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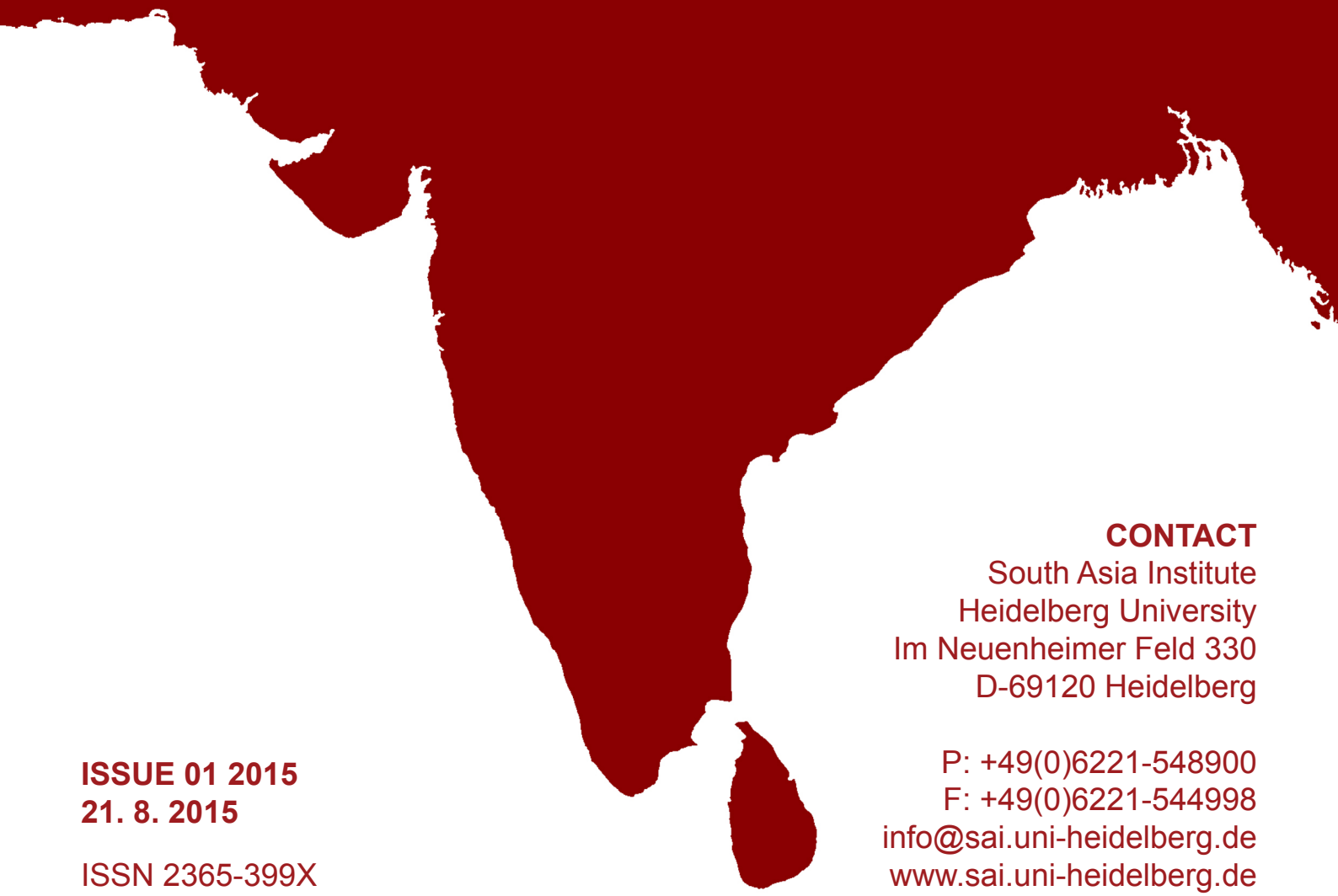
"Hinduism" and the Problem of Self-Actualisation in the Colonial Era: Critical Reflections



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“Hinduism” and the Problem of Self-Actualisation in the Colonial Era: Critical Reflections

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This paper is the text of a lecture delivered at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg, on May 20, 2015, with footnotes added. It discusses how scholarly perceptions of colonial Hinduism have visibly shifted trajectory over the years. Relating how Hinduism has moved from being ‘discovered’ in the eighteenth century to be seen as discursively ‘invented’ or ‘imagined’ in the nineteenth, it argues that in colonial India, internally generated debates about the origin and nature of Hinduism paralleled ascriptions originating outside but failed to attract adequate attention. It also seeks to ask if not also to definitively answer certain key theoretical questions. For instance, even allowing for the fact that social and religious identities are always porous, does it still make sense to ask if unstable and fluid perceptions of the self too were invested with some meaning?

I

His Excellency, M. Sevela Naik, Consul General of India at Munich; Prof. Gerrit Kloss, Dean, Philosophical Faculty; Prof. Stefan Klonner, Executive Director, SAI; Professor Gita Dharampal Frick, Head, Department of History, SAI; Dr. Martin Gieselmann, Executive Secretary; SAI, Dr. Eleonore Schmitt, Librarian, SAI; and other distinguished members of this audience. Thank you all for coming.

When speaking about religion in general and on Hinduism in particular, Heidelberg is undoubtedly a more encouraging and safer platform than those available back home. Within many influential streams of the Indian

academia, the choice of a subject such as this one, I fear, may well be dismissed as regressive or reactionary both in its orientation and content. It is only apt, therefore, that I use this occasion to express my anguish and concern at the fact that notwithstanding the richness and diversity of Indian religious culture, there are less than half a dozen institutions within India today which seriously engage with the academic study of religion. Sadly, some institutions appear to do so in the name of political correctness; they encourage the study of comparative religion only in as much as this lends strength to our ‘secular’ fabric. As an academic discipline in India, religion fares rather poorly; in many cases, it is the last refuge for students and scholars who have been unable to secure higher rated disciplines or more lucrative vocations. The case for “Hinduism” is particularly bad. Whereas even the University of Oxford in the U.K. hosts the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, there is no comparable institution worth the name in Hindu majority India.

In the presentation that I am about to make before you this evening I intend to put across essentially two points of criticism. First, I argue that claims that have been made about a pre-existing “Hinduism” being either discovered in the eighteenth century or else its being ‘imagined’ or ‘invented’ in the nineteenth, are both outsider perceptions and do not adequately take on board the question of just how the Hindus might have dealt with this question at given historical conjunctures. But even when looking for internally generated debates and differences, we often end up with a confusion of heuristic categories. Particularly in the context of colonial India, it is commonplace to conflate intellectual representations of “Hinduism” with attempts to determine it in cultural or religious terms. This is a point well worth pondering since no religion or cultural system is exhausted by acts of cognition alone. It is my belief that what colonial India witnessed was not so much a debate on “Hinduism” itself as contesting Hindu hermeneutics. A closer look at this phenomenon such as I shall attempt in the course of this lecture, will reveal some muddled thinking, palpably on account of two reasons. In British India, representations of “Hinduism” originated in a new class of interpreters who adopted western categories of thought even when expressing themselves in the vernacular. Colonial “Hinduism” was rarely, if

ever, represented by traditional Hindu scholars and exegetes, who might have preferred to communicate through purely indigenous idioms of self-expression. On the contrary, there are known instances of traditional Hindu scholars and missionaries quite speciously attempting to rationalise older Hindu thought and praxis by using the language of modern science and only ending up in acutely embarrassing their Anglophone compatriots. Such was the power of 'English language Hinduism'. Second, it would be important to remember that to an extent, muddled thinking also arose in the fact that acts of interpretation or re-interpretation aimed not so much at self-understanding as presenting apologetic projections of the Hindu self before non-Hindus.

I begin with the observation that the terms "Hindu" and "Hinduism" ordinarily function more as a noun than an adjective.[1] It is far easier to define the Christian 'calling' or the Islamic 'path' than the Hindu 'way of life' that eminent Hindu thinkers and scholars like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan or Chakravarti Rajagopalachari have tried to formulate. To a student or scholar researching "Hinduism" it would be also quite evident that over time, academic views on the subject, if not also general public opinion, has undergone a palpable paradigm shift. Broadly speaking, this rests on three inter-related and acutely revisionist critiques. First, there is the problem of origin or the historically determined age for "Hinduism". In 1970, Peter J. Marshall had reason to believe that British travellers, missionaries and colonial administrators had come to 'discover' Hinduism in the eighteenth century; closer to our time, Geoffrey A. Oddie has argued that in truth, this had been only 'imagined' by the same classes of people in the nineteenth.[2]

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1 An observation also made by Rajmohan Gandhi in his review of Srinivasan, Vasanthi (2014): *Hindu Spirituality and Virtue Politics*; Los Angeles, SAGE Publications. Cf. Gandhi, Rajmohan (2015), *The Book Review* (New Delhi), 31.4, 4.

2 Peter J. Marshall (ed.) (1970): *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century;* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Oddie, Geoffrey A. (2006): *Imagined Hinduism. British Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793–1900*; New Delhi, SAGE Publications. The argument of Hinduism being 'invented' typically occurs in Heinrich von Stietencron (1989): 'Hinduism. On the proper use of a deceptive term'; in: Sontheimer, Günther Dietz & Hermann Kulke (eds.): *Hinduism Reconsidered*; New Delhi, Manohar; Dalmia, Vasudha & Heinrich von Stietencron (eds.) (1995): *Representing Hinduism. The*

Arguments similar to the one made by Oddie have often been coupled with the claim that the cultural and religious formation commonly called "Hinduism" did not exist in nature or originate in the historical and cultural experience of the Hindus themselves. On the contrary, this is seen as a synthetic category born of contrivance, 'an orchid bred by European scholarship' as one scholar has chosen to call it.[3] Third, existing alongside such critiques are mounting doubts expressed about whether or not "Hinduism" at all fits the conceptual category of 'religion'.[4] W.C. Smith's observation, made some five decades back about "Hinduism" being a 'particularly false conceptualisation', has only gained in strength in thoughts articulated since that time.[5]

Currently, the reigning discourse on this question is that rather than the timeless and continuous religious tradition that it was believed to be not so long ago, "Hinduism" may justly be proclaimed as the youngest of 'world-religions'. At times, this is joined to the claim that effectively, the Hindu can do without any discernible religious convictions. "The chief concern of Hindu religious conviction is not the existence or non-existence of God or whether there is one God or many gods", a scholar writes, "Hindus can choose to be monotheists, polytheists, pantheists, atheists, agnostics, dualists, monists or pluralists".[6] J.A.B. van Buitenen, writing for the Encyclopaedia Britannica, has even gone to the extent of claiming that "[…] a Hindu may embrace a non-Hindu religion without ceasing to be a Hindu". In effect, this creates the extraordinary possibility of a Hindu not having to be a Hindu in order to be a Hindu![7] Such perceptions stand in visible contrast to the view, hitherto

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Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity; London, SAGE Publications.

3 Küng, Hans & Heinrich von Stietencron (2005): *Christentum und Weltreligionen II: Hinduismus*; München, Piper; cited in Llewellyn, J.E. (ed.) (2005): *Defining Hinduism. A Reader*; London, Equinox; p. 11.

4 Fitzgerald, Timothy (2005): 'Problems with "Religion" as a Category for Understanding Religion'; in: Llewellyn, *Defining Hinduism*, 171–201.

5 Smith, Wilfred Cantwell (1963): *The Meaning and End of Religion. A Revolutionary Approach to the Great Religious Traditions*; New York, Macmillan.

6 Nigosian, Solomon A. (2000): *World Religions. An Historical Approach*; Boston, Bedford/St. Martin's; p. 20; cited in Llewellyn, *Defining Hinduism*, p. 4.

7 van Buitenen, J.A.B. (1974): "Hinduism"; in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 5; Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 519–58; p. 519; quoted in Brian K. Smith: "Ques-

commonly accepted, that although not a creedal religion like Christianity, "Hinduism" has long been invested with a doctrinal core, deviation from which would amount to ceasing, at least in an intellectual sense, to be a Hindu.[8] Further, to argue that "Hinduism" has had no natural state of existence implicitly leads to the highly dubious claim that other religions like Christianity or Islam were naturally born and not determined by historical or cultural changes.

The difficulties in defining "Hinduism" also spring from the fact that at no point of time were the several definitions offered applicable to all Hindus even though things were often made to look that way. It is quite unlikely that within the "Hindu" tradition, conformity rested on 'intellectual' grounds alone across the community of people that might have called themselves "Hindu". Intellectual and textual accounts of "Hinduism" have not always documented lived religion and conversely, what is often deemed to be 'religious' in the everyday life of the Hindu, has not always found a place in textual studies on "Hinduism". I take it, therefore, that particularly in the context of colonial India, the characteristic qualities attached to "Hinduism", whether in a positive sense or the exasperatingly negative, originates not so much in the commonplace, pedestrian Hindu but members of the modern, Anglophone Hindu intelligentsia who have been actively engaged with heuristic problems of meaning or definition for over two centuries now. The latter are better understood as interpreters of "Hinduism" than its active practitioners; closer to the cultural construct of 'religion' than to matters of active faith. Such people did not habitually visit holy shrines and temples nor did they reveal any palpable interest in the ritual acts governing the daily life of the Hindu. They had practically very little knowledge or understanding of Vedic literature even when identifying that with the Hindu canon and lacked a working knowledge of the Sanskrit language which they otherwise saw as constituting both an inner unity of Hindu thought and the

tioning Authority: Construction and Deconstruction of Hinduism"; in: Llewellyn, *Defining Hinduism*, p. 109.

8 Young, Richard Fox (1981): *Resistant Hinduism. Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth Century India*; Vienna, De Nobili Research Institute; p. 140.

pan-Indian spread of Hindu religious culture. Finally, even as interpreters of their tradition, the modern Hindu intelligentsia was deeply divided. In nineteenth century India, when critical questions about what it meant to be a Hindu arose with some regularity, there also appeared deep differences over questions of authority, authenticity and canon. Consider for example, the question of Vedas as the accepted canon for Hindus. Among modern Hindu reformers both Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) and Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824–83) speak consistently of the Vedas, but their understanding and acceptance of these texts were very differently located. Rammohan Roy treated the *Upaniṣad*s synonymously with the Vedas and had virtually no knowledge of the *Saṃhitā*s which Dayanand, to offer a striking contrast, took as representing the core of Vedic wisdom. The spiritual successors of Rammohan Roy quite radically rejected the Vedas as *pramāṇa* (authority) and put together a religious source-book, which, contrary to past practice, was culled from both śruti and *smṛti.*[9] And whereas the Brahmos persistently displayed a broad cosmopolitanism and interest in non-Indic religious cultures, Dayanand's *Satyārth Prakāś* was notoriously intolerant of these. It occurs to me, therefore, that even when re-interpreting or re-orienting the "Hindu" tradition, it was not easy for the modern Hindu intelligentsia to determine the exact nexus between values and structure, between idealistic visions and historical contingencies. Hence, it still remains a moot question as to whether the social and religious reforms initiated by this class made way for a 'unified Hinduism' or such reform itself postulated a unified religious system for the Hindus.

In this paper, I proceed with the assumption that though elusive and difficult to pin down as a definitional category, there did exist in pre-colonial India, a certain cognitive view of the world or of life within it that may be called "Hindu". That being said, one needs to be careful about leap-frogging across historical time by locating a continuum between medieval Indian doxography that brought together various Hindu philosophical schools

9 I am referring here to the two-volume *Brāhmodharmagrantha* (1849) of Devendranath Tagore, which, quite uniquely, incorporated theological and philosophical ideas from the *Upaniṣad*s, *smṛti* texts and *tantra*. Republished (n.y.) Kolkata, SBS Publications.

and the rhetoric of a unified "Hinduism" born in colonial India. "In unifying the āstika philosophical schools", Andrew Nicholson writes in his *Unifying Hinduism,* "Vijñānabhikṣu and his contemporaries made possible the world religion later known by the name Hinduism".[10] Such formulations can be problematic. For one, within colonial "Hinduism", the intellectual foundations of Hindu 'unity' lay not in any acclaimed philosophical coherence but apparently its very opposite—the hierarchized privileging of some philosophical schools over others. From Rammohan Roy down to Radhakrishnan, there has been a pronounced tendency to treat non-dualist Vedanta (*advaita vedānta*) alone as quintessential Indian thought. This, in itself, poses a problem yet unresolved in contemporary scholarship.[11] Second, it would be reasonable to say that in colonial India as contrasted with the pre-colonial, the Hindu mind was faced with a palpably different order of challenges. Nineteenth century Hindu press and literature is replete with references to how Islam and the Muslims, when compared to the Christian (and modern) West, failed to throw an active moral and intellectual challenge to the Hindus. The nature of the Hindu-Muslim dialogue in pre-modern India, it is important to remember, was intrinsically religious, a fact that proved critical since religions, by themselves, have been known to be the most resistant to change.[12] Barring few exceptions, the Indo-Muslim ruling class produced no active or systematized critique of contemporary Hindu theology or of the *jāti* system. The colonized Hindu, by comparison, was confronted with a two-pronged assault that deftly combined a theological contempt for the heathen with secular-scientific critiques of traditional Indian society and culture. Rev. Alexander Duff (1806–78), notwithstanding his success with securing converts in early nineteenth century Bengal (some of whom were

10 Nicholson, Andrew J. (2011): *Unifying Hinduism. Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History*; New Delhi, Permanent Black; p. 6.

11 See for instance Daya Krishna's treatment of this subject in Krishna, Daya (2002): *Developments in Indian Philosophy from Eighteenth Century onwards. Classical and Western*; Delhi, Motilal Banarsidas; p. 40; Appendix I, pp. 345–61.

12 See Sen, Amiya P. (2007): 'The Idea of Social Reform and its Critique among Hindus of Nineteenth Century India'; in: Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi (ed.): *Development of Modern Indian Thought and the Social Sciences*; New Delhi, Oxford University Press/Centre of Studies in Civilizations; p. 115.

Brahmins) believed that the philosophical and the scientific discourse of the contemporary West would more effectively shake the foundations of Hindu society than the acknowledged moral and theological superiority of Christianity.[13] In post-Enlightenment Europe itself, there was a discernible tendency to gloss over the differences hitherto separating the scientific spirit from the evangelist. The successors of Locke and Newton did come to believe that disseminating modern, secular education was no less God's work than propagating the 'truths' of the Gospel. Even allowing for Nicholson's argument that the synthetic forging of Hindu philosophical unity, chiefly by the Vedantins, had peaked by the sixteenth century,[14] there still remains the historical time separating this period from early colonial India, the intellectual contours of which are not as definitively known. Advaita Vedanta itself, to cite an apt example, does not appear to have enjoyed the exalted intellectual standing between the sixteenth and eighteen centuries that it increasingly gained after Raja Rammohan Roy.[15] In early nineteenth century Bengal, where the first forays into 'reformed' religion were made, the local intelligentsia came to reveal a startling ignorance of *śruti* literature, hitherto accepted as canonical. Around 1815, when Rammohan Roy started translating and commenting upon select Upanishads, his orthodox adversaries accused him of dealing with texts that were forgeries.[16] Rammohan Roy's critics, however, met with deep embarrassment when told that the Raja's most worthy opponent, Pandit Mritunjay Vidyalankar (1762–1811) possessed a personal library that housed the best local collection of *śruti* manuscripts.[17] This leads me to believe that the failure of the Hindu intelligentsia to more actively locate greater doctrinal coherence in their tradition points to a qualitative decline in contemporary Hindu scholarship. In his seminal essay,

13 Cited in Basu, Shamita (2002): *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse. Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth Century Bengal*; New Delhi, Oxford University Press; p. 46.

14 Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism*, pp. 1–23.

15 See note 12 above.

16 Robertson, Bruce Carlisle (1995): *Raja Rammohan Ray. The Father of Modern India*; New Delhi, Oxford University Press; pp. 1–9.

17 Ibid.

'The Renaissance of India', Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) makes the point that the West might have caught the Indian mind when it was intellectually at its weakest.[18]

Over time, I have also come to entertain the feeling that the substance and strength of Hindu orthopraxy has been somewhat overstretched. Such a view is possible even when allowing for the fact that in the Hindu tradition, the mechanisms of control are more structural than doctrinal. Contemporary India amply demonstrates that "Hinduism" has survived the visible weakening of caste structures in everyday life and this is visible even in those politicized Hindu groups or communities that openly adhere to the idea of a unified Hinduism. Perhaps the problem also lies elsewhere. Quite often, the academic study of religion arrogates to itself the right or authority to decide the boundaries of a religious community or what constitutes 'orthodoxy'. I am persuaded to raise this especially to counter the view that 'religions' have virtually no existence outside the academia.[19] Now, in the context of "Hinduism", it would be one thing to question the 'superiority' that the Brahmins assign to themselves within the Hindu social and religious order and quite another to deny them the right or authority to create a doctrinal cover under which smaller and even mutually contesting religious particularisms may grow and flourish. If, therefore, there can be no one way of defining the "Hindu", this would at least partly appear to follow from the possibility that the term 'religion' itself may be differently conceptualized in various traditions. In the 1880s, when the noted Hindu-Bengali novelist and thinker, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhayay (1838–94) attempted to reduce the singularly complex term *dharma* to the category of a normative 'religion', he was in effect trying to foist an axiomatic moral and philosophical Truth upon a complex variety of social and cultural praxis.[20] Bankim Chandra

18 Sri Aurobindo (1951): *The Renaissance in India*; Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Asram; p. 25. The work was originally serialized in the journal *Arya* between August and November, 1918.

19 Jonathan Smith, quoted in Smith, *Questioning Authority,* p. 120.

20 See his *Dharmmatattva* (1888). This work is available in an English translation, cf. Ray, Apratim (2003): *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Dharmatattva*, with an introduction by Amiya P. Sen; New Delhi, Oxford University Press. The original Bengali text is

was just as aware as any of us that in the Hindu tradition, the term *dharma* carried a multiplicity of meanings, ranging from the social and pragmatic to the cosmic and transcendental and yet, as I have argued elsewhere, for him the pursuit of *dharma* also underscored no less an arduous spiritual apprenticeship (*sādhanā*) as the awakening of modern notions of civic responsibility.[21] Bankim Chandra, incidentally, also anticipates contemporary scholarship in arguing that "Hinduism" was not one but several religions[22]. And yet, he also believed that a unified view of religion was possible within his tradition, provided that unity was not taken to be an absolute identity but close-knit affiliations and family resemblances. Perhaps it is in allowing this interplay of thought and structure and not their mutual exclusion that we may better understand how within the Hindu tradition, centering co-exists with de-centering, centripetal forces with the centrifugal, in a delicate balancing act that has demonstrably stood the test of time. This also enables us to understand "Hinduism" as a social and cultural category that combines the plasticity of orthopraxy with the fixity of certain given values. 'Truth' in the Hindu world-view is not necessarily doctrinal truth and it is equally the case that "Hinduism" does not judge other religions through the categories of 'truth' and 'falsehood'.[23] On the contrary, what fortifies this world-view is the transcendental nature of Truth, never fully cognisable to the limited human mind. Individual experiences draw meaning from this larger and trans-worldly Truth. Hindu orthopraxy, when taken outside this synoptic model, represents only bewildering epistemic infirmity with no foundations in validating thought or practice. A purely relative theory of values, after all, cannot really be a theory of values.

It was in the nineteenth century more than ever before that the colonized

available in J.C. Bāgal (ed.) (1990): *Baṅkim Racanābalī* (Collected Works of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya), vol. 2; Kalikātā, Sāhitya Saṃsad, 584–679.

21 Sen Amiya P. (2010): *Explorations in Modern Bengal. C. 1800–1900. Essays on Religion, History and Culture*; Delhi, Primus Books; p. 154.

22 Sen, Amiya P. (2011): 'Introduction'; in: Sen, Amiya P. (ed.): *Bankim's Hinduism. An Anthology of Writings by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay*; Delhi, Permanent Black, 3–41.

23 Balgangadhara, S.N. (2012): *Reconceptualizing India Studies*; Delhi, Oxford University Press; pp. 205–6.

Hindu came to realize how the use of ‘Hindu’ as a term of self-description amounted to an alienation of the self since such use had origins in a culture that was non-Hindu. This realisation would have struck him with greater acuity in a cultural environment that was already under some interpretative stress. In colonial India, Hindus had been increasingly forced to acknowledge that a homogenised identity, based on some social consensus was pivotal to any progressive transformation of the self and society. At the time, new instruments of bureaucratic control such as the census clearly favoured aggregation and vastly exaggerated the value of numbers. And yet, the term “Hindu”, as we know, was also quite often a residual category that included peoples who could not for some reason call themselves non-Hindu. I imagine that given the circumstances, the determination of “Hindu-ness” assumed an importance comparable to that associated with the assessment of numerical strength. Evidently, it was no longer enough to assume that there was a community that could call itself “Hindu”; the Hindu had also to be sufficiently aware of just what supported this self-description.

The use of the label ‘Hindu’, as I have hinted above, was not always flattering. Among other things, it historicized social and religious labels whereas what ‘reformed’ Hindus now needed more urgently was a ‘past’ as different from mere history, a trope that flattened time and created romantic visions of a flowing, uninterrupted continuum. It was hence that the colonized Hindu was pushed to place ‘religion’ before society as the site for all social change. There was something visibly contingent about society, framed as it was by time and space; by comparison, the building blocks for religion were seen to lie outside recorded history and in timeless values. “We are asked what good is your religion to your society”, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) once complained. “Society is made the test of truth. Now this is very illogical. Society is only a stage in the growth which we are passing [through]. Society is good at a certain stage but it cannot be an ideal, it is

constant flux".[24] Understandably, this 'religion' also came to be associated more with principles than personalities, a strategy that helped it appear more rational and universal. Whereas in the 1880s, Bankim Chandra had taken some pains to project Krishna as a historical personality,[25] some Hindus hereafter were never weary of arguing that the enduring quality about "Hinduism" lay precisely in the fact that it had no historically established founder.[26] At a public lecture organized by some Hindu reformists at Bombay, G.Y. Chitnis, a spokesperson for the Brahmo Samaj, was persuaded to speak of the 'great danger' into which all historical religions fell. "They seek to avoid the danger either by adapting their creeds to the need of the time spirit or by making historical criticism subservient to their particular theological bias", Chitnis warned. "In both cases, there is violence done either to religion or to historical criticism".[27] Quite clearly, such an argument was fraught with immense strategic value. It encouraged the turning back on the relativism of newly emerging disciplines like history and anthropology, the questioning of religions that claimed to have been founded on historically unique revelations and the rejection of utilitarian perspectives by which religions in India particularly had come to be judged. In hindsight, this also explains the recurring attempt within the colonial Hindu discourse (down to the days of Gandhi) to fall back on the older but consciously de-historicized term, *sanātan*, literally meaning that which was ageless and eternal.[28] This move clearly carried great strategic value. It supported the proposition that the 'purity' or the 'authenticity' of a tradition could be best judged in terms

24 Cited in Sen, 'The Idea of Social Reform', p. 130.

25 In his *magnum opus, Kṛṣṇacaritra* (1886). The original Bengali treatise is reproduced in Bāgal: *Baṅkim Racanābalī*, vol. 2, 407–583.

26 Commenting on the historicity of Krishna and of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Vivekananda observed: "[…] there is no connection between the historical researches and our real aim, even if the historicity of the whole thing is proved to be absolutely false today, it will not in the least be any less true". (Swami Vivekananda (1978): 'Thoughts on the Gita'; in: *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 4; Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama; pp. 103, 105.

27 Chitnis G.Y. (1927): 'The Faith of the Brahma Samaj'; in: Chitnis, G.Y. (ed.) *Freedom, Religion and Reality. Essays on Liberal Religious Thought*; Bombay, Y.V. Bhandarkar; 65–6.

28 For an apt example, cf. Sri Aurobindo (1950): *Uttarpara Speech*; Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram. (This was first published in 1909 in the journal *Karmayogin*.)

of antiquity and certain given values and not necessarily, the historical past. Here, the trope of degenerative time, common to both Anglican Protestantism and Brahmanical Hinduism, also forced 'reform' to speak in the language of a 'revival'.

The colonial Hindu apologetic took birth in a self-reflexivity that had to negotiate some confounding characterisations of "Hindu" and "Hinduism", originating in the West but subsequently also advanced by Indian critics. In the historiography of nineteenth century India, a 'unified' Hinduism is shown to be the work of Anglophone neo-Hindus who, allegedly, employed gross cultural essentialisations in order to establish the credentials of Hinduism as a distinctly identifiable religion. According to the Indologist Paul Hacker, the term 'neo-Hindu' was first used by Rev. Robert Antoine in 1953 to describe the new discourse that was brought into play in late nineteenth century India.[29] However, the use of the term *nabya hindu* (neo-Hindu) as evident in colonial Bengal, has an older history[30] and reportedly, some English-educated Hindus themselves often used it in a derogatory sense.[31] In the case of Bankim himself who is known to have used it, the term proved pivotal to a polemical debate that occurred between the more traditionalist elements within the community of anglicized Hindus and those who employed greater hermeneutical freedom. From a scrutiny of an essay by Bankim Chandra titled '*Ādi brāhmo samāj o nabya hindu sampradāẏ*' (The Adi Brahmo Samaj and the community of Neo-Hindus) it emerges that Bankim Chandra tried to defend himself against criticism from Dvijendranath and Rabindranath Tagore (both of whom were then associated with the conservative wing of the Brahmos, the Adi Brahmo Samaj), accusing men like Bankim Chandra, who they counted among 'neo-Hindus', of rather spurious re-interpretations of traditional Hindu notions of moral and religious 'truth'. [32] Now if

30 I owe this point to Prof. Hans Harder of the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg, who kindly agreed to read an earlier draft of this paper.

31 Harder, Hans (2001): *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's* Śrīmadbhagabadgītā. *Translation and Analysis*; Delhi, Manohar; pp. 240–1.

32 The debate, interestingly, was over the question of whether the Hindu tradition allowed temporary lapses into untruthfulness for the sake of greater public good. Bankim,

the use of this expression in relation to Bankim and like-minded writers was indeed derogatory, this probably also points to its ineptness, even in the eyes of some contemporary Hindus. To the Tagores, apparently, the ‘*nabya hindu*’ represented a new-fangled Hinduism that had no roots in tradition. My own argument though also strives to proceed in other directions. Arguably, the term ‘neo-Hinduism’ clearly postulates a “Hinduism” both earlier fixed in time and as a finished product. This, as I shall presently argue, could not have been readily accepted by the Anglophone Hindu himself who saw Hinduism as essentially evolving over time. From this perspective, ‘*nabya hindu*’ as a term of self-description for men such as Bankim appears to have been problematic. How confounding this flaw was is something that I hope to demonstrate in the course of this talk and in relation to Bankim Chandra himself. Further, if, as argued by some critics, the expression ‘neo-Hinduism’ is validated by formative influences originating outside the religion of the Hindus, as for instance by the Christian West, one may justifiably ask why the term could not be used in other instances when non-Hindu influences are known to have significantly shaped Hindu thought. Thus, if Paul Hacker is right in labelling colonial Hinduism as ‘neo-Hinduism’ purely on account of influences derived from Christian thought,[33] it should be equally possible for us to call the Ādi Śaṅkara, who borrowed elements from contemporary Buddhist philosophy, a neo-Hindu and not a crypto Buddhist (*prachanna baudha*) as commonly done. Not to argue thus would be tantamount to suggesting that only modernity and the Christian West had the capacity to produce something ‘new’ in the realm of Hindu thought.

This could be problematic on yet another level. At times, Hindus in colonial India appear quite oblivious (perhaps deliberately so) of mental and social changes produced by their intellectual engagement with the West. Even when deeply influenced by European and Christian categories of thought and sometimes departing radically from him in interpreting the philosophi-

adopting a more utilitarian position, thought that it did. This was fiercely contested by the Tagores. See Bankim Chandra Chattopdhyay (1973): ‘Ādi brāhmo samāj o nabya hindu sampradāẏ’, reproduced in Bāgal, *Baṅkim racanābalī*, vol. 2.; Kalikātā, Sāhitya Saṃsad, 913–9.

33 Ibid.

cal school of Vedanta, both Rammohan Roy and Vivekananda nevertheless chose to situate themselves in the spiritual lineage (*guruparampar*ā) of Śaṅkara.[34] Here, it would be equally important to remember that the often acclaimed 'progressive' content of the social and political discourse coming from the West was at times blunted by Hindus themselves by putting this to conservative uses. Thus, August Comte's general discouragement of second marriages in men was used by a section of educated Hindus to strengthen the argument against widow marriages.[35] Bankim himself, though inspired to experiment with the Positivist philosophy of Comte for a time, ultimately gave it up on account of its 'atheism'.

II

I next turn to the inner inconsistencies within the post-modernist, post-colonialist discourse that has been otherwise so active in challenging the idea of "Hinduism" as a given category. It occurs to me that while on one level, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) has deepened our convictions about the ways in which religious traditions outside Europe have been read and discursively formulated by the West, this work has also produced in its wake, certain conceptual and methodological problems of understanding. For one, the Saidian view appears to deny the Orientals themselves agency and autonomy: the will or capacity to constructively fashion their own cultures or religions outside the framework of producing merely reactionary impulses.[36] Ironically, this comes disconcertingly close to the experience of colonialism itself which Said so ably critiques and which also committed moral violence by taking away from the colonized peoples, the cultural legitimacy of their own experiences.[37] On the academic level alone, the Saidian discourse on Orientalism is guilty of at least two kinds of misreading: first, it tends to rule out plain intellectual and cultural curiosity on the part of Orientalist scholars

34 Sen, 'The Idea of Social Reform', p. 118.
35 Ibid., p. 117.
36 Smith, *Questioning Authority*, p. 121.
37 Balgangadhara, *Reconceptualizing India Studies*, p. 111.

themselves. This curiosity may not have been culturally neutral or innocent and yet I feel that these fell short of those manipulative machinations that are taken to lie at the heart of all Occidental readings of the Orient. Second, it discourages, at least tacitly, the study of the pre-modern pasts and of underlying continuities in thought and practice. Had Anglophone Hindus of the colonial era also been captivated by the Saidian view, they might have found themselves in a curious predicament. If, for instance, they took the 'modern' to have been derived only through the 'othering' of 'tradition', the latter might well have appeared unintelligible and culturally useless. If, on the other hand, they saw the modern as continuous with tradition, it would have made no sense to study it with any seriousness.

One cannot also but notice how a substantial part of the recent Western scholarship on "Hinduism" is devoted to the study of its political face, commonly identified as 'Hindutva', palpably neglecting the study of Hindu ritual or doctrine.[38] There is, however, a case for translating the term 'Hindutva' as 'Hindu-ness' if only because there is an older history to this term which does not quite agree with the interpretation that Savarkar later put to it.[39] In a sense, the reluctance to acknowledge such variations in meaning follows from a discourse that does not acknowledge "Hinduism" as an autonomous and unified body of thought and practice and shares the deep disquiet about how such acknowledgement may only breed religious intolerance and communal passion.[40] Evidently, the contemporaneous critique

38 Important exceptions to this are the Axel Michaels (2004): *Hinduism. Past and Present*; Princeton, Princeton University Press; and Angelika Malinar (2009): *Hinduismus. Studium Religionen*; Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

39 See for instance, Julius J. Lipner's handling of this term in 'Ancient Banyan. An inquiry into the meaning of Hinduism', reproduced in Llewellyn, *Defining Hinduism*, 30–47; p. 32. To the best of my knowledge, the term Hindutva was first used in modern times by Bengali literary scholar Chandranath Basu (1892) in the work *Hindutva bā hindur prakṛta itihās* (Hindutva or the authentic history of the Hindus); Kalikātā, Gurudās Caṭṭopādhyāẏ.

40 In 1978, while delivering an anniversary lecture on the 150th birth anniversary celebrations of the noted Indologist, Rajendralal Mitra, the historian Romesh Chandra Majumdar is known to have said the following: "To speak oneself as Hindu is now looked upon as a sign of communalism by the powers that be. Comment is needless on such absurdities". Cf. The Asiatic Society (1978): *Rajendralal Mitra. 150th Birth Anniversary Celebrations*; Calcutta; pp. 10–1.

of political "Hinduism" is itself deeply political in nature and reflects currently fashionable political moods. Underlining such agenda is the deep distrust of meta-narratives and the somewhat romanticized celebration of the small and the fragmentary. Here, "Hinduism" represents the meta-narrative that needs to be somehow broken down into discrete and disparate religion sensibilities that can live and breed only in an intellectual environment of demolished certitudes. From this perspective, granting a collective identity for Hindus is not only academically flawed but also fraught with political dangers. "Every Hindu decides what is Hinduism", I have heard one scholar say.[41]

The contemporary politics of identity, one feels, has now put the term 'Hindu' too under some cloud. Thus, a Dalit activist from Tamil Nadu writes the following:

> The very concept of Hinduism, which took shape in the north, only when the Muslim rule was being consolidated [...] was never known to the Tamils until the period of colonization. [...] The "Hindu" was thus born just two centuries back; and he is still a colourless, odourless and formless illusory artificial constitution.[42]

Now, the point about "Hinduism" being completely alien and unknown to pre-modern Tamil culture stands clearly in contrast to the observations of the Protestant missionary B. Ziegenbalg (1682–1719) who noted how in the Tamil region, Saivas and Vaishnavas functioned as sects but also considered themselves to be a part of a larger religious formation. Reportedly, they acknowledged each other but not the Buddhists and Jains. Importantly enough, these observations made by Ziegenbalg were based on local Tamil sources and not those in pan-Indian Sanskrit which he made no serious ef-

41 Sharma, Jyotirmay (2013): *Hindutva. Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*; New Delhi, Penguin Books; p. 13.

42 Guna (1984): *Asiatic Mode. A Socio Cultural Perspective*; Delhi, Bookwell Publications; pp. 124–5; cited in Omvedt, Gail (2005): 'Introduction to Dalit Vision', reproduced in Llewellyn, *Defining Hinduism*, 167–170; p. 169.

fort to learn.[43] Given the fact that it had been known to the *Zendavesta* and to the early Persians and Greeks, the claim that the very category of the "Hindu" is a pure construct appears to be not only contra-historical but also creates a fuzziness with categorisation. Surely, it is one thing to deny oneself as a "Hindu" as another Dalit intellectual-activist, Kancha Ilaiah has, and quite another to dispute the very category itself.[44] On one level, this is at best a circular argument, for in the least, the act of disassociating oneself with an identity amounts *ipso facto* to acknowledging its existence. To me what looks no less ominous is the irrational and xenophobic reaction that attacks on the use of the term Hindu has now produced in people who are acutely uncomfortable with its origins in non-Hindu peoples and cultures. A work that has recently come to my notice somewhat angrily asserts how the use of the term "Hindu" had simply "hijacked our foundations in Vedic and Upanishadic religion".[45]

Apart from the problematic perceptions that the West carried in respect of "Hinduism", there was also some serious confusion generated internally in the Hindu mind. It is in relation to the new mental and moral challenges thrown by the West in the nineteenth century that the Hindus most effectively realized that the vitality of their tradition rested as much on their capacity to meet new challenges as in attempts to perpetuate older beliefs or ways of life. This would explain the anxiety to 'modernise', but equally, the failure to fathom the innately alienating nature of colonial modernity. One of the tangible consequences following from this was the growth of a false consciousness that predisposed the Hindus to judge indigenous cultural experiences in the light of Western history and categories of thought. Thus, re-

43 See Sweetman, Will (ed.) (2015): *Hinduism. Cultural Concepts in Religious Studies*, vol. 1; London, Routledge, p. 4. I say this also to question the notion that as a pan-Indian language used by Hindu elites, Sanskrit often deliberately glosses over social and cultural differences.

44 Kancha Ilaiah (1986): *Why I am not a Hindu. A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*; Calcutta, Samya. It is worth noting that in Ilaiah's perception, Hindu and Hindutva become synonymous, thereby implying that the ideology of Hindutva is a pre-requisite for establishing the Hindu identity.

45 Ghosh, Suresh Chandra (2013): *Loss of Our Religious Identity. How the term Hindu has Hijacked our Vedic and Upanishadic Religion*; New Delhi, Dev Publishers.

formist Hindus like Narayan Ganesh Chandravarkar (1855–1923), associated with the Indian Social Conference, spoke of "Hindu Protestantism",[46] and as is only too well known, western-educated Hindus of nineteenth century Calcutta proudly claimed to have experienced a western style "Renaissance".[47] While associating "Hinduism" with Indic thought and experiences, colonized Hindus also came to believe, no doubt quite mistakenly, that no religion that was not universal in nature could endure in time. Evidently, this idea grew from their uncritically accepting Enlightenment tropes about linear movements in history, in a development chronology and the common destiny of man. This placed on them the additional burden of having to consistently affirm that "Hinduism" was the most tolerant, accommodative and hence, also the most universal of religions. I would argue that eventually, this forced the colonized Hindu to confront three inter-related problems.

First, it led them to confuse the doctrinal relativism known to the Hindu tradition with pluralism taken in the modern sense of the word. Hindu theism repeatedly speaks of *adhikāra* and of the freedom to choose one's *iṣṭa* or the favoured deity. On the other hand, neither of these terms was entirely unrelated to the structures of everyday life. The question of *adhikāra* or one's eligibility to adopt a certain kind of religious life was partly founded on one's *jāti* standing and by extension, on *saṃskāra* (predispositions) and karmic consequences from some past life. The concept of *adhikāra* furthermore, was joined to that of *bheda* or differentiation, the two then being read as *adhikāra-bheda*, a complexly differentiated and hierarchically arranged system of eligibility and rights. In the understanding of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–86), a figure that I would readily identify with old world "Hinduism", it was not left to human beings to freely choose a religious path. On the contrary, varying choices of paths that men were known

46 Chandravarkar, N.G. (1911): 'Hindoo Protestantism. Reform, not Revival'; in: Kaikini, L.V. (ed.): *The Speeches and Writings of Sir Narayen G. Chandravarkar*; Bombay, Manoranjak Grantha Prasarak Mandali, 38–46.

47 For a brilliant critique see Sarkar, Sumit (1975): 'Rammohun Roy and the break with the Past'; in: Joshi, V.C. (ed.): *Rammohun Roy and the Modernization of India*; Delhi: Vikas, 46–68; Sarkar, Sumit (1977): 'The Radicalism of Intellectuals in a Colonial Situation. A Case Study of Nineteenth Century Bengal'; in: *Calcutta Historical Journal,* 2, 61–77.

to make in worldly life essentially reflected the intentionality of God. Understandably, this view came down heavily on self-righteousness and religious dogmatism since religions, in the first place, were seen to be created by God, not men. It is interesting to note how Ramakrishna considered 'toleration' to be a terribly condescending word for it led to the indefensible assumption that a certain religion, having appropriated Truth for itself, could charitably and good-humouredly let other religions co-exist.[48] The choice of *iṣṭa* too, I would further argue, allowed little room for firm theological exclusions. To the best of my knowledge, very few Hindu temples, and even those dating back to the pre-modern era (when one might allow for greater sectarian rivalry) were entirely dedicated to a particular god or goddess to the rigid exclusion of others. Thus, the medieval *Bhakti* saint Tulsidas could sing the praise of Lord Rama, even when inhabiting the city of Kashi, traditionally dedicated to Lord Siva.[49]

Second, the colonized Hindu was also led to believe that all religions shared common aims and porous boundaries which, in turn, allowed a unity of ends if not a common religious vocabulary.[50] In the nineteenth century, this thesis took either the form of an intellectual empathy towards religious cultures other than one's own or else, the synthetic fusion of select ideas or symbols borrowed across traditions. In colonial India both these tendencies were best exemplified by the Brahmo Samaj[51] and both failed to endure, to say the least. Contrast this to the eclecticism of the old-world Hindu religious figure, Ramakrishna, who did not for a moment believe that boundaries

48 See the third essay in Sen, Amiya P. (2001): *Three Essays on Sri Ramakrishna and His Times*; Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

49 Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism*, p. 187. Note also the reversal of this idea in the shrine of Rameshwar in South India where Siva is the deity propitiated by Rama.

50 In hindsight, this appears quite facile given the important doctrinal differences that exist even within the so called Semitic group of religions, often clubbed together to suggest their distinctiveness as against Indic religions like Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism.

51 I am referring here to the religious experiments of the Brahmo missionary and theologian, Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–84) who commissioned the study of the lives of saints and prophets from the Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and Islamic traditions. By the early 1880s, he also put together the Nababidhan (New Dispensation) Church which synthetically fused ideas and symbols drawn from various religious traditions.

determined by one religion could be easily breached by another but more importantly, that each of these religions had to be understood in terms of its own doctrinal orthodoxy or prescribed practices. When training himself in the theology of Islam, Ramakrishna scrupulously kept away from the Kali temple where he was the officiating priest.[52] Ironically, such eclecticism, it has to be said, has been seriously misconstrued as Universalism at times by none other than monks of the Ramakrishna Order itself. Thus, in an effort to propagate what he believed to be the Hindu gift of religious Universalism, Swami Lokeshvarananda, a senior monk once associated with the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Kolkata, declared Ramakrishna to be an *avatāra* not only for Hinduism but for Islam and Christianity as well.[53] It did not occur to him that especially in the context of Islam, this would have been sheer blasphemy. Finally, perhaps without their quite realizing it, the belief that all religions had common aims and principles though articulated in different languages, also made colonial Hindus somewhat defenceless against other traditions which claimed Truth for themselves, leaving others to suffer damnation. For instance, at least in theory, this would have weakened the Hindu anger at Christian evangelism.

It is not at all improbable that in pre-colonial India too and notwithstanding synthesising tendencies between religions, people were sufficiently aware of the doctrinal differences between, say, the pantheistic tendencies known to "Hinduism" and the transcendence of God in Islam. It is curious too how the medieval poet-theologian, Kabir, acknowledges the separate religious communities of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' even as he declines to identify himself with any of these:

> Gorakh! Gorakh! cries the Yogi; Ram! Ram! says the Hindu
> 'Allah is One', proclaims the Muslim, But […] my Lord pervades all.
> The God of the Hindus resides in a temple, the God of Muslims
> resides in a mosque,

52 See Sen, *Three Essays*, p. 89–110.

53 Elst, Koenraad (2002): *Who is a Hindu? Revivalist Voices of Animism, Buddhism, Sikhism and other Offshoots of Hinduism*; New Delhi, Voice of India; p. 86.

Who resides there where there are no temples, nor mosques![54]

From this I am persuaded to conclude that this is not so much a questioning of the labels 'Hindu' or 'Muslim' per se as cautioning people that these will not by themselves, bring them any closer to God.

Third, the colonized Hindu was often confounded when trying to understand the mechanisms of social and cultural change. This is typically exemplified by a short passage that I have found among the writings of Bankim Chandra: "Let us revere the past", he says, "but we must, in justice to our new life, adopt new methods of interpretation and adapt the old, eternal and undying truths to the necessities of that life".[55] What caught my attention here was Bankim Chandra's rather unconvincing attempt to simultaneously play with the words 'adopt' and 'adapt'. Now if 'truths' that Bankim speaks of were 'eternal' and 'undying' in nature, why did these have to be adapted at all to a new environment? In this passage, I will argue, one finds the ambivalence that typically characterised colonial Hindu thought: the tendency to take both a historical and de-historicized view of culture, to treat culture as something both frozen in time but also evolving historically. Arguably, at a time when the Hindu mind was influenced equally by nostalgia and evolutionary views of society and culture,[56] this was but natural. I also believe that this ambivalence also deflected from the realisation that a long and varied past was not always amenable to a strong and continuous tradition, for, time could also produce unwanted and traumatic ruptures.

At times, the thought of the colonized Hindus reveals an utter confusion of categories. Take for instance the very puzzling dichotomy in Rammohan

54 Kumar, S. (1984): *The Vision of Kabir. Love Poems of a Fifteenth Century Weaver-Sage*; Concord, Alpha & Omega Books; pp. 21, 31. Cited in Lippner, Julius J. (2006): 'The Rise of Hinduism or, How to Invent a World Religion with only Moderate Success'; in: *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 10.1, 91–104.

55 Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1990): 'Letters on Hinduism'; in: Bagal, Jogesh Chandra (ed.): Bankim Rachanavali: English Writings. Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 227-269; 236.

56 In the late nineteenth century, the writings of Herbert Spencer cast a major influence on the Hindu mind besides that of Darwin in accepting an evolutionary view of social change.

Roy who saw religion as the site for all meaningful social change but in substance also argued against the same idea. In his thinking, the Raja was progressive but not secular; for him, the choice lay not between the 'religious' and the 'secular' but between pure/authentic and impure/inauthentic religion itself. This, however, is hard to reconcile with Rammohan Roy's instrumentalist view that religion was expected to secure for man, the bourgeois virtues of 'political advantage and social comfort'.[57] "A votary of God obtains his desired objects", the Raja was persuaded to remark, "anyone desiring honour and advantage shall revere Him".[58] Here, Rammohan sounds more the religious materialist than the spokesperson for transcendental Vedanta which he otherwise claimed to be and arguably, the confusion arose in his attempt to wed Brahmanical thought to bourgeois values of the contemporary West. In a somewhat different form, the same dichotomy appears in the Hindu missionary figure, Swami Vivekananda. The Swami angrily dismissed the worth of a religion that could not wipe the widow's tears or bring food to the starving and yet believed that all social reform had to be founded in the spiritual.[59]

There are two presumptions common to the recent scholarship on "Hinduism" that need careful interrogation. First, there is the tacit belief that 'unity' can be founded on absolute identification alone and not broad affinities. In this view, "Hinduism" cannot claim to be a unified category because it appears to speak with many and often mutually conflicting voices. This thesis, however, may be at least partly met with the argument that identities harden mostly when self-definition turns exclusionary. To offer a crude analogy, members of the same family do not ordinarily address each other by their family names and by extending the same argument it could be said that in pre-colonial India, sectarian Shaivas and Vaishnavas may not have felt it necessary to additionally identify themselves as "Hindu". A sense of

57 Cf. Rammohan's undated letter to John Digby, reproduced in Ghosh, Ajit Kumar (ed.) (1973): *Rāmˈmohan racanābalī* (The Collected [Bengali] Works of Rammohan Roy); Kalˈkātā: Haraph Prakāśanī, p. 462.

58 Cited in Sen, *Explorations,* p. 29.

59 Sen, Amiya P. (ed.) (2003): *Social and Religious Reform. The Hindus of British India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press; pp. 12–13.

unity can sometimes proceed from discernibly broad overlaps and family-resemblances. Thus, in 1897, when speaking of 'common bases of Hinduism' before an audience assembled at Lahore, Vivekananda hinted not at a single doctrinal pivot on which "Hinduism" rested but certain shared ideas and values which went into the making of a distinct world-view.[60] Second, there is the tendency to collapse the possible distinction between a term and a concept, an outward projection of the collective self and an internally generated, broad-based self-understanding. In my own researches on 'Reform Hinduism' I have found, somewhat to my surprise, that words like 'saṃskār' or 'sudhār', now commonly taken to mean 'reform', were not in vogue in the vernaculars of pre-modern north India like Hindi, Marathi or Bengali. Are we then to conclude from this that the intention to reform society of its social and religious abuses took birth only in modern India? It is not the availability or the persistent use of a single term (in this instance, 'reform' or its equivalent in Indian languages) that cogently explains differences between the pre-modern conceptualisations of social or religious change and the modern. In colonial India, such a term became necessary in terms of both strategy and concept since Hindu reformers themselves turned acutely self-conscious about the moral worth of human intervention. This, in turn, followed from the idea, increasingly accepted by the colonial Hindu intelligentsia, but absent in dominant versions of Hindu cosmology, that the very act of creation and human history were invested with a specific purpose and were manifestly anthropocentric. It was the acceptance of this view that allowed Reform Hinduism to make fairly rigid distinctions between the 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong'—distinctions that could not be as clearly made within Hindu-Brahmanical epistemology and metaphysics. Indeed, two of the defining qualities of Hindu thought in the nineteenth century were respectively, the tendency to insert moral distinctions within what was otherwise flattened cosmologies and to postulate a development chronology that accepted history as the chronicle of uninter-

60 See Swami Vivekananda (1973): 'The Common Bases of Hinduism' (Lectures from Colombo to Almora); in: *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 3; Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 366.

rupted human progress. Both, it would be important to reiterate, palpably deviated from the cosmology of traditional Hinduism which did not believe either in a unique, history-centred Revelation or the dualist separation between God and man.

In conclusion, I would hazard the guess that even allowing for the fact that religious traditions are by nature hybrid as are races, “Hinduism” is perhaps not an entirely amorphous and intractable category. My argument here rests not simply upon the fact that even the harshest critics of this term have now grudgingly come to accept its wide social currency but equally in the hope that rather than be preoccupied by differentiation which has been hitherto the case, the future historian of ideas will be willing to investigate elements of common-ness, coherence and continuities of thought or practice within what may be loosely called the ‘Hindu World’. Admittedly, a part of what is now seen to constitute “Hinduism” took shape in the past two hundred years. On the other hand, to treat this “Hinduism” as entirely contingent and simply reactive in its growth and development is to take a rather myopic view of history. For me, it appears possible to qualify Paul Hacker’s allegations about colonial “Hinduism” being so grossly ‘inclusive’ in nature in at least two ways. In the first place, such inclusivism was not unknown to pre-colonial India. But more importantly, Hacker’s thesis resonates with the idea that ‘inclusivism’ is by its very nature manipulative appropriation and not a sign of growth. No religious culture has consistently resisted change, whether generated by genuine self-reflection and a momentum developed on its own or else triggered off by ideas or practices produced outside itself. It is equally the case that values and ideas originating in one culture cannot acquire a potency or meaning in another without there being some possible correspondence in thought or behaviour between those cultures. Such correspondence, it needs to be added, is not in every case purely contingent or reactive. Rather, it could also represent fortuitous self-discovery, the mirroring of ideas partly hidden to oneself but amply visible in the otherwise alienating ‘other’.

Historically speaking, Hindus did attempt to define themselves, especially at such conjunctures when such definitions became culturally necessary. On the whole though, this occurred on two levels, the endogamous and

the exogamous, and with varying depth or intensity. Notwithstanding acute religious and philosophical differences existing between them, Hindus were constantly in conversation with Jains and Buddhists. By comparison, this does not appear to have equally occurred in the case of Muslims, partly because each of these communities understood Truth differently, both in a metaphysical sense and the moral. Arguably, for Hindus who took the "Hindu" identity to be essentially founded on birth and did not seek formal conversion from communities located outside, it was relatively easier to acknowledge that Truth could equally lie beyond their own religious domain. Here, it might be also appropriate to recall the tendency among Hindus to see Truth to be intrinsically indeterminate. In Eknath's *Hindū tark saṃvād*, for instance, the Hindu protagonist wonders why, given God's omnipotence, it was not possible for Him to be equally manifest in the image.[61]

In the Hindu view, as I have come to understand it, the Absolute Reality is the ground for all possibilities. From this perspective, no expression of the finite can exhaust the Infinite. While man and this phenomenal world are It's concrete manifestations, the Absolute Itself transcends and goes beyond both the finite and infinite, the personal and the impersonal. This might explain why, alongside its doctrinal latitude, the Hindu tradition has also assumed an unassailable unity (*ekavākyatā*) inherent in all Hindu scriptures. "[…] the explanation of the Veda and of its commentators must either be admitted as sufficiently reconciling the apparent contradictions or must not be admitted (at all)", Rammohan Roy observed in his *A Defence of Hindoo Theism*, "in the latter case, the Veda must be necessarily supposed to be inconsistent with itself and therefore altogether unintelligible, which is directly contrary to the faith of the Hindu of every description".[62]

In the nineteenth century, even as they laboured to formulate a Universal religion, the Hindu intelligentsia was also inclined to believe that moralism was more amenable to universality than religious belief. For one, this could be associated with greater cultural non-aggression. Whereas theologies insisted on a certain view of man's relationship with God, a moral view of the

61 Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism*, p. 193.
62 Cited in Sen, *Explorations,* p. 25.

world could deftly bypass that. This would explain the Hindu penchant for separating the moral teachings of Christ from the purely theological postulates about his divinity, much to the annoyance of European missionaries. Evidently, religious re-orientation implied a greater cultural uprooting than the acceptance of morally sound behaviour. "[…] If religion consists of the blessings of self-knowledge and improved notions of God and a system of morality held a subordinate place, I certainly prefer the Vedas," Rammohan Roy once wrote to his friend, Chandrashekhar Deb.[63] It is equally possible, however, that the Hindu ultimately made no rigid distinction between the moral and the spiritual. In 1926 (on another authority, 1929),[64] Gandhi turned around the expression 'God is Truth' to read 'Truth is God' and this, notwithstanding the fact that he remained a deeply pious Hindu. In this view, evidently, moral correctness too ultimately converged in the highest spiritual life.

My concluding thought for the day is that "Hinduism", like all other religions, remains deeply aspirational. At heart, it represents an abiding quest for Truth and not simply indeterminacy or epistemological relativism. Perhaps it is the case that Hindu India and the Christian West have not fully understood each other since they have also worked with palpably different ideals. While one of these has always postulated a Unity from which proceeded differentiation, the other has striven to find some unity underlying disparate phenomenal experiences. In one, doctrinal allegiance seeks to bind man to God, in the other, salvation is essentially founded in individualized and intuitive experiences. One of these has consistently striven for perfection, the other for 'pūrṇatva' or fullsomeness.[65] Permit me then, to end with another quote from Bankim Chandra:

63 Ibid., p. 32.

64 Margaret Chatterjee believes that the change took place in 1929, Bhikhu Parekh, in 1926.

65 As found in the invocation common to some major *Upaniṣad*s. A good example occurs in the opening lines of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. The word 'pūrṇa', however, has sometimes been rendered as 'infinity', without significantly altering the meaning. A typical instance of the latter occurs in the edition published by the Ramakrishna Math. See anon. (1951): *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Mylapore, Sri Ramakrishna Math.

> With other peoples, religion is only a part of life; there are things religious and there are things lay and secular. To the European, his relations to God and to the spiritual world are things sharply distinguished from his relations to man and to the temporal world. To the Hindu, his relations to God and his relations to man are incapable of being so distinguished. They form one compact and harmonious whole. […] All life to him (the Hindu) was religion and never received a name from him, because it never had for him an existence apart from all that had received a name.[66]

Here, it is quite probable that his polemical intent led Bankim Chandra to overstretch the differences between the Christian West and Hindu India. He would have been far more accurate if only he had chosen to replace the word 'religion' with what a recent work has identified as 'Dharmic Consciousness'.[67] On the other hand, one ought not to forget that for reasons rooted in his historical situation, Bankim Chandra had already been forced to somewhat dubiously translate dharma as religion.[68] From that commitment, there was perhaps no going back. I have no reason otherwise to doubt that Bankim was aware of manifest differences between the Hindu worldview and that of the West and of the ways in which these vitally shaped the two cultures.

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66 Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (2011): 'Letters on Hinduism'. Reprinted in: Sen, Amiya P. (ed.): *Bankim's Hinduism. An Anthology of Writings by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay*. Delhi, Permanent Black, p. 299.

67 Rajiv Malhotra (2011): *Being Different. An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism*; New Delhi, Harper Collins & The India Today Group. Sri Aurobindo, in what was perhaps a polite corrective to what Bankim had written, observed the following: "Perhaps there was too much religion in one sense; the word is English, smacks too much of things external […] [and] there is no one Indian equivalent. But if we give rather to religion the sense of the following of the spiritual impulse in its **fullness** and define spirituality as the attempt to know and live in the highest self, the divine and all-embracing unity and to raise life in all its parts to the divinest possible values, then it is evident that here was not too much of religion but too little of it […]" (emphasis mine) (Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India*, p. 75).

68 As in his *Dharmmatattva*, see note 20 above.

Post Script: In the course of preparing this presentation I have been increasingly seized by the apprehension that my recurring use of words or expressions like ‘Hindu’ or the ‘Hindu mind’ or ‘Hindu hermeneutics’ will be read as gross and indefensible essentialisation. However, this is not so much a conceptual problem as stylistic. It is a problem that appears to have also confronted others. Prima facie, is it not the case that A.K. Ramanujan’s seminal essay ‘Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay’ conflates the Hindu with the Indian?[69] Even so, I have reason to believe that he was not essentialising. This is also a paper that I have consciously and conscientiously distanced from political readings of religion and culture. I am given to understand that in the contemporary world, everything is pervasively political. However, even when accused of naïveté, I would prefer to think otherwise.

69 Ramanujan, A.K. (1989): ‘Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay’; *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23.1, 41–58.

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