitting for the benefit of designated communities Vedic soteriology with due authority*. There are numerous examples of such texts, accepted more or less universally in the social panoply of Hinduism. Thus the Purāṇas (from about sixth century BCE onwards), compendia of diverse kinds of religious and cultural lore and divided up and enumerated in different ways by various groups of Hindus, are called collectively the “fifth Veda” (*pañcama veda*), the description suggesting that this more intelligible fifth Veda (or parts thereof), when correctly interpreted, is capable of having the same salvific effect as the “original” Veda.⁵ The famous epic story of the internecine conflict between two branches of one family, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, known as the *Mahābhārata* (ca. fifth century BCE to fifth century CE), describes itself also as the “fifth Veda,” stating with disarming self-confidence that it is “a work on a par with the Vedas and supremely purifying” (1.56.15; Poona Critical Edition). Again, as Kunal Chakrabarty (2001, pp. 188–189) has shown, certain Tantric texts (ca. sixth–seventh century CE onwards), focusing on the exploits and powers of the goddess, referred to themselves as Vedic in their salvific efficacy. In similar vein, there are devotional texts from about the seventh to tenth century CE known collectively as the Tamil Veda, and so on.

What is happening here in so distinctive a fashion? In a variety of contexts, what we have called alternative Vedas have been set up, with the recognition that they convey, when appropriately interpreted, the soteriological power of the four canonical Sanskrit Vedas. But this is not all. They are perceived to do this in so far as they coexist interactively with the “original” Vedas through one or other interpre-

⁵ Thus note the special role played in this respect by the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* for Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas.

tative strategy.⁶ “Original” Vedic authority and salvific efficacy flows dialectically between the centers under scrutiny, this relationship endorsing the original source of soteriological power. In fact, a unique *śakti* or power has been refracted and multiplied in this network, overcoming the hiatuses and responding to the needs of space, time, language, and social context. In an earlier work, I have described the dynamics of this polycentric system as follows:

This is a form of intertextuality that is both decentring and re-integrative: by virtue of its decentring tendency it can accommodate an indefinite number of members simultaneously in the nexus; in so far as it is re-integrative it is capable of sustaining itself. The dynamic of the whole permits individual members to be subtracted from or added to the grid in a more or less contingent fashion. “Vedas” can drop out of or enter the system by force of historical circumstance without impairing either the critical mass or the modality of the whole. This is one way in which polycentrism as a characteristic of the Hindu banyan expresses itself, and it is a way of tenacious survival and adaptive propagation (Lipner, 2004, p. 27).

It is also at the heart of the secret of Hindu tolerance or accommodation in religious belief and practice intradenominationally. In fact, Hinduism has not been very tolerant (socially) when it comes to the practice of ritual and caste observances, while in matters of religious belief I have also tried to show elsewhere (Lipner, 1994, pp. 180–181) that there has usually been a passion for grasping the truth rather than for taking recourse to some form of radical epistemological relativism. Nevertheless, this leaves room for some form of *epistemological*, and consequently doctrinal, tolerance in Hindu traditions so that there is some force to the dictum that Hinduism is a tolerant tradition, at least in this that there is a leading tendency to consider and accommodate other points of view seriously. It is the polycentric mentality that makes this possible. *How* polycentrism enables Vedic authority to leapfrog from one textual context to another is a separate issue, and under note 6 we have looked at a couple of strategies that may be employed.

Let us now move on to our next representative illustration of how Hindu polycentrism works. This has to do with a very visible and basic aspect of Hindu religion, namely, the worship of images. Everyone is familiar with the fact that there is a profusion of sacred images in Hinduism, both in the temple and in the home, so much so that Hindu religion is commonly (if mistakenly) described as “polytheistic,” that is, as having “many gods.” Indeed, the unwary Hindu himself or herself often appears to connive in fostering this description. But a little bit of Socratic questioning or study of the matter will show how misleading “polytheism” is as a

⁶ We can mention two such strategies here: (i) that the original Vedas are “special revelation,” restricted to the twice-born castes, while the alternative Veda is a case of more “general revelation” (see Lipner, 2004, pp. 27–28), and (ii) that the original Veda is a form of implicit revelation which is made (increasingly) explicit in subsequent texts. For example, in his *Tattvārthadīpanibandha* (38), the fifteenth-century theologian Vallabha declares: “In the early part [of the Veda], Kṛṣṇa appears as the sacrifice (*yajñarūpaḥ*), in the later [Upaniṣadic portion], he appears as Brahman, [in the *Bhagavad Gītā*] he is the *avatārin* [god in human form], but in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Kṛṣṇa appears clearly [as himself].”

description of Hindu religiosity. In general, it is not polytheism but a form of polycentrism.⁷ Let me explain.

In accordance with earlier remarks I have made, the banyan of Hinduism contains a vast array of different sects, cults, and denominations, each with its own stem system of worship and belief, connected textually, mythologically, socially, and so on, in complex ways with the network of the whole (tracing these complex connections in particular cases in the context of the banyan model would constitute the object, I believe, of illuminating research). Now let us consider a particular stem system—“center” in the polycentric model—in which Viṣṇu is worshipped as the supreme being, namely, Tamil Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. For Śrī Vaiṣṇavas, there is only one supreme being, who is named Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa’s consort, the Goddess Śrī (hence “Śrī Vaiṣṇavism”), is an integral part of the godhead so to speak, perceived not as fragmenting the underlying unity of the divine being but rather as coexisting with Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa in a kind of binitarian relationship somewhat analogous metaphysically to Christian Trinitarianism. In fact, the two divine “centers” of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa and Śrī relate dialectically in such a fashion that they share and express, each in their own way with particular reference to ritual, narrative, and so on, among devotees, the same divine power and graciousness.⁸ Further, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa manifests in various modes, specific to time and place, for example, as the *avatāras* Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva or Narasiṃha in mythic history or as this or that *persona* in one temple or other, in accordance with his gracious will. All these further manifestations, which may have their own cultic practices, are actual manifestations of the same godhead, endorsing and reinforcing each other through a dialectical grid that draws its authority theologically from the same ultimate source. All coexist, if not simultaneously (and an indefinite number *can* coexist simultaneously), then in the same mutually interactive framework of divine efficacy.

There is a further dimension to this polycentric grid: other “gods” and “goddesses”—themselves perhaps supreme centers in one particular stem system or other of the Hindu banyan—“gods” and “goddesses” such as Śiva or Gaṇeśa or Rādhā or Kālī—may also be accommodated, perhaps with their own specificities of ritual, worship, and mythology, as lesser but interrelated centers in the dispensation of the whole. The entire far-flung system functions in that it is a *theologically* unified network of textual, metaphysical, mythological, ritual, and social centripetal and centrifugal forces.

First, this is not polytheism but a kind of polymorphic monotheism. There is only one godhead manifesting variously. Second, it is a polycentric reality in that the “divine” centers of the system—higher and lower, with their own sometimes apparently conflicting cultic histories—are interpreted as actual expressions of the one ultimate godhead, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. Further—and this is important—the Śrī Vaiṣṇava (stem) system itself is but one center among many in the extensive tracery of the Hindu banyan, drawing its distinctive life force from the shared environment of the whole.

In scope and practice, I believe there is nothing quite like this in the religious expression of any other world faith. The many denominations of so-called main-

⁷ “In general”: it may well be that there are instances of polytheism under the vast canopy of Hinduism. My claim is that their number is far fewer than suspected and, further, that there is no polytheism in the Sanskritic theological systems that by consensus act as the norm.

⁸ For some idea of the theology involved, see, for example, Narayanan (1982).

stream Christianity, for instance, admit of no other text on a par with the Bible, converge on but one name by which all must be saved, do not admit of various incarnational or other forms of the deity *coexisting in and through different cultic practices*, and have hardly developed a theology of inclusiveness (that is, with respect to *intra-Christian denominations*, leave alone non-Christian faiths). Most important of all, perhaps—and this is where they depart radically from the ethos of polycentrism—they *seek inherently to polarize*, to prioritize the centripetal forces of authority and belief over the centrifugal, rather than to maintain the two in a form of life that is expressed in the tensive equilibrium that characterizes the dialectical grid of polycentrism. Judaism and Islam seem to exhibit on the whole an even sharper contrast with Hinduism in this respect. In short, theologically, I do not find the Abrahamic faiths in their present forms essentially polycentric at all. (Note that this is intended to be a descriptive rather than evaluative comment).

We now come to our final example of Hindu polycentrism. To show that this form of life expresses itself beyond the purely religious (if there is such a thing), let me cite an observation from the work of Ronald Inden. In his *Imagining India* he writes:

When we consider that all rivers were said ultimately to originate from the Gaṅgā, when we take into account the fact that some of the *Purāṇas* refer to the Godavari and the Krishna, the rivers constituting the imperial domains of the Rashtrakutas [in middle eastern India], as Gaṅgās of the south, when we remember that the Rasktrakutas were talking about these topographical features [namely, mount Kailāsa of the north and the Gaṅgā of the northeast] *not simply as physical places, but as the domains of purposive agents interacting with time, country, universal king and cosmic overlord to make and remake a divinized polity*, it all makes good sense (1990, p. 259; emphasis added).

In other words, there are repeated occurrences historically where the “original” holy Gaṅgā flowing physically in one part of the land, becomes re-expressed in rivers elsewhere and sacred mount Kailāsa located in the Himālayas is re-identified in mountains elsewhere so that their re-centered efficacy becomes the legitimating base of the polities of these regions. Through this process of diffusion, the authority of the original is dispersed to its new centre(s), and what is more, such dispersion is perceived to “make sense” all round. The world is re-ordered and political order re-framed. It would be interesting to discern whether modern liaisons among political parties in India conform to some mode of the polycentric model (in some cases perhaps without the religious overtones).

There are numerous other examples of polycentrism in action to characterize the Hindu way of life in various domains, and I have considered some of these elsewhere (see Lipner, 2004). But we must now move on to the final part of this essay, namely, to a consideration of how Hinduism is being “modernized” in some circles in a way that militates against its established polycentric characteristics. This represents an invented form of Hinduism, but, as I hope to indicate, with only dubious success.

A modern form of hinduism, or how to invent a religion

The *locus classicus* for this process can be traced to the interaction between members of the Hindu intelligentsia, on the one hand, and British administrators and missionaries in particular, on the other, in early nineteenth-century Bengal. By then the colonial project had been well established, and Bengal was emerging as the prize of the British

East India Company. Already in his famous “Minute of 1835 on Indian Education” to the Supreme Council of the colonial government in Calcutta, Thomas Babington Macaulay, president of the influential Committee of Public Instruction, had announced what was to become the policy of the British administration:

We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them some foreign language....What then shall that language be?....I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic.... But...I have never found one [Orientalist]...who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia....The claims of our own language [English] it is hardly necessary to recapitulate....I think it is clear that...English is better worth knowing than Sanscrit or Arabic[,]...that it is possible to make natives of this country thoroughly good English scholars, and that to this end our efforts ought to be directed (1967, pp. 722, 729).⁹

Thus English education was to be the medium of higher instruction in the land, and to be fair, for their own reasons this was a policy avidly endorsed by the Indian elite on the whole. In other words, now that this challenging intercultural encounter had fully engaged at the level of the elites in a tongue that had shaped the thought processes of one side, influential Hindu Bengalis sought to characterize their ancestral faith and some of its leading figures as equal counterparts of the religion of their political masters. Conceptual steps were taken to show that “Hinduism” was really monotheistic, part of the divine dispensation to know and worship “the one, true god,” and that Hindu polytheism and Brāhmanic priestcraft were corrupting accretions (for example, Ram Mohan Roy); that the “discriminatory practices” of the age-old caste system were likewise corruptions of an originally egalitarian revelation with a social message teaching human equality between the sexes and the castes (for example, the Brāhmo Samāj, and later Svāmī Vivekānanda) and that this model of Hinduism was one up on its rival, Christianity, in that it could accommodate more easily the (Western) advances of reason and science (for example, the Brāhmo Samāj, Svāmī Vivekānanda, Bankimcandra Chatterji). Indeed, on one quite contemporary reconstruction, it was Hinduism through its monistic essence that was the one, true faith of humanity, absorbing hierarchically all other forms of religion at their best and generating a strong impulse towards universal egalitarianism and harmony (for example, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan¹⁰).

But to return to nineteenth-century Bengal: a spate of books, pamphlets, and articles appeared setting up Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva either implicitly or explicitly as a rival of Christ and as a form of hero or savior in a nascent nationalist movement. On this reading, the profusion or “jungle” of traditions that seemed to characterize traditional Hinduism was on the whole either an aberration or unfortunate mask for what in effect was a monocentric ancestral faith. These attempts were to a large extent inclusivistic of other peoples and cultures: endeavors to show that the “real” Hinduism could accommodate or match what was best particularly in the dominant religio-cultural structures of the West, with special reference to the British.

But before long, and still in the latter half of the nineteenth century, this process of re-invention for an emerging polity, in Bengal and elsewhere in India, took on, to

⁹ To make my point clear, I have transposed one or two sentences in this extract.

¹⁰ I have discussed this trait of Radhakrishnan’s thought in Lipner (1989).

my mind, a sinister turn. Burdened by history, a line of thinkers began to construct a Hinduism that was *exclusivistic*, characterized by the property of *hindutva* or “hinduness.” We see this term crop up in contexts that appear, on the one hand, to actively homogenize all those considered to be Hindus, dismissing or minimizing their religious differences, and, on the other, to keep at bay all those described as non-Hindus. *Hindutva* becomes a marker, with cumulative effect as time marches on, for a polarized distance between Hindus and non-Hindus (with Muslims, primarily, and to a lesser extent, Christians, being the target groups for this latter category). A watershed for this way of thinking, with special reference to politics in modern India, occurs in the work of the militant thinker, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), whose project Klaus Klostermaier describes as follows:

[He] fought...for a violent liberation of India under the Hindu banner from everything foreign, and a complete restoration of Hindu ideas and Hindu society....In his essay “Hindutva” he developed the outlines of the new Hindu India. He distinguished between *Hindu-dharma*, Hinduism as a religion, which is divided into countless *sampradayas*, and *Hindutva*, Hindudom [*sic*] as the unifying socio-cultural background of all Hindus (1994, p. 463).

But what are the distinguishing criteria of Hindus qua Hindus according to this point of view? In his important tract, “Essentials of Hindutva,” Savarkar wrote:

A Hindu...is...[one] who feels attachments to the land that extends from *sindhu* to *sindhu* [sea] as the land of his forefathers—as his Fatherland; who inherits the blood of the great race...which[,] assimilating all that was incorporated and ennobling all that was assimilated[,] has grown into and come to be known as the Hindu people; and who, as a consequence of the foregoing attributes, has inherited and claims as his own...the Hindu civilization, as represented in a common history, common heroes, a common literature, a common art, a common law and a common jurisprudence, common fairs and festivals, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments (1964, p. 64).

Note the emphasis on territory, race, and commonality to the exclusion of religio-cultural difference—a reflection of the very way in which the foreign element (be it British or Christian, Muslim or Islam) tended to be perceived in the land—as distinguishing attributes of *hindutva* (which I think is more correctly translated as “Hinduness”). There is a radical departure here from the polycentric phenomenon, so accommodating of plurality, which I described earlier as characterizing the traditional Hindu way of life. Though the distinguishing attributes may vary to some extent, modern positions on the nature of Hinduness adopted by Savarkar’s heirs continue to polarize Hindus from non-Hindus in terms of unicentric structures of thought and practice. We cannot go into this here, but all India-watchers will be aware of this trend coming to the fore in Indian politics especially in the last decade or so.

Whither Hinduism, whither India?

Because of the interplay of these conflicting traditional and modern tendencies, Hinduism, and indeed India today (since over 80 percent of Indians are generally designated as Hindus), are at a critical fork in the road. Which kind of influence will prevail as India takes its place in an increasingly globalized world? There is a crucial

decision here that will affect the lives of billions by way of fallout, not only in India, but also in an already politically tense subcontinent and beyond. Will Hinduism as a religion endorse its polycentric, plurality-accommodating nature, extending this dynamic further to encompass other faiths, or will it become increasingly unicentric and contentious? Note that, in my assessment of the matter, polycentrism itself is a powerful means of non-violent survival, a creative yet traditional form of *ahimsā* that one presumes the Mahātmā would endorse.

Will Indian politics, with its numerically superior Hindu component, work out polycentric strategies towards harmony and progress; or will it, in accordance with the new form of Hinduism that has emerged over the last hundred years or so (and which is developing under the shadow of *hindutva*), adopt monocentric structures that cannot but lend themselves to confrontation? These are critical questions that have been brewing in the proverbial melting pot, and decisions must be made with an urgency that presses upon us. It remains for all those who value not only the Mahātmā's message to us but also Hinduism's traditional contributions to the rich alterities of life to enter with serious intent into this epochal debate.

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