

5 The modern myth of 'Hinduism'

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

Of the many enduring images of 'the Orient' that have captured the imagination of Westerners over the centuries, it is the characterization of Eastern culture, and Indian religions in particular, as 'mystical' that is most relevant to our current discussion. As European culture became increasingly intrigued by the cultural mysteries and economic resources of foreign lands in an age of colonial expansion, it was inevitable that a developing awareness of the diversity of cultures and religions would require some characterization of these 'alternative perspectives' in a way that displayed their *alterity* when compared to the normative European (Christian) perspective.

As we have seen from the work of Michel de Certeau, the imaginative construction of a 'mystical' tradition within Western Christianity seems to have gained increasing credence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. With a greater awareness of the plurality of religious perspectives throughout the world furnished by colonial encounters abroad it became inevitable that comparisons with Christianity would come to the fore. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, to find the Protestant presuppositions of many Europeans (especially in the growing scholarly fields of German and English Orientalism) being reflected in their characterization of non-Christian religion. Given Protestant distrust of the 'mystical' elements of Catholicism, it is also of little surprise to find a tendency to disentangle the 'mystical' from its particular Christian application and to reapply this characterization in a pluralistic religious context.

Once the term 'mystical' became detached from the specificity of its originally Christian context and became applied to the 'strange and mysterious Orient', the association of the East with 'mysticism' became well and truly entrenched in the collective cultural imagination of the West. Note, however, that the association of Indian religion with the 'mystical' was by no means

always intended as a critique. Indeed the Romantic movement in Europe represents a good counterexample of a positive attempt to valorize 'the mystical East'. One should be wary, therefore, of assuming that colonial discourses are unidirectional and that enthusiastic portrayals of the East somehow remain untainted by the colonial enterprise.

Equally, it is worth noting that the characterization of the Orient as 'mystical' in the colonial period is not *just* about the classification and control of foreign lands and peoples; it also carries with it the weight of another burden – the implicit (and sometimes explicit) criticism of contemporary elements of the Orientalist's own culture. For scholars such as Peter Harrison, this reflects the fact that:

The whole comparative approach to religion was directly related to confessional disputes within Christianity... Accordingly, the 'religions' of the 'Orient', of the Pacific and the Americas, of ancient Greece and Rome were pressed into the service of the religious interests of the West. They became heresies which were formally equivalent to some undesirable version of Christianity, be it papism, Calvinism, Arminianism, or any other of the myriads of Protestant sects.²

Thus, for some, describing religions of the East as 'mystical' is a way of differentiating the essential historical truth of Christianity from its inferior rivals – and implicitly to attack those within Western Christianity who might want to focus upon the 'mystical' dimensions of their own tradition. However, for many of the Romantics 'the mystic East' represented the spirituality that much of contemporary Christian religion seemed to lack. Thus, as the term 'mystical' became divorced from a Christian context and was applied to other religions by Western theologians and Orientalists, it continued to function at home as the site of a power struggle in the battle to define European and Christian cultural identity.

Today, there are perhaps two powerful images in contemporary Western characterizations of Eastern religiosity. One is the continually enduring notion of the 'mystical East' that we have been discussing – a powerful image precisely because for some it represents what is most disturbing and outdated about Eastern culture, while for others it represents the magic, the mystery and the sense of the spiritual that they perceive to be lacking in modern Western culture. The depravity and backwardness of the Orient thus appears to sit side by side with its blossoming spirituality and cultural richness. Both of these motifs have a long historical pedigree, deriving from the hopes and fears of the European imagination and its perennial fascination with the East.

The second image of Eastern religion – one indeed that is increasingly coming to the fore in Western circles, is that of the 'militant fanatic'. Such a characterization also has a considerable ancestry, being a contemporary manifestation of older colonial myths about Oriental despotism and the

irrationality of the colonial subject. The particular nature of this construct is, of course, heavily influenced by the secularist perspective of much of modern Western culture. The image of the militant fanatic or religious 'fundamentalist', while frequently interwoven with 'the mystical' characterization (particularly in the emphasis that Western commentators place upon the 'religious' dimension of conflicts such as Ayodhyā in India), is rarely explicitly associated with the notion of 'the mystical East' precisely because modern Western understandings of 'the mystical' tend to preclude the possibility of an authentic mystical involvement in political struggle. The otherworldly Eastern mystic cannot be involved in a this-worldly political struggle without calling into question the strong cultural opposition between the mystical and the public realms. The discontinuity between these two cultural representations of the East has frequently created problems for Western and Western-influenced observers who find it difficult to reconcile notions of spiritual detachment with political (and sometimes violent) social activism.³

Thus in the modern era we find Hinduism being represented both as a globalized and all-embracing world religion and as an intolerant and virulent form of religious nationalism. Despite the apparent incongruity of these two representations, I will argue in this chapter that one feature that both characterizations share in common is the debt they owe to Western Orientalism. My argument does not entail that the modern concept of 'Hinduism' is merely the product of Western Orientalism. Western influence was a necessary but not a sufficient causal factor in the rise of this particular social construction. To argue otherwise would be to ignore the crucial role played by indigenous brahmanical ideology in the formation of early Orientalist representations of Hindu religiosity.

The myth of homogeneity and the modern myth of 'Hinduism'

As we saw in Chapter 3, scepticism about the applicability of globalized, highly abstract and univocal systems of thought onto the religious experience of humankind (as manifested in the concept of 'world religions') has been expressed by scholars like Wilfred Cantwell Smith on the grounds that such an approach provides us with an overly homogenized picture of human cultural diversity.⁴ We can see the implications of this more clearly if we consider the claim, supported by such figures as Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Vivekānanda, that there is a single religion called 'Hinduism', which can be meaningfully referred to as the religion of the Hindu people.

The notion of 'Hinduism' is itself a Western-inspired abstraction, which until the nineteenth century bore little or no resemblance to the diversity of Indian religious belief and practice. The term 'Hindoo' is the Persian variant of the Sanskrit *sindhu*, referring to the Indus river, and as such was used by the Persians to denote the people of that region.⁵ Al-Hind, therefore, is a

term denoting the people of a particular geographical area. Although indigenous use of the term by Hindus themselves can be found as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, its usage was derivative of Persian Muslim influences and did not represent anything more than a distinction between 'indigenous' or 'native' and foreign (*mleccha*).⁶ For instance, when Belgian Thierry Verhelst interviewed an Indian intellectual from Tamil Nadu he recorded the following interchange:

Q: Are you a Hindu?

A: No, I grew critical of it because of casteism ... Actually, you should not ask people if they are Hindu. This does not mean much. If you ask them what their religion is, they will say, 'I belong to this caste.'⁷

Indeed, it is clear that the term 'Hindu', even when used by the indigenous Indian, did not have the specifically religious connotations that it subsequently developed under Orientalist influences until the nineteenth century.⁸ Thus eighteenth-century references to 'Hindoo' Christians or 'Hindoo' Muslims were not uncommon.⁹ As Romila Thapar points out in her discussion of the reception of Muslims into India:

The people of India do not seem to have perceived the new arrivals as a unified body of Muslims. The name 'Muslim' does not occur in the records of the early contacts. The term used was either ethnic, *turuška*, referring to the Turks, or geographical, *Yavana*, or cultural, *mleccha*.¹⁰

One should also note the distinctively negative nature of the term, the primary function of which is to provide a catch-all designation for the 'Other', whether negatively contrasted with the ancient Persians, with their Muslim descendants, or with the later European Orientalists who eventually adopted the term. Indeed the same is apparent from an examination of modern Indian law. For example the 1955 Hindu Marriage Act, section 2(1) defines a 'Hindu' as a category including not only all Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs but also anyone who is not a Muslim, a Christian, a Parsee or a Jew. Thus even in the contemporary context the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' are essentially negative appellations, functioning as an all-inclusive rubric for the non-Judaeo-Christian 'Other'.¹¹

'Hindu' in fact only came into provenance amongst Westerners in the eighteenth century. Previously, the predominant Christian perspective amongst the Europeans classified Indian religion under the all-inclusive rubric of Heathenism. On this view there were four major religious groups, Jews, Christians, Mahometans (i.e. Muslims) and Heathens. Members of the last category were widely considered to be children of the Devil, and the Indian Heathens were but one particular sect alongside the Africans and the Americans (who even today are referred to as American 'Indians' in an attempt to draw a parallel between the indigenous populations of India and

the precolonial population of the Americas). Other designations used to refer to the Indians were 'Banians', a term which derives from the merchant populations of Northern India, and 'Gentooes', which functioned as an alternative to 'Heathen'. Nevertheless, as Western knowledge and interest in India increased, the term 'Hindu' eventually gained greater prominence as a culturally and geographically more specific term.

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

The work of integrating a vast collection of myths, beliefs, rituals, and laws into a coherent religion, and of shaping an amorphous heritage into a rational faith known now as "Hinduism" were endeavors initiated by Orientalists.¹²

The term 'Hinduism' seems first to have made an appearance in the early nineteenth century, and gradually gained provenance in the decades thereafter. Eighteenth-century references to the 'religion of the Gentooes' (e.g. Nathaniel Brassey Halhead (1776), *A Code of Gentoo Laws*) were gradually supplanted in the nineteenth century by references to 'the religion of the Hindoos' – a preference for the Persian as opposed to the Portuguese designation of the Indian people. However, it is not until the nineteenth century proper that the term 'Hinduism' became used as a signifier of a unified, all-embracing and independent religious entity in both Western and Indian circles. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces 'Hindooism' to an 1829 reference in the *Bengalee* (Volume 45), and also refers to an 1858 usage by the German Indologist Max Müller.¹³ Dermot Killingley, however, cites a reference to 'Hindooism' by Rammohun Roy in 1816. As Killingley suggests, 'Rammohun was probably the first Hindu to use the word Hinduism.'¹⁴ One hardly need mention the extent to which Roy's conception of the 'Hindu' religion was conditioned by European, Muslim and Unitarian theological influences. Ironically there is considerable reason, therefore, for the frequency with which Western scholars have described Roy as 'the father of modern India'.

Western Orientalist discourses, by virtue of their privileged political status within 'British' India, have contributed greatly to the modern construction of 'Hinduism' as a single world religion. This was somewhat inevitable given British control over the political, educational and media institutions of India. If we note, for instance, the extent to which the British

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

Christianity, textualism and the construction of 'Hinduism'

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

Western literary bias has contributed to a textualization of Indian religion.¹⁵ This is not to deny that Indian culture has its own literary traditions, rather it is to emphasize the sense in which Western presuppositions about the role of sacred texts in 'religion' predisposed Orientalists towards focusing upon such texts as the essential foundation for understanding the Hindu people as a whole. Protestant emphasis upon the text as the locus of religion placed a particular emphasis upon the literary aspects of Indian culture in the work of Orientalists. Academics and highly educated Western administrators are already inclined towards literary forms of expression because of their training, and so it is not all that surprising to find Orientalists (both old and new) being drawn towards Indian literary materials as sources for understanding Indian culture. Many of the early European translators of Indian texts were also Christian missionaries, who, in their translations and critical editions of Indian works, effectively constructed uniform texts and a homogenized written canon through the imposition of Western philological standards and presuppositions onto Indian materials.¹⁶ Thus the oral and 'popular' aspect of Indian religious tradition was either ignored or decried as evidence of the degradation of contemporary Hindu religion into superstitious practices that bore little or no relation to 'their own' texts. This attitude was easily assimilated with the Pūranically inspired, brahminical belief in the current deterioration of civilization in the age of *kaliyuga*.

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

[T]he privileging of scribal communities and authoritative interpreters of 'tradition' provided, on the one hand, an essential requirement of practical administration. On the other, it formed a crucial component in colonialism's larger project itself for the textualization of cultures, for the construction of authoritative bodies of knowledge about Hindu communities as the means of securing 'freedom' to follow their own customs.¹⁷

William Jones for example, in his role as Supreme Court Judge in India, initiated a project to translate the *Dharmaśāstras* in the misguided belief that this represented the law of the Hindus, in order to circumvent what he saw as the 'culpable bias' of the native pundits. In taking the *Dharmaśāstras* as a binding law-book, Jones manifests the Judaeo-Christian paradigm within which he conceived of religion, and the attempt to apply such a book universally reflects Jones' 'textual imperialism'.¹⁸ The problem with taking the *Dharmaśāstras* as pan-Indian in application is that the texts themselves were representative of a priestly élite (the *brāhmaṇa* castes), and not of Hindus *in toto*. Thus, even within these texts, there was no notion of a unified Hindu community, but rather an acknowledgement of a plurality of local, occupational and caste contexts in which different customs or rules applied.¹⁹ It was thus in this manner that:

society was made to conform to ancient *dharmaśāstras* texts, in spite of those texts' insistence that they were overridden by local and group custom. It eventually allowed Anglicist administrators to *manipulate the porous boundary between religion as defined by texts and customs they wished to ban.*²⁰ [my italics]

There is, of course, a danger that in critically focusing upon Orientalist discourses one might ignore the importance of native actors and circumstances in the construction of Western conceptions of India. Here perhaps we should note the sense in which certain élitist communities within India (notably the scholarly *brāhmaṇa* castes) exerted a certain degree of influence upon the Western Orientalists, thereby contributing to the construction of the modern, Western conception of 'Hinduism'. The high social, economic and, to some degree, political status of the *brāhmaṇa* castes has, no doubt, contributed to the elision between brahmanical forms of religion and 'Hinduism'. This is most notable, for instance, in the tendency to emphasize Vedic and brahmanical texts and beliefs as central and foundational to the 'essence' of Hinduism, and in the modern association of 'Hindu doctrine' with the various brahmanical schools of the Vedānta (in particular, Advaita

Vedānta, the subject of Chapter 6). Indeed, neo-Vedāntic rhetoric about the underlying unity of Indian religion has tended:

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

As a result, western students saw Hinduism as a unity. The Indians had no reason to contradict this; to them the religious and cultural unity discovered by western scholars was highly welcome in their search for national identity in the period of struggle for national union.²¹

C.A. Bayly notes, for instance, the extent to which the administrative and academic demand for the literary and ritual expertise of the brahmins placed them in a position of direct contact and involvement with their imperial rulers, a factor that should not go unnoticed in attempting to explain why Western Orientalists tended to associate brahmanical literature and ideology with Hindu religion *in toto*.²² It is clear that, in this regard at least, Western Orientalists, working under the aegis of a Judaeo-Christian religious paradigm, looked for and found an ecclesiastical authority akin to Western models of an ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the case of the brahmanical 'priests' and pundits, already convinced of the degradation of contemporary Indian civilization in the present era of *kaliyuga*, these scholars generally found a receptive and willing religious élite, who, for that very reason remained amenable to the rhetoric of reform.

The brahmanical religions, of course, had already been active in their own appropriation of non-brahmanical forms of Indian religion long before the Muslim and European invasions. Brahmanization – the process whereby the Sanskritic, 'high' culture of the brahmins absorbed non-brahmanical (sometimes called 'popular' or even 'tribal') religious forms – was an effective means of assimilating diverse cultural strands within one's locality, and of maintaining social and political authority.²³ The process works both ways, of course, and many of the features of Sanskritic religion initially derived from a particular, localized context.²⁴ Nevertheless, in the case of the educated *brāhmaṇa* castes, the British found a loosely defined cultural élite that proved amenable to an ideology that placed them at the apex of a single world-religious tradition.²⁵ If one asks who would most have benefited from the modern construction of a unified Hindu community focusing upon the Sanskritic and brahmanical forms of Indian religion, the answer would, of course, be those highly educated members of the higher *brāhmaṇa* castes, for whom modern 'Hinduism' represents the triumph of universalized,

brahmanical forms of religion over the 'tribal' and the 'local'. Statistically, for example, it would seem that in post-Independence India the brahmin castes have become the dominant social group, filling 36 to 63 per cent of all government jobs, despite representing only 3.5 per cent of the Indian population.²⁶ As Frykenberg points out:

Brahmins have always controlled information. That was their boast. It was they who had provided information on indigenous institutions [for Western Orientalists]. It was they who provided this on a scale so unprecedented that, at least at the level of All-India consciousness, a new religion emerged the likes of which India had perhaps never known before.²⁷

The Sanskritic 'brahmanization' of Hindu religion (itself representing one stage in the textualization process) was filtered through colonial discourses, thereby furnishing a new holistic and unified conception of the multiplicity of Indian religious phenomena throughout history. Such an approach remains profoundly anti-historical in its postulation of an ahistorical 'essence' to which all forms of 'Hinduism' are said to relate. As Said has suggested, such an abstract and synchronic approach is one way in which Orientalist discourses fundamentally distinguish the passive and ahistorical Orient from the active and historically changing Occident. In this manner, Orientals are effectively dehumanized (since denied an active role in the processes of history), and thus made more amenable to colonial manipulation. As Romila Thapar suggests, this new Hinduism, furnished with a brahmanical base, was merged with elements of 'upper caste belief and ritual with one eye on the Christian and Islamic models', and was thoroughly infused with a political and nationalistic emphasis. Thapar describes this contemporary development as 'syndicated Hinduism', and notes that it is 'being pushed forward as the sole claimant of the inheritance of indigenous Indian religion'.²⁸

This reflects the tendency, during and after European colonialism, for Indian religion to be conceived by Westerners and Indians themselves in a manner conducive to Judaeo-Christian conceptions of the nature of religion, a process that Veena Das has described as the 'semitification' of Hinduism in the modern era. Thus, since the nineteenth century, 'Hinduism' has developed, and is notable for, a number of new characteristics, which seem to have arisen in response to Judaeo-Christian presuppositions about the nature of religion. This new form of organized or 'syndicated Hinduism':

seeks historicity for the incarnations of its deities, encourages the idea of a centrally sacred book, claims monotheism as significant to the worship of deity, acknowledges the authority of the ecclesiastical organization of certain sects as prevailing over all and has supported

large-scale missionary work and conversion. These changes allow it to transcend caste identities and reach out to larger numbers.²⁹

In the contemporary era, then, 'Hinduism' is characterized by both an emerging 'universalistic' strand that focuses upon proselytization (for example, neo-Vedānta, Sathya Sai Baba, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, transcendental meditation) as well as so-called 'fundamentalist', 'revivalist' and 'nationalist' strands that focus upon the historicity of human incarnations of Viṣṇu, such as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, the sacrality of their purported birth-places, and an antagonistic attitude towards non-Hindu religions (notably the Indian Muslims).³⁰ One hardly need point to the sense in which these developments mimic traits usually associated in the West with the Judaeo-Christian traditions.³¹

Indeed, it would seem that the key to the West's initial postulation of the unity of 'Hinduism' derives from the Judaeo-Christian presuppositions of the Orientalists and missionaries. Convinced as they were that distinctive religions could not coexist without frequent antagonism, the doctrinal liberality of Indian religions remained a mystery without the postulation of an overarching religious framework that could unite the Indians under the flag of a single religious tradition. How else can the relatively peaceful coexistence of the various Hindu movements be explained without some sense of religious unity? Why else would Hindus of differing sectarian affiliations accept the existence of rival gods unless they belonged to the same religious tradition? Failure to transcend a model of religion premised on the monotheistic exclusivism of Western Christianity thereby resulted in the imaginative construction of a single religion called 'Hinduism'. Of course, being able to classify Hindus under a single religious rubric also made colonial control and manipulation easier. The fact that the semblance of unity within India owed considerable debt to imperial rule seems to have been forgotten. The lack of an orthodoxy, of an ecclesiastical structure, or indeed of any distinctive feature that might point to the postulation of a single Hindu religion, was dismissed, and one consequence of this was the tendency to portray 'Hinduism' as a contradictory religion, which required some form of organization along ecclesiastical and doctrinal lines and a purging of 'superstitious' elements incompatible with the 'high' culture of 'Hinduism'.

This new *epistēme*³² created a conceptual space in the form of a rising perception that 'Hinduism' had become a corrupt shadow of its former self (which was now located in certain key sacred texts such as the Vedas, the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* – all taken to provide an unproblematic account of ancient Hindu religiosity). The perceived shortcomings of contemporary 'Hinduism' in comparison to the ideal form, as represented in the text, thus created the belief (among both Westerners and Indians) that Hindu religion had stagnated over the centuries and was therefore in need of reformation. The gap between original (ideal) 'Hinduism' and the

contemporary beliefs and practices of Hindus was soon filled, of course, by the rise of what have become known as 'Hindu reform movements' in the nineteenth century – groups such as the Brahma Samaj, the Ārya Samaj and the Rāmākṣṣṇa Mission. Virtually all textbooks on Hinduism describe these groups as 'reform' movements. This representation, however, falls into the trap of seeing precolonial Hindu religion(s) through colonial spectacles. When combined with a highly questionable periodization of Hindu religious history (which ultimately derives from James Mill's *A History of British India*), the impression is given (1) that Hinduism is a single religion with its origins in the Vedas, (2) that from the 'medieval' period onwards (c. tenth century onwards) Hinduism stagnated and lost its potential for renewal, and (3) that, with the arrival of the West, Hindus became inspired to reform their now decadent religion to something approaching its former glory. This picture of Indian history, as problematic as it is prevalent, reflects a Victorian and post-Enlightenment faith in the progressive nature of history. Thus Hinduism in the twentieth century is allowed to enter the privileged arena of the 'world religions', having finally come of age in a global context and satisfying the criteria of membership established by Western scholars of religion!

To illustrate the arbitrariness involved in the homogenization of Indian religions under the rubric of 'Hinduism', let us briefly consider what happens if one applies the same a priori assumption of religious unity to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As von Stietencron argues, if one takes these three 'religions' to be sects or denominations of a single religion one can point to a common geographical origin in the Near East, a common ancestry (Abrahamic tradition), a common monotheism, a common prophetism, all three accept a linear and eschatological conception of history, uphold similar (though varying) religious ethics, work within a broadly similar theological framework with regard to their notions of a single God, the devil, paradise, creation, the status of humankind within the workings of history, as well as, of course, revering the Hebrew Bible (to varying degrees). On the other hand, however, there is no common founder of the three movements, probably no doctrine that is valid for all adherents, no uniform religious ritual or ecclesiastical organization, and it is not immediately clear that the adherents of these three movements believe in the same God.³³ If we then consider the diversity of religious movements usually subsumed under the label 'Hinduism', we shall find a similar picture. Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that nineteenth- and twentieth-century 'Hindus' have generally not objected to the postulation of a single religious tradition as a way of understanding their beliefs and practices, whereas Jews, Christians and Muslims generally remain very protective of their own group identities. This Hindu attitude does not merely reflect the colonization of their thought-processes by the Orientalists. Postulation of Hindu unity was to be encouraged in the development of Indian autonomy from British rule. *Swaraj* (home rule) was seen to be inconceivable without the unification of

India along nationalistic and cultural lines. Not only that, although sectarian clashes have always occurred, in general Indian religious groups appear to have been able to live together in a manner unprecedented in the history of the Judaeo-Christian religions in the West.

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

The construction of a unified Hindu identity is of utmost importance for Hindus who live outside India. They need a Hinduism that can be explained to outsiders as a respectable religion, that can be taught to their children in religious education, and that can form the basis for collective action ... In an ironic twist of history, orientalism is now brought by Indians to Indians living in the West.³⁴

As mentioned earlier, the invention of 'Hinduism' as a single 'world religion' was also accompanied by the rise of a nationalist consciousness in India since the nineteenth century.³⁵ The modern nation-state, of course, is a product of European sociopolitical and economic developments from the sixteenth century onwards, and the introduction of the nationalist model into Asia is a further legacy of European imperialism in this area. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, to find that the very Hindu nationalists who fought so vehemently against British imperialist rule themselves accepted the homogenizing concepts of 'nationhood' and 'Hinduism', which ultimately derived from their imperial rulers.³⁶ To some extent it is difficult to see what alternative the opponents of colonialism had, since the nation-state provides the paradigmatic building block of all contemporary economic, political and cultural interaction. Thus, as David Ludden has suggested, the authority of Orientalist discourses initially derived from colonialism:

but it was reproduced by anti-imperial, national movements and reinvigorated by Partition, in 1947, and the reorganization of Indian states, in 1956; it thrives today on conflict expressed in religious and ethnic terms. In its reification of tradition and of oppositions between East and West, nationalized orientalism suffuses postcolonial political culture and scholarship that claims to speak for India by defining India's identity in a postcolonial world ... Having helped to make nations in South Asia what they are, orientalism fuels fires that may consume them.³⁷

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

Since it was easy to recognize other communities on the basis of religion, such as Muslims and Christians, an effort was made to consolidate a parallel Hindu community ... In Gramsci's terms, the class which wishes to become hegemonic has to nationalize itself and the 'nationalist' Hinduism comes from the middle class.³⁸

The status of the term 'Hinduism'

Given the evidence that we have just considered, is it still possible to use the term 'Hinduism' at all? One might wish to argue that the term 'Hinduism' is a useful construct in so far as it refers to the general features of 'Indian culture' rather than to a single religion. Julius Lipner has recently argued that scholars should retain the term 'Hinduism' in so far as it is used in a non-essentialist manner to refer to Hindu culture and not to the idea of a single religion. Lipner suggests that the Western term 'Hinduism' when used in this sense is effective so long as it represents the 'dynamic polycentrism' of *Hindutā* (Hindu-ness).³⁹

However, even Lipner's characterization of 'Hinduism' remains deeply indebted to Sanskritic brahmanism. It is difficult to see, even on this view, why Buddhism and Jainism are not themselves part of *Hindutā*. Despite Lipner's explicit disavowal of an essentialist or reified rendering of the term, his description of 'Hinduism' as 'macrocosmically one though microcosmically many, a polycentric phenomenon imbued with the same life-sap, the boundaries and (micro)centres seeming to merge and overlap in a complexus of oscillating tensions'⁴⁰ is likely to continue to cause misunderstanding, just as it is also likely to be appropriated by the inclusivism of neo-Vedānta (which attempts to subsume Buddhism (in particular) under the umbrella of an absolutism of the Advaita Vedānta variety) and Hindu nationalist groups alike. Although the modern Indian Constitution (article 25 (2)) classifies all Buddhist, Jains and Sikhs as 'Hindu', this is unacceptable for a number of reasons. First, it rides roughshod over religious diversity and established group-affiliations. Second, such an approach ignores the non-brahmanical

and non-Vedic elements of these traditions. Fundamentally, such assimilation effectively subverts the authority of members of these traditions to speak for themselves. In the last analysis, neo-Vedāntic inclusivism remains inappropriate for the simple reason that Buddhists and Jains do not generally see themselves as followers of sectarian denominations of 'Hinduism'.

Lipner's appeal to 'polycentricism' and perspectivism as characteristic of Hindu thought also fails to salvage a recognizable sense of Indian religious unity, since it amounts to stating that the unity of 'Hinduism' (or *Hindutā*) can be found in a relativistic recognition of perspective in a great deal of Hindu doctrine and practice. This will hardly suffice if one wishes to use the term 'Hinduism' in a way that is in any meaningful respect classifiable as a 'religion' in the modern Western sense of the term. One might wish to postulate 'Hinduism' as an underlying cultural unity, but this, too, is likely to prove inadequate once one moves beyond generalized examination and appeals to cultural homogeneity. Yet even if one accepts 'Hinduism' as a cultural rather than as a specifically religious unity, one would then need to acknowledge the sense in which it was no longer identifiable as an 'ism', thereby rendering the term obsolete or at best downright misleading. To continue to talk of 'Hinduism', even as a broad cultural phenomenon, is as problematic as the postulation of a unified cultural tradition known as 'Westernism'. There are general features of both Indian and Western culture that one can pinpoint and analyse to a certain degree, but neither term should be reified.

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

We cannot reduce the meanings of *dharma* to one general principle; nor is there one single translation that would cover all its usages. Nevertheless, there is coherence in this variety; it reflects the elusive, yet undeniable coherence of Hinduism itself, its peculiar unity-in-diversity.⁴¹

According to Halbfass, despite specific 'sectarian' allegiances (for example, to Vaiṣṇavism or Śaivism) the theoreticians and literary representatives of these traditions 'relate and refer to one another, juxtapose or coordinate their teachings, and articulate their claims of mutual inclusion or transcendence' in a manner indicative of a wider sense of Hindu unity and identity.⁴² However, the 'elusive' glue which apparently holds together the diversity of Indian religious traditions is not further elaborated upon by Halbfass, nor is this 'unity-in-diversity' as 'undeniable' as he suggests. As we have seen, the nineteenth-century Orientalists tended to postulate an underlying unity to Hindu religious traditions because they tended to view Indian religion from a Western Christian perspective. Halbfass at least is willing to admit that the reality of 'Hinduism' is 'elusive' and that the use of the term 'religion' to

translate the concept of *dharma* is problematic.⁴³ Nevertheless, in my view he fails to appreciate the sense in which the postulation of a single, underlying religious unity called 'Hinduism' requires a highly imaginative act of historical reconstruction. To appeal to the Indian concept of *dharma* as unifying the diversity of Hindu religious traditions is moot, since *dharma* is not a principle that is amenable to a single, universal interpretation, being in fact appropriated in diverse ways by a variety of Indian traditions (all of which tended to define the concept in terms of their own group-dynamic and identity). The appeal to *dharma* therefore is highly questionable in the same sense that an appeal to the notion of the Covenant would be in establishing that Judaism, Christianity and Islam were actually sectarian offshoots of a single religious tradition.

Despite all of these problems, one might argue that there are a number of reasons why one should retain the term 'Hinduism'. First, the term remains useful on a general, superficial and introductory level. Second, it is clear that, since the nineteenth century, movements have arisen in India that roughly correspond to the term as it was understood by Orientalists. Indeed, as I have argued, Orientalist accounts have themselves had a significant role to play in the rise of such groups. Thus 'Hinduism' now exists in a sense in which it certainly did not before the nineteenth century. Third, one might wish to retain the term, as Lipner does, with the qualification that its radically polythetic nature be understood. What I have in mind here is a non-essentialist approach that draws particular attention to the ruptures and discontinuities, the criss-crossing patterns and 'family resemblances' that are usually subsumed by unreflective and essentialist usage. Ferro-Luzzi, for instance, has suggested that the term 'Hinduism' should be understood to be a 'polythetic-prototypical' concept, polythetic because of its radically heterogeneous nature, and 'prototypical' in the sense that the term is frequently used by both Westerners and Indians to refer to a particular idealized construct. Prototypical features of Hinduism function as such either because of their high frequency among Hindus (for example, the worship of deities such Śiva, Kṛṣṇa and Gaṇeṣa, temple worship, and the practice of *pūja*), or because of their prestige among Hindus (such as the so-called 'high' culture of Hindus – that is, the brahmanical concepts of *dharma*, *saṃsāra*, *karma*, *advaita*, *viśiṣṭādvaita*, etc.), which remain important normative or prototypical paradigms for contemporary Hindu self-identity, although only actually believed in by a minority. With regard to this latter category, Ferro-Luzzi suggests that:

Even though only a minority of Hindus believe in them or even know them they enjoy the greatest prestige both among educated Hindus and Westerners. Besides, their influence upon Hindus tends to increase now with the spread of education [and literacy in particular, one might add]. The prototype of a Hindu might be a person who worships the above deities, visits temples, goes on a pilgrimage and believes in the above

concepts. Undoubtedly, such persons exist but they are 'only a minority amongst Hindus.'⁴⁴

In my view, however, the problems deriving from the use of 'Hinduism' make it inappropriate as a term denoting the heterogeneity of 'Hindu' religiosity in the precolonial era. Nevertheless, whatever one's view on the appropriateness of the term 'Hinduism', the abandonment of essentialism, rather than facilitating vagueness and disorder, opens up the possibility of new directions in scholarship. Indeed, a proper acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of Indian religious phenomena, as outlined in a postcolonial critique of homogenizing and hegemonic discourses (whether Western or Indian), also allows for attempts to overcome the cultural and political élitism supported by them, and for the possibility of subaltern responses to *dominant ideological constructs and the cultural and political élitism that they tend to support.*

The relevance of feminism to the Orientalist debate

So far I have suggested that in the construction of 'Hinduism' as a single religion the Orientalist creates a homogeneous picture of the world constructed according to Enlightenment (and ultimately Judeo-Christian) presuppositions about the nature of religion. Orientalist discourses, however, also tend to focus upon the radical 'otherness' of Indian religion as a way of contrasting the Indian with the normative (i.e. Western) paradigm. At first sight this might seem to entail a contradiction. How can Orientalist discourses conceive of Indian religion in their own image and at the same time conceive of that same phenomena as the mirror-opposite of that image? In fact it is precisely because 'Hinduism' is conceived of in terms of Western conceptions of religion that it can then be meaningfully contrasted with the normative paradigm itself. In this sense, Orientalist discourses on Indian religion often become confined within a self-contained process of identification and differentiation constructed according to a normative paradigm (frequently modern, Western Christianity but sometimes secular liberalism). In the context of such discourses, the Indian subject remains trapped within the self-perpetuating logic of identity and difference, and thus remains subordinate to the normative paradigm. The complicity of identity and difference is an important feature of such discourses. Thus 'Hinduism' was conceptualized by Western Orientalists according to their own Western presuppositions about the nature of religion. It was precisely this that enabled them to construct an image of India that was the inverse of that paradigm.

As Kalpana Ram has pointed out:

The logic of comparison – which is, on the face of it, concerned with difference – functions rather as a logic of identity, in which the Indian

subject does not enjoy independent status, and is made intelligible only in opposition to the fundamental or privileged values of Western modernity ... In the hegemonic discourse of modernity and liberalism, the Western subject has been conceived as an individuated self-conscious authorial presence (the 'author' of his own activities) ... [T]he 'Indian' is not simply different from the 'Westerner', but is his exact inverse.⁴⁵

This dilemma is reflected in the catch-22 situation in which the Indian colonial subject is placed. To agree with the colonial discourse is to accept one's subordination in terms of a hegemonic Western paradigm. However, in rejecting such discourses one often perpetuates the paradigm itself, even if the categories are now inverted, reversed or revalorized. This, for instance, is the situation with regard to Hindu nationalist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In their quest for home rule (*swaraj*) and freedom from imperial control, Hindus tended to perpetuate the nationalistic, romantic and homogenizing presuppositions of their British rulers.

As we have already seen, the manner in which Indological discourse has constructed India as the 'Other' or the 'shadow' of the West is a feature that is stressed in a number of critical accounts of Indological orientalism, e.g. the work of Ronald Inden (1985, 1990) and Ashis Nandy (1983). A number of scholars have pointed to work such as Louis Dumont's classic sociological study of the Indian caste system, *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970), as clear examples of this tendency. The hierarchical 'Indian' represented in this work comes to represent the antithesis of the ideal 'Western Man', or *homo aequalis*.⁴⁶ The essentialism endemic within such approaches necessitates a stereotypical representation of the Westerner in order that the Indian might reflect his polar opposite. The Westerner, presupposed as the normative paradigm in such analysis, tends to be idealized as modern, egalitarian, civilized, secular, rational and male. In contrast, the Indian is often represented as tied to tradition, primitive, hierarchical, uncivilized, religious, irrational and effeminate.

Rosalind O'Hanlon argues that the complicity between patriarchal and colonialist discourses has gone largely unnoticed by Edward Said and many of his followers, though Said has been quick to respond to this charge.⁴⁷ O'Hanlon suggests that the use of gender classifications to represent cultural differences and thus to establish the inferiority of the Orient:

... seems to me to run right through what he [Said] defines as the central principles of oriental representation from the late eighteenth century, almost as their natural substratum: the persistent reference to the effeminate sensuality of Asiatic subjects, their inertia, their irrationality, their submissiveness to despotic authority, the hidden wiles and petty cunning of their political projects. Implied in this femininity of weakness is also its opposite: an open dynamism and self-mastered rationality in colonial

culture, what Said describes as 'the clarity, directness and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race'.⁴⁸

Similar criticisms have also been offered by Jane Miller and Reina Lewis.⁴⁹ Perhaps the most striking example of the feminization of Indians is to be found in British conceptions of the Bengali male as weak, docile and effeminate. Thus, in a work lucidly entitled *An Essay on the Best Means of Civilising the Subjects of the British Empire in India and of Diffusing the Light of the Christian Religion throughout the Eastern World* (1805), John Mitchell suggests that 'there seems to be a natural alliance betwixt the gentleness of the Hindoo, and the generosity of the Briton'.⁵⁰ Mitchell warns the reader, however, of the dangers of 'diluting' the manly virtues of the British by spending too long away from the homeland: 'there is danger lest the bold and somewhat rugged elements of our national spirit, should, instead of assimilating the Hindoo character to itself, be melted down into the softness of the country'.⁵¹

Mitchell's anxiety is grounded in a belief that national characteristics are at least partially a consequence of climatic conditions, and demonstrates British concerns about the threat of contamination by Indian sensibilities and characteristics as a result of one's isolation from the homeland. Similarly, Tejaswini Niranjana points out that British Orientalist William Jones usually represented the Hindus as:

a submissive, indolent nation unable to appreciate the fruits of freedom, desirous of being ruled by an absolute power, and sunk deeply in the mythology of an ancient religion ... The presentation of Indians as 'naturally' effeminate as well as deceitful often go hand in hand in Jones' work.⁵²

The passive, feeble and generally 'unmanly' nature of the Indian is highlighted in the following turn-of-the-century account of the Bengali people, taken from John Strachey's *India* – a standard text for English trainees in the *Indian Civil Service*.

The physical organization of the Bengali is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds ... His mind bears a singular analogy to his body: it is weak even to helplessness for purposes of manly resistance; but its suppleness and tact move the children of sterner climates to admiration not unmingled with contempt.⁵³

It is here that we can see the ways in which notions of gender, race and nationality impinge upon each other in the colonial context. This is aptly demonstrated, for instance, in Mrinalini Sinha's analysis of the relationship

between British 'colonial masculinity' and 'Bengali effeminacy'.⁵⁴ Such work opens up the possibility of a link between feminist critiques of Western patriarchal culture and postcolonial critiques of Western hegemony, since the colonial subjects of India and Africa have both been described in terms of the prevailing feminine stereotypes of the day. Indeed, one might even wish to argue, as Kalpana Ram, Veena Das and Rosalind O'Hanlon have, that the link between Western conceptions of India and of the female coincide to such a degree that:

often, Indian male and female subjects are made to share a common subject position that is 'feminine' in relation to the Western model. The link explored here is not simply between Woman and Native, conceived in general terms, but between Western Woman (or Woman in Western discursive traditions) and the Indian Native. In Western discourses on modernity and subject-hood these terms have often been positioned in such a way that their attributes overlap and coincide.⁵⁵

Just as the myth of India has been constructed as the 'Other' (i.e. as 'not-West') to the West's own self-image, women have been defined as 'not-male' or other in relation to normative patriarchal paradigms. The construction of images of the 'Other' has thus increasingly become a target of both the feminist critique of patriarchy,⁵⁶ and of postcolonial critiques of Orientalism. Indeed, it would seem that the patriarchal discourses that have excluded the 'feminine' and the female from the realms of rationality, subjectivity and authority have also been used to exclude the non-Western world from the same spheres of influence.

In this sense, one might wish to point out that colonialism, in the broadest sense of the term, is a problem for all women living in a patriarchal society, and not just for those living under the political domination of a foreign power. Thus French feminist Hélène Cixous's appeal to the body as a source of female awareness stems from the fact that women have been unable to conceptualize their own experience as females because their bodies have been colonized by patriarchal discourse.⁵⁷ The potential links between the feminist and 'Third World' agendas are noted by Veena Das, who argues that:

Categories of nature and culture, emotion and reason, excess and balance were used to inferiorize not only women but also a whole culture. This means that if feminist scholarship is to claim for itself, as I believe it should, a potential for liberation ... , that there is the possibility of a natural alliance between feminist scholarship and knowledge produced by (and not of) other cultures.⁵⁸

Another parallel worth exploring, though beyond the scope of this work, is the exclusion of women and the 'Third World' from the privileged domain

of science and technology. The rhetoric of 'modernization' and 'development' theory, as enshrined, for instance, in the popular tripartite distinction between First, Second and Third World nations, perpetuates the belief that Western technological 'progress' is not only superior to that of the non-West, but also that the manner in which it transforms societies is a politically and culturally neutral process through which the non-Western world can 'catch up' with the West through modernization and development.⁵⁹

The work of Claude Alvares provides a highly critical account of the ways in which European powers either appropriated or marginalized the indigenous agricultural, industrial and medical technologies of the Asian world. Despite its polemical nature, his analysis provides a useful corrective to the standard modernist historical accounts, which portray European technology as vastly superior to that of the East. Alvares argues that the imitation (and appropriation) of Indian craftwork practices was essential to the revolution of European textile industries, particularly from the sixteenth century onwards.⁶⁰ He also points to the Indian origins of plastic surgery, which, it is claimed, derives from the necessity to reconstruct noses as a result of an Indian custom of amputating the nose of criminals as a punitive practice, and to the effectiveness but eventual suppression of indigenous brahmanical inoculations against smallpox.⁶¹ I am reminded here of Francis Bacon's famous remark that the three most important scientific discoveries in the history of the world have been paper and printing, gunpowder and the compass. These three discoveries have been instrumental in the development of the mass media of communication, the arms race, merchandising and the cultural interaction and exploration of the world. All three were, of course, initially discovered in Asia by the Chinese and not, as might be thought, in the West.

With regard to the status of women, feminists, from a number of different perspectives, have long argued that a similar position holds with regard to the subordination and exclusion of women from the realms of science and technology. Susan Hekman in a recent review of contemporary feminist theory writes:

Because only subjects can constitute knowledge, the exclusion of women from the realm of the subject has been synonymous with their exclusion from the realm of rationality and hence, truth ... [B]ecause women are defined as incapable of producing knowledge, they are therefore defined as incapable of engaging in intellectual, and specifically, scientific activities.⁶²

In order to see the relevance of such statements to colonial discourses about India, one need only replace the term 'Indians' for 'women' in the above quote and then reread it. The context changes but the analysis of power relations remains just as appropriate. Thus, just as women are denied subjectivity and agency in history, so too are Indians in colonial discourses. In this

sense both become dehumanized and silenced. Equally comparable is the association of the female with nature and the irrational in Western thought (themes taken up by ecofeminism and radical feminism), and the parallel equation of the colonized subject with the uncivilized and irrational savage. In this regard one is reminded of the time an English reporter asked Mahātmā Gandhi what he thought of British civilization. Gandhi's reply – 'I think that it would be a good idea!' – provides a humorous example of the deliberate inversion of British colonial prejudices.

Conclusions

Let me sum up some of the strands of argument that I have been considering as they relate to the study of Hinduism in general. The study of Asian cultures in the West has generally been characterized by an essentialism that posits the existence of distinct properties, qualities or 'natures' which differentiate 'Indian' culture from the West. As Inden has shown, Western scholars have also tended to presuppose that such analysis was an accurate and unproblematic representation of that which it purported to explain, and that as educated Westerners they were better placed than the Indians themselves to understand, classify and describe Indian culture.

Simplistically speaking, we can speak of two forms of Orientalist discourse, the first, generally antagonistic and confident in European superiority, the second, generally affirmative, enthusiastic and suggestive of Indian superiority in certain key areas. Both forms of Orientalism, however, make essentialist judgements that foster an overly simplistic and homogenous conception of Indian culture.

However, Orientalist discourses are not univocal, nor can they be simplistically dismissed as mere tools of European imperialist ideology. Thus, the 'new' Indian intelligentsia, educated in colonially established institutions, and according to European cultural standards, appropriated the romanticist elements in Orientalist dialogues and promoted the idea of a spiritually advanced and ancient religious tradition called 'Hinduism', which was the religion of the Indian 'nation'. In this manner, Western-inspired Orientalist and nationalist discourses permeated indigenous self-awareness and were applied in anti-colonial discourses by Indians themselves. However, such indigenous discourses remain deeply indebted to Orientalist presuppositions and have generally failed to criticize the essentialist stereotypes embodied in such narratives. This rejection of British political hegemony, but from a standpoint that still accepts many of the European presuppositions about Indian culture, is what Ashis Nandy has called 'the second colonization' of India.

In this regard, the nature of Indian postcolonial self-identity provides support for Gadamer's suggestion that one cannot easily escape the normative authority of tradition, for, in opposing British colonial rule, Hindu nationalists did not fully transcend the presuppositions of the West, but

rather legitimated Western Orientalist discourse by responding in a manner that did not fundamentally question the Orientalists' paradigm.

Through the colonially established apparatus of the political, economic and educational institutions of India, contemporary Indian self-awareness remains deeply influenced by Western presuppositions about the nature of Indian culture. The prime example of this is the development since the nineteenth century of an indigenous sense of Indian national identity and the construction of a single 'world religion' called 'Hinduism'. This religion is now the cognitive site of a power struggle between internationally orientated movements (such as ISKCON and the Rāmākṣṣṇa Mission) and contemporary Hindu nationalist movements (such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh). The prize on offer is to be able to define the 'soul' or 'essence' of Hinduism. My thesis in this chapter has been that this 'essence' did not exist (at least in the sense in which Western Orientalists and contemporary Hindu movements have tended to represent it) until it was invented in the nineteenth century. In so far as such conceptions of Indian culture and history prevail and the myth of 'Hinduism' persists, contemporary Indian identities remain subject to the influence of a Westernizing and neo-colonial (as opposed to truly postcolonial) Orientalism.