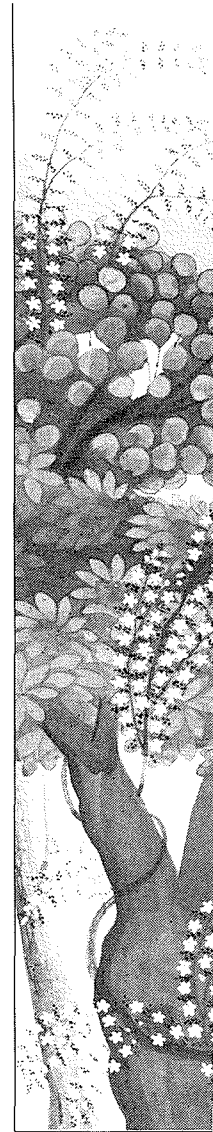


# Hinduism and the Fate of India

In May, only days before he was assassinated on the campaign trail, Rajiv Gandhi warned that if India's Hindu nationalists triumphed at the polls, "the country will burn." Indian democracy survived Gandhi's death and the challenge that he thought the Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) represented. But the fact remains that in India, a country founded on the secularist principles of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the rising political force is an overtly religious one. The next election could well leave the world's largest democracy—and the Third World's boldest political experiment—under the sway of a new and unfamiliar form of religious fundamentalism.

If an Indian from a century ago could observe all of this, surprise would almost certainly be his reaction. Surprise that Hinduism, with its multitude of gods, beliefs, customs, and peoples, is now referred to so adamantly as a single faith. Surprise at who is now considered Hindu (including certain tribal groups) and who is not (such as the Sikhs). Our contributors—John Stratton Hawley, Alf Hildebeitel, Wendy Doniger, and Prasenjit Duara—explore the creation of this new Hindu identity and the implications of the new Hindu politics for the future of India.



## NAMING HINDUISM

*by John Stratton Hawley*

**H**induism—the word, and perhaps the reality too—was born in the 19th century, a notoriously illegitimate child. The father was middle-class and British, and the mother, of course, was India. The circumstances of

the conception are not altogether clear. One heard of the “goodly habits and observances of Hindooism” in a Bengali-English grammar written in 1829, and the Reverend William Tennant had spoken of “the Hindoo system” in a book on Indian manners and history written at the beginning of the century. Yet it was not until the inex-



A 19th-century gouache showing milkmaids searching in vain for the divine Krishna. In India, gods do not remain in the "other world" but descend to Earth.

pensive handbook *Hinduism* was published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in 1877 that the term came into general English usage.

The author of this book was Sir Monier Monier-Williams, then Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford. Monier-Williams had approached the same topic in an earlier

work, *Indian Wisdom* (1875), but that book, being an introduction to Sanskrit literature, had a limited readership. *Hinduism* was more popular, for it was a volume in the Society's widely read series on "Non-Christian Religious Systems." Its very existence in that series served to set the Hindu religion on a par with Buddhism, Judaism,

Confucianism, and all the other “isms” that still figure, for better or worse, as the major building blocks in our modern conception of world religion.

Monier-Williams understood that there was a problem in this—two problems, in fact. First, the “system” he proposed to describe had an utterly “variable character.” Hinduism was “all-tolerant, all-comprehensible, all-absorbing,” he said, so much so that it resembled the great Indian banyan tree, whose “single stem sends out numerous branches destined to send roots to the ground and become trees themselves, till the parent stock is lost in a dense forest of its own offshoots . . . .” To the “parent stock,” a majestic pantheistic creed, Monier-Williams gave the name “esoteric” Hinduism or simply Brahmanism. As the name showed, he conceived it to have been produced by Brahmans, the priestly caste that had exerted its scholarly influence over the shaping of India ever since the Indo-European Aryans descended upon the subcontinent during the second millennium B.C.\* As for the branches of his banyan tree, the “popular side of the same creed,” these Monier-Williams called “exoteric” Hinduism or just plain Hinduism, for short. His distinction between a religious core and a periphery—between learned and popular, between higher and lower—had long been a leitmotif in European thinking about religion. Monier-Williams furnished names that made realities of both sides of the split in Hinduism, instead of suggesting, as many of his predecessors had, that one aspect was really more than religion (philosophy)

\*The Indo-Europeans were tribes who spoke related languages and occupied the pastureland between the Caspian and Black seas. Their dispersal from that region around 2000 B.C. sent some tribes as far west as England and Ireland while the easternmost or Indo-Aryan tribes eventually crossed the Hindu Kush mountains to the Indus Valley.

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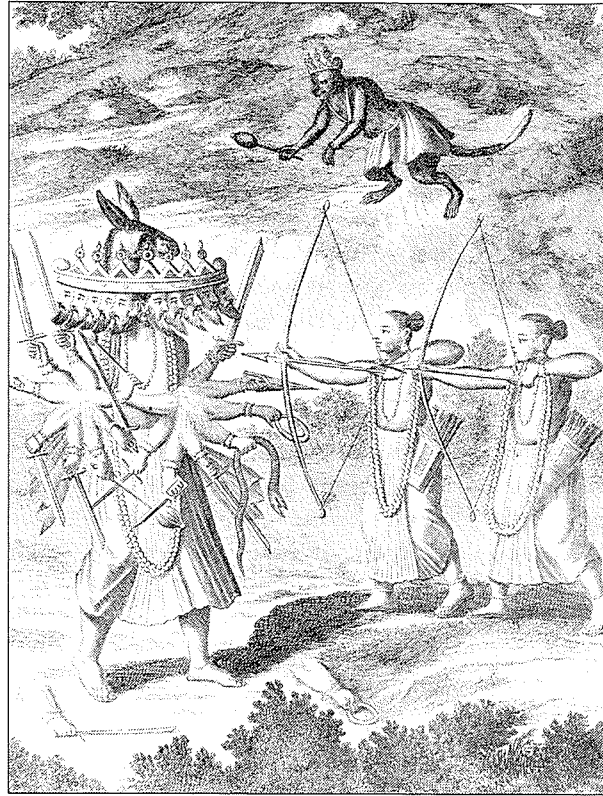
while the other was really less (superstition).

These very names, however, constituted Monier-Williams’ second problem, and it is to his credit that he perceived it. As he candidly admitted, Brahmanism and Hinduism “are not names recognized by the natives.” They were 19th-century English neologisms that had parallels in other European tongues but no place in any Indic language. In Hindi, one of India’s major languages, it would not be until the early 20th century that a real parallel to “Hinduism” could be found—the word *hindutva* (Hinduness, Hinduism)—and this term was patently an ideological and political invention, a tool in India’s nationalist movement. It was created for a pamphlet literature supporting rallies where Indians of various stripes attempted to forge a common Hindu identity by training with staves, as in traditional Hindu gymnasia, and marching in khaki shorts, in the fashion of the British police force in India. The shorts aptly symbolized the derivative element in this new “Hinduism”: The raw material and the idea of a half-size pant may have been Indian, but the cut, definition, and standard ritual usage came from Europe.

**T**he word “Hindu” is much older than “Hinduism,” but it too is a bit of a stranger in India itself. Though the Greeks knew a version of the word (*hindoï*), it was apparently first used as a religious term by the Muslim invaders who entered India early in the second millennium A.D. to designate the practices of people they found living in the region of the Indus River. These people—Hindus—were simply Indians, natives. Hindus themselves were slow to take up the term, and, when they did, it was with a similar purpose: to

distinguish themselves from outsiders, especially Muslims (or “Turks” as they tended to say). Even in the 16th century, 500 years after the Muslim conquerors had come, the term Hindu was rarely used—certainly never in Sanskrit or in any even vaguely scriptural document—and when it was, its range was such that it would have embraced Buddhists and Jains as well as the people we today would call Hindus.

At the beginning of the 19th century a coterie of upper-class Bengalis who had regular contact with the British (including Ram Mohun Roy, the so-called “father of modern India”) began to use the word in roughly its modern sense, preferring it to “Gentoo,” which was equally popular in British usage and was derived through the Portuguese, from the word “gentile,” meaning heathen. Yet it was only much later in the 19th century that it became commonplace for Hindus to respond to questions about their religious identity by using the term “Hindu.” It was the official British census, a basic reflex of enlightened empire-building, that created the need for such a response, and many Indians gave it amid confusion, or not at all. Low-caste and Untouchable leaders resisted being lumped together under the rubric “Hindu” because real political and economic gains were at stake: The British had inaugurated a system of government designed to give representation to various religious and ethnic communities. During the censuses of the 1920s and ’30s, following an earlier example set by Sikhs, these leaders urged their followers to answer the religion question with a firm “We are not Hindus!” Even those who were content to have themselves described as Hindu did so with little conviction: Hindus were



*Hinduism in a Eurocentric mirror. This fanciful Westernized engraving from 1672, truer to Indian views than most, illustrates the 10 incarnations of Vishnu.*

what was left after others—Muslims, Untouchables, Christians, Sikhs, and so forth—had set themselves apart.

After Independence (1947), when the word became truly common, this pattern persisted. Already in the early 20th century leaders such as Sri Aurobindo and Mohandas Gandhi had articulated versions of Hindu nationalism, but it is probably safe to say that Indians began to think of themselves as Hindus more because of the creation of Pakistan in 1947, which was by charter a country for Muslims, than because of anything intrinsic to their own religious identity. Even today Hindus are apt to describe themselves by sect (as Vaishnavas, say) or caste-groupings (as Nagar Brahmins, for example) rather than to call

themselves Hindus, and the term *hindutva* has a still more arcane ring. Likewise the phrase *hindu dharma* ("Hindu religion"), which has become conventional in certain sorts of official and public literature, tends to function as a call to the battlements rather than as a simple designation of fact.

So there has been little Hindu about Hinduism, this supposedly ancient religion, until very recent times. Hindus had a concept of India as sacred space and they had histories and epics that established their complex common ancestry, but they never developed a concept of themselves as a society unified by religion. To the contrary, the Hindu idea of *dharma*—of right conduct in conformity to ultimate laws—typically insisted upon distinctions between various groups.

Hinduism originated as a European term, not an Indian one, and it may be significant that Europeans living in Europe, not the many Europeans who lived in India during the 19th century, were most responsible for crediting it. It served as a component in a conceptual map that was of far greater use in expansionist, imperialist Europe than in Asia itself. At the same time, however, it represented the consolidation of a tradition of scholarship that was some three centuries old by the time Monier-Williams spoke *ex cathedra* from Oxford, and most of that tradition did indeed grow up in the Indian subcontinent. Today we call this tradition Orientalism, probably with a pejorative twist, but that too is a term with a history, and the first practitioners would have been very surprised to hear themselves referred to in such a way.

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**I**n the English-speaking world, Sir William Jones is often thought of as the first true Orientalist. By founding the Asiatic Society of Bengal and its journal

*Asiatick Researches* in 1784, Jones created the first forum for systematic Western scholarship about India.

Yet the roots of Orientalism go deeper: Roberto de Nobili, a Jesuit missionary of the early 17th century and a remarkably colorful figure, may deserve to be called the first European Orientalist of India. Scion of a Tuscan noble family that produced two popes, nephew of a precocious cardinal whose name he inherited, born into the temporal and spiritual aristocracy of Rome, Nobili forsook it all to board a Portuguese ship bound for Goa in 1604. Sailing onward around the tip of India, he received permission from his Jesuit superior to travel inland and set himself up in the Tamil city of Madurai, which was venerated as South India's foremost center of Brahman learning.

Nobili's purpose was, as his superior put it, "to open a door for the conversion of those Gentiles who are remarkable for their ability, judgment, and sense of honor." His approach to Indian society was unabashedly elitist. He ignored most of the crazy quilt of Hindu life. Rather, Nobili began with the class he took as corresponding most closely to his own: the spiritual aristocracy of learned (but not necessarily wealthy or temporally powerful) Brahmans. In explaining himself to his Brahman peers, he emphasized his own fine education and noble birth. He denied that he was a foreigner (*parangi*) in the sense to which they had become accustomed—that is, a Portuguese—depicting himself instead as a Roman monk, a religious ascetic (*sanyasi*). He had come to Madurai as a pilgrim, he said, and for penance, but had decided to stay. This information he published in a Tamil-language manifesto that he tacked to a tree in front of his house.

Nobili acted out his analogies. He adopted a Brahman diet (no eggs, no meat, a Brahman cook); he received permission

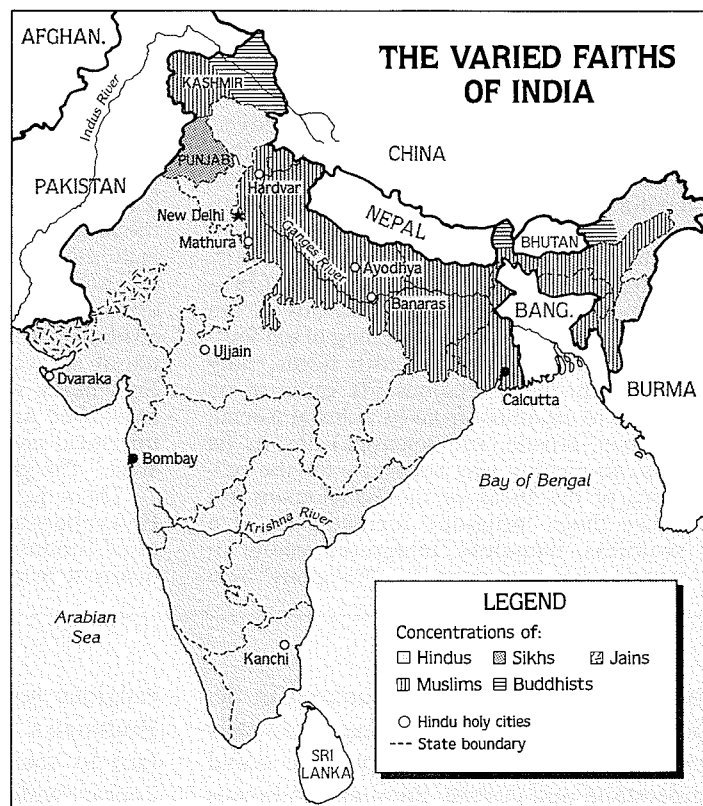
from his Jesuit superior to refrain from touching members of the lowly castes; he wore a long saffron-colored ascetic's "toga," carried a mendicant's staff and water-gourd, and painted the ashen marks of Shiva on his forehead. In justifying these practices to his superior, he cited the success in China of Jesuits who had adopted the dress of the Mandarins. And as would befit the first Orientalist, he learned Sanskrit, which he saw as the Latin of India.

All this constituted his own *apologia* to the Brahmans of Madurai, but in several of his written works he performed the same gesture in reverse, defending Brahman ways to Europeans. Three centuries earlier his Venetian countryman Marco Polo had perceived the Brahmans of Tamil Nadu as "enchanters" who uttered incantations and spells for a price to make the pearl divers of the Coromandel coast confident in the face of danger. Nobili, by contrast, depicted them as scholars, not priests, and went so far as to call himself an Italian Brahman (*Brachmanem Italum*) when addressing the pope. He portrayed the Brahmans not as mystifiers but as interpreters of law and of the sciences.

Marco Polo had described the idolatrous habits of the Indians he observed—in particular, their dressing and feeding of images—whereas Nobili attempted to distinguish between the highest echelon of Brahman scholars and those who officiated in the temples. The former were held by their countrymen to be

"perfect," he says—"proficient in the sciences" and "given to the contemplation of the true God." But even the idolaters (*idololatrae*), whom he classified into sects such as Shaivas and Vaishnavas, came off well. Nobili endeavored to show how aspects of "the law of Christ," including the mystery of the Holy Trinity, were embedded in "the laws of the idolaters," so idolaters were "not to be altogether condemned." It was a remarkable effort of cultural and religious translation.

Several features of Nobili's effort deserve particular attention. First, both in life and in scholarship, he characteristically situated the doctrines of those he studied in their social context. This served his apolo-



*In India there are many faiths and many variations within Hinduism. For example, Shaivite (Shiva-worshipping) sects predominate in the far north, in the south near Kanchi, and near Bombay. And castes, numbering more than 3,000, divide India in other ways.*

## OF CAMPHOR AND COCONUTS

Of all the world's religious traditions, none has been more closely scrutinized for its fissures than "Hinduism." Put simply, it is now fashionable to argue that there is no such thing.

Two prominent scholars, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Robert E. Frykenberg, have been instrumental in establishing the idea that it was not just the history of Hinduism that was invented by outsiders but its very identity. It is worth looking at the work of Smith and Frykenberg to see whether the idea of "Hinduism" is as fragile and recent as contemporary scholarship suggests.

Smith, who until recently headed the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University, inspired an influential school of comparative religion. In *The Meaning and the End of Religion* (1962), he attributes the coinage of the term "Hindu" to the consequences of the Muslim invasions of North India beginning in A.D. 1001. Originally, "Hindu" defined not a religion but a geographical attribute of all non-Muslim peoples south and east of the Indus River: that is, in "Hindustan." Smith argues that Hinduism as a distinct religion was a 19th-century construct, as were most other "Eastern" religions or "isms." The single exception was Islam, which named itself, distinguishing itself from Judaism and Christianity, its fellow Abrahamic religions of "the Book." The 19th-century naming of the Eastern "isms" occurred, Smith notes, only when a people's religious life came to be treated as separable from its cultural (social, political, artistic, and scientific) life. As he says, no naming was necessary for the religions of the Incas or the Babylonians because their "religion" formed part of a seamless, nameless, integrated whole in which what was done for "religious" rea-

sons was virtually inseparable from what was done for, say, economic reasons.

Smith argues that this 19th-century naming process followed a "trend toward reification" of religion, in which faith in God was replaced by an allegiance to newly named "things," the religions themselves. Smith finds it important that Hinduism provides no good equivalent to the Western term "religion," but then he fails to note that this is equally true for his concept of "faith." Smith would like to argue, for example, that the *varna* system of social classes is "an expression of faith," but no one else writing on the subject has ever made that argument. More generally, Smith states, "Hinduism" is "not a unity and does not aspire to be." He admits, however, that "classical Hindus were inhibited by no lack of . . . [group] self-consciousness." Such self-consciousness, however, implies some unity after all.

Robert Frykenberg, a historian at the University of Wisconsin, carries these arguments even further. In the anthology *Hinduism Reconsidered* (1989), Frykenberg argues that present-day, so-called Hinduism is quite different from the Indian religious past that it supposedly incorporates. For Frykenberg, the term Hinduism is not so much theologically misleading (as it was in Smith's view) but politically dangerous and intellectually erroneous. Political interests in India have attributed to modern Hinduism the character of a "world religion"—"a character," Frykenberg writes, "which is all too easily swallowed and then certified by naive and uncritical savants of oriental religions in the West." The gauntlet has been thrown down.

There is, indeed, much to be said for Frykenberg's position. The reified, politicized Hinduism he speaks of is a reality. It is different from what preceded it and what

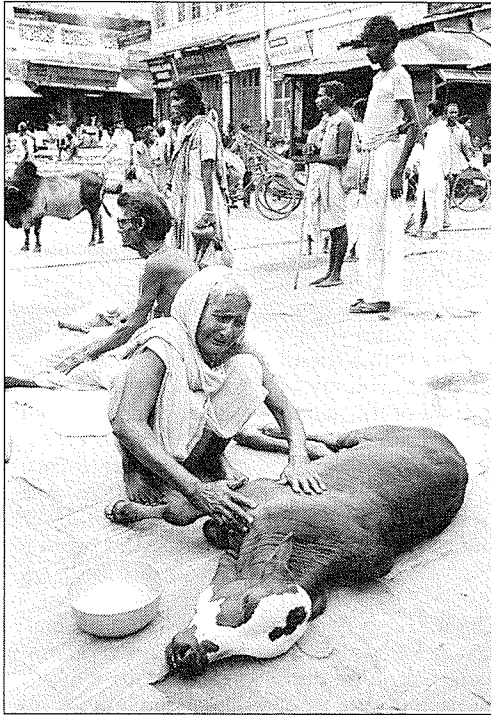
getic ends, for if he could succeed in depicting the Brahmans as playing a primarily social role, not a religious one, he could understand and portray them as candidates for initiation into the higher law of Christ. Though making up less than 10 percent of the population, the Brahmans typically performed all major religious functions, and

religious regulations shaped much of the Brahman's life from diet (usually vegetarian) to social activity (severely restricted contact with lower castes) to profession (no plowing or handling of impure materials like leather). Yet Nobili tended to downplay such religious underpinnings and instead attributed the Brahmans' prominence to

surrounds it in its contemporary milieu. But the fact that many current Hindu movements have strong, and even dangerous, political overtones is not in itself a sufficient reason to toss out the concept of Hinduism.

Although scholars have dissected the idea of a single Hinduism, its image as one of the world's great religions remains popularly accepted. In books on the world's religions, Hinduism is readily defined, indeed much as the earlier Orientalists defined it—as a religion united intellectually by the age-old Vedas, socially by the four classes of castes (*varnas*), and spiritually by the

laws of *dharma/karma* which govern the transmigration of souls. Frykenberg argues that this textbook definition has “been made to encompass everything from the philosophical and the ritual features of the cosmic order in all its highest sophistication to the bloodiest, crudest, meanest, and most savage practices of the most primitive peoples.” Indeed, he laments, “blood sacrifices” and “blood rituals”—such as the offering of goats and bulls—continued after 1817 under the British and are allowed to continue to-



*Cows, because they give milk and ask no recompense, are nearly sacred symbols of purity and motherhood. Hindus allow them to roam in temples and even in their homes.*

symbolize the offering of one's head to the deities. Likewise, they light camphor to wave before the temple deity as the medium through which their offerings are carried to the gods.

Frykenberg tries to expose the futility of defining a Hindu by asking whether the participation of Muslims or Christians at Hindu temples and festivals “makes them Hindus?” The point, however, is that these events would not even occur if Christians and Muslims were the only people involved. It is the

day under India's present state governments.

Frykenberg, like others, recognizes the impossibility of defining Hinduism by “essentials.” Here Frykenberg disregards a modern scholarly truism: Hinduism has no orthodoxy, but only orthopraxy (correct practice). A Hindu need not define himself by a statement of beliefs or by allegiance to a set of doctrines (as Smith would have it) or even by a response to the government census. What defines a Hindu is his or her practices. Many Hindus, for example, are united by the rituals of coconuts and camphor. Some Hindus break coconuts to

their noble birth and their being the seekers and custodians of the truth.

Second, he attempted, on the basis of what we today might call field work, to undo the preconceptions about India that were inherited from classical times. Since the time of Herodotus India had symbolized life at the edge of the known world—

vast, complex, confused, and fabulous. Nobili tried, by contrast, to find direct analogies between what was familiar to him at home and what he found in Madurai.

Third, Nobili established a double distinction in regard to Brahmans. On the one hand he made the common observation that the Brahmans were the cognoscenti of



practices (including the building and maintaining of the temples) themselves that are Hindu. And we may as well face it, so are the majority of the people who keep such temples and festivals going. If you ask why these people perform the rites the way they do, you will almost invariably hear that they do it because their ancestors did it or because it is custom, not because it fulfills some doctrine or teaching. The meaningful question, then, is not "who is a Hindu?" but "what are the things that Hindus do?"

I recently attended a large multi-village festival for a South Indian deity with a friend of mine, Lee Weissman of the University of Chicago. Lee was asked by one of the young men in the crowd. "Are you Hindu?"

"No," he answered, "I am a Jew."

"Is a Jew a Hindu?"

"Well, they do many similar things."

"Do you break coconuts and light camphor?"

"No," Lee answered.

"Then you're not a Hindu."

Here we have, I think, a rather profound folk definition of Hinduism. One differentiates Hindus by what they do and don't do: They break coconuts and light camphor; they do not light candles or candelabras, or offer lambs or doves.

In *Hinduism Reconsidered*, anthropologist Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi argues that "it is not necessary to abandon the term Hinduism or deny it the status of a religion. What should be abandoned instead is the conviction that all concepts can be defined . . . [with] clear-cut boundaries." She turns helpfully to the philosopher Wittgenstein's notion that certain concepts may be held together by a "family resemblance," by a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing." Such concepts "cannot be defined but only exemplified." Recall our coconuts and camphor as exem-

plifications of Hinduism. Lawrence Babb, in *Redemptive Encounters* (1986), points to a similar family resemblance in what are on the surface highly distinct Hindu religious movements. And he reminds us that "Hindus mean something when they call themselves that, and what they mean goes deeper than mere matters of subcontinental politics or cultural chauvinism."

Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi introduces the idea of "prototypes" in Hinduism, referring to those features that recur most prominently and frequently in the crisscrossed Hindu fabric. Pilgrimage, asceticism, and vegetarianism are good examples that she cites. Sacrifice is clearly another such prototype, despite Frykenberg's disparagement of its bloodier forms. Not all Hindus follow such practices, and they are not unique to Hindus. But they each have a distinctive frequency and prestige, and, I would add, style within the Indian context that marks them as Hindu.

While one can agree with Frykenberg and other scholars who lament some of the misuses to which the name Hinduism has been put, there are good reasons to resist their conclusions. In Hinduism, we are faced with a deep and diverse tradition, one that cannot be expected to rethink the name it wants to call itself, no matter how recent the name may be.

—Alf Hiltebeitel

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*Alf Hiltebeitel, a former Wilson Center Fellow, is professor of religion at The George Washington University. He is the author of The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata (1976) and The Cult of Draupadi (Vol. I, 1988; Vol. II to be published by University of Chicago later this year) and the editor of Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees (1989).*

India, the carriers of its learned and religious traditions. So while Brahmans were primarily a hereditary group, one could also speak of "the Brahmans of the Buddhist or atheist school" and, as we have seen, Italian ones too. On the other hand, Nobili noted the difference between Brahmans who were *gnanis*, "wise men," and

those who were "idolaters" involved in cultic life. Nobili then articulated something like the distinction between center and periphery or high and low that was to become critical for Monier-Williams.

Finally, and most obvious, Nobili's main object of concern was not the religion of the Hindus—as far as I know, he did not

use the term—but of the Brahmins. What he was concerned with was aligning two traditions of learning, the Christian and the Brahmin, so that they might converge. Other missionaries and travelers had understood the Brahmins' sacred thread and boxlike forehead mark as the insignia of idolatry, but for Nobili they were symbols of learning. He himself assumed them happily, hoping thereby to solidify a bond that would make it possible for him to teach his Brahmin acquaintances "the lost Veda," the Christian Veda; and by teaching them, teach the rest of Indian society as well.

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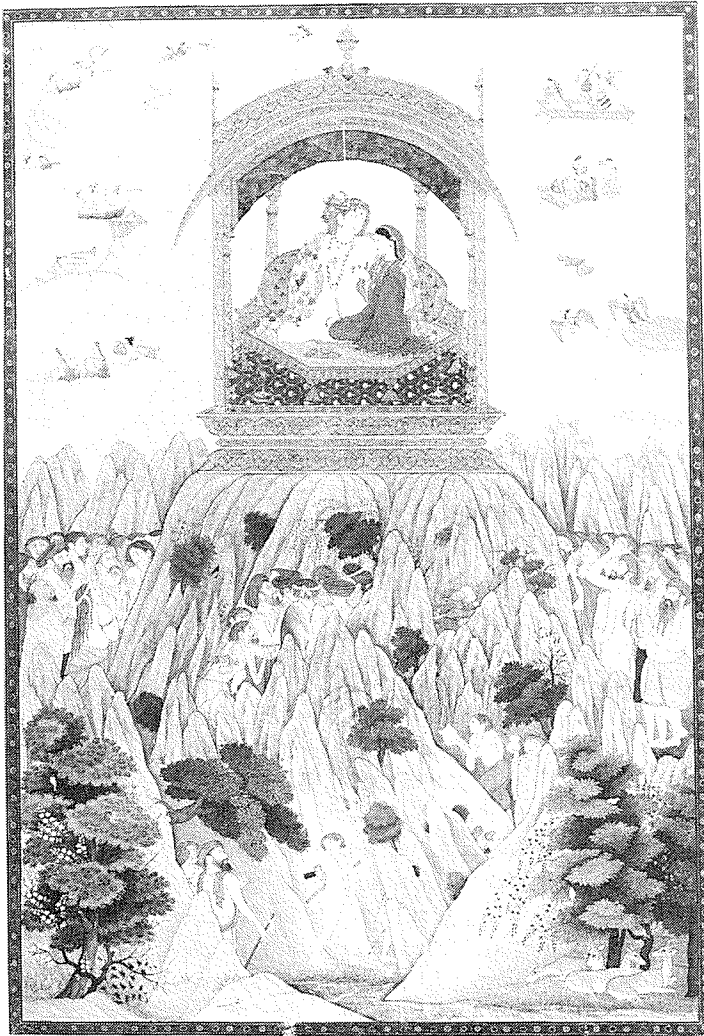
The next major phase in Europe's naming of Hinduism came with the Enlightenment. Yet just as important themes in the Catholic Reformation paled before Roberto de Nobili's immediate missionary preoccupations, so were broad Enlightenment motifs muted by the local concerns of British Orientalist scholarship in Bengal in the 18th century. Take, for example, Nathaniel Halhed, who published a *Code of Gentoo Laws* in 1776 and was therefore, in a sense, the Nobili of his time. Halhed created this document not to fill a chapter in some great encyclopedia but to meet the practical needs of his superior in the British East India Company, the governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings. In his Judicial Plan of 1772, Hastings had called for what Halhed termed "a new system of government" that would make it possible for British administrators to deal with Indian litigation on the basis of local canons. These were understood to be based in the Qur'an so far as Muslims were concerned and in the "Shaster," that is, the *dharmaśāstra* ("treatises on duty"), when the issue concerned Hindus. Notably, then, it was a comparison with Islam—Muslims had ruled Bengal before the British dis-

placed them—that suggested the terms by which a summary of Hindu institutions began to be drawn up.

The naming of Hinduism in its late 18th-century phase was thus again dictated by European needs—in particular, the need to rule. But now it was northern Europe rather than Italian or Portuguese, and Protestant—or worse, Deist!—rather than Catholic concerns that shaped the comprehension of Hinduism.

Meanwhile in Europe, during the Enlightenment, intellectuals were engaged in a new public debate about the status of Christianity in relation to other religious traditions. As Europe's trade and colonies spread throughout the world, its educated classes had become especially intrigued—in part through Jesuit reporting—by traditions that appeared to represent standards of rationality and social organization that rivaled those of the West. On the whole, Europe's self-confidence remained unshaken, but knowledge of the achievements of China and then India did have an effect.

For someone like Halhed there was no *crise de confiance*, at least not in the earlier, more productive part of his life. Here was a man from a prominent mercantile family, who had trained at Harrow, written farces with Richard Sheridan when they were students at Oxford, and cut quite the figure among the ladies of Calcutta (some of them already married). His approach was evenhanded and secure: He wished to give "a precise idea of the customs and manners of these people which, to their great injury, have long been misrepresented in the Western world," lest his countrymen, in their vanity, try to reconcile "every other mode of worship in some kind of conformity with our own." He deplored the popular idea that Asians were more inclined to violence than Europeans and hoped to correct this notion by publishing a digest of Indian law. As for Hindu religion, like all religion, it



*Hindu gods are full of contradictions. Shiva—shown with his divine consort, Parvati—embodies fertility (he devised 84 million sexual positions) and asceticism, yet is also lord of destruction.*

was to be understood as a stage on the upward road from barbarism to science.

Other British students of Hindu manners and doctrine felt differently. John Zephaniah Holwell was a surgeon in the East India Company who took an active interest in Indian civil affairs. He contributed to the Deist discovery of Hinduism and thus brought Hinduism into the great debate about the status of the Christian Church. His first major work—*Interesting Historical*

*Events, relative to the Provinces of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan . . . As also the Mythology and Cosmogony, Fasts and Festivals of the Gentoos, followers of the Shastah*—created quite a stir when it was published in 1765. It was swiftly translated into German and French; Voltaire had read it in the original by 1767; and it was to have a lasting impact on Orientalist scholarship.

Halhed had proposed a common source of Indo-European language and religion, but Holwell believed that India itself was the source from which the others sprang. He believed that the “original principles, religious and moral, of the ancient Brahmans” included a belief in the immortality of the soul and in a single, eternal God long before the time of Moses or Jesus Christ. (Indeed, according to Holwell, Jewish and Christian monotheism and belief in immortality are descended from the Brahman religion.) Holwell main-

tained, similarly, that Pythagoras had learned the doctrine of metempsychosis, the migration of souls, by visiting India.

An interesting facet of Holwell’s position is that he seems to have believed that he had at one time been in possession of the oldest extant texts in which these original principles were inscribed. Alas, the manuscripts were destroyed when Calcutta was sacked by the Muslim ruler of Bengal in 1756. Holwell summarized his “Shastah”

in such a way that it sounded like an earlier, brahmanical version of the Christian doctrine of the Fall, replete with a final judgment and angels good and bad. On the good side were the major Hindu deities Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, while their enemies (Ravana, for example, the villain in the *Ramayana*) stood in for Lucifer and Beelzebub. In all likelihood, however, Holwell's "Shastah" was not some ancient Sanskrit text, as he believed, but a relatively recent document. It is ironic that Holwell, who was to become one of the great challengers of Christian truth, did so in large part on the basis of documents he accepted as brahmanical; in truth they stood quite outside the general edifice of Brahman learning.

No matter. Holwell's "Shastah," along with the *Ezour-Vedam*, a French document which was fabricated out of whole cloth probably with the intention of having Jesus use it in converting natives, made a deep impression on Voltaire. He subscribed eagerly to Holwell's conclusions, pointing out that they established the Brahmans as several centuries older even than the Chinese Confucians. Christianity, he informed Frederick the Great, was entirely founded on "*l'antique religion de Brama.*" And thus was joined one of the great debates of the Enlightenment, with the anti-Christian side being taken up more characteristically on the Continent than in sober Britain.

Whichever side of the debate one embraced, by the end of the 18th century most educated Europeans had come to accept a series of points about Indian religion quite unlike what had been believed earlier, when India was still primarily a land of mystery and dark idolatry. First, "the doctrine of Brihma," as Halhed called it, was understood to be unusually tolerant (except in relation to the women of its own society, who were subject to *suttee*, cremation on their husband's funeral pyre). Second, the

doctrine possessed two levels: the idolatrous, which could now be interpreted not just as crass paganism but as behavior of a symbolic sort, and more exaltedly, the monotheist. Third, "the doctrine of Brihma" affirmed the immortality of the soul by teaching metempsychosis. Fourth, that doctrine embraced a series of moral principles that were held at least by some European minds to be the rival of those endorsed in the Christian West. And finally, this system bore a real relation to Semitic—and specifically Christian—religion.

When Henry David Thoreau, halfway through the 19th century, stepped into a life of seclusion at Walden Pond, he took with him a copy of that major Hindu religious text, the Bhagavad Gita, along with this entire set of conceptions about Hindu religion. There, at the end of winter, his silent isolation was broken by a hundred workers cutting Walden's ice into chunks that would be exported to Madras and Bombay and Calcutta. As the ice-cutters labored, Thoreau imagined a more fundamental connection that linked the Ganges with his own pond and indeed his own well.

In the morning I bathe my intellect  
in the stupendous and cosmogonical  
philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta,  
since whose composition years of the  
gods have elapsed, and in comparison  
with which our modern world and its  
literature seem puny and trivial . . . I  
lay down the book and go to my well  
for water, and lo! there I met the  
servant of the Brahman . . . come to  
draw water for his master, and our  
buckets as it were grate together in  
the same well. The pure Walden water  
is mingled with the sacred water of  
the Ganges.

Seven centuries after Marco Polo, Thoreau and other Westerners had come to see "the doctrine of Brihma" as equal to the best that Christendom had yet produced.

As Thoreau's appropriation of it would suggest, most of the 18th-century Oriental-

ist description of “Gentoo” religion depicted what Monier-Williams was to call Brahmanism, a philosophical system more or less laid out in the five points listed above. The “popular religion” that Monier-Williams dignified with the title Hinduism in 1877 was mainly ignored. It is true that Holwell made some attempt to catalogue “fasts and festivals,” but on the whole it was not until the 19th century that this aspect became a regular feature in scholarly descriptions of Hinduism. Only then did “Hinduism” fully emerge before European eyes—

just at the time, paradoxically, when some of the most influential Indian interpreters of the subject were eager to subtract such practices from their tradition.

A major historical change had occurred in India in the century between Holwell’s *Interesting Historical Events* and the publication of Monier-Williams’s *Hinduism* in 1877. By the time Monier-Williams wrote, the British hold on India had assumed the proportions of empire, and their cataloguing of native castes, tribes, and sects was well under way. Especially influential was Horace Hayman Wilson’s *Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus*, which first appeared in Bengal in 1828 and was reprinted in Britain in 1846.

Monier-Williams’s job was to integrate this new information about “popular Hinduism,” and he did so, predictably, by putting it at the end of his book. In a way, this was natural, for the other major 19th-century advance in the study of Indian reli-



*Hindu architecture has its own language. This 7th-century A.D. temple tower in Orissa, India, resembles a mountain, home of the gods.*

gion clearly belonged at the beginning: a knowledge of the Vedas, the earliest hymns and incantations known to Hindus. Orientalist scholars tended to conceive of the Vedas as being comprised of distinct books that needed to be found and translated. The great force in the field was Friedrich Max Müller, an Oxford professor who produced a six-volume edition of the most important Veda, the Rig Veda, from 1849 to 1873 under a commission from the East India Company and later inaugurated the series “Sacred Books of the East.”

For centuries Brahmans had been telling Europeans about the Vedas, depicting them as the collection they venerated most highly but quoting them primarily through the Upanishads or other later texts. The Vedas were distant and immense, and because Vedic hymns were remembered primarily through rigorous oral traditions, they did not readily suggest themselves as candidates for translation. Yet the European predilection to see religion as based first and foremost on texts and to accord the highest status to the oldest text in a given group led religion-minded Orientalists to search the Vedas out. Once isolated and produced as books, these necessarily formed, to European eyes, the foundation stones for an adequate conception of Hinduism—or rather, as Monier-Williams and others put it, Brahmanism.

Yet the path from the early Rig Veda to contemporary Brahmanism was not ex-

actly obvious nor free from controversy. While Horace Hayman Wilson had understood the history of Hindu religion as an upward swing—"the course of time and the presence of foreign rulers have very much ameliorated the character of much of the Hindu worship," he said—Monier-Williams and his generation tended to see it as a downward trajectory. Monier-Williams made special efforts, therefore, to avert his readers' eyes from the "puerile conceits" that could surely be found in the Vedas and Upanishads and draw their attention instead to the "striking ideas, original ideas, and lofty language" that could "redeem the absurdities of the mysticism."

In *Hinduism*, Monier-Williams was at pains to bridge the two extremes of Indian religion that had come to light in the course of the 18th century—the ancient and the modern, or, as he saw it, the elevated and the mundane. He accomplished the trick through his coordinate use of the terms Brahmanism and Hinduism, which he saw not just as ideal types but as realities, with one succeeding the other. Brahmanism evoked the higher teaching of the Vedas, especially as achieved in the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. when "Men began to ask themselves earnestly such questions as—What am I? Whence have I come? Has the Creator form, or is he formless? . . ." The term Hinduism, by contrast, gave a name to "Brahmanism after it had degenerated—to wit, that complicated system of polytheistic doctrines and caste-usages which has gradually resulted out of the mixture of Brahmanism and Buddhism with the non-Aryan creeds of Dravidians and aborigines." Hinduism was what was left after Brahmanism lost its Aryan—and, be it noted, Indo-European—purity.

It was only at the end of his book that he ventured into the actual subject of "idol-worship, sacred objects, holy places and times," and he did so with a certain sense

of lingering resentment. "No account of Hinduism can pretend to completeness without some notice of its modern idol-worship," he admitted. Monier-Williams saved this subject for last because in his mind it was least, and he justified his approach by characterizing idol-worship as a modern phenomenon. It was seemingly impossible for him to concede that images of many deities had played a major role in Hindu thought and worship for thousands of years. The idolatry that Marco Polo had seen all about him was still not something that deserved a place at Oxford.

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A number of important Indian intellectuals agreed with Monier-Williams that idolatry deserved no place in their religion. Their efforts to reconceive and reform Hindu life are not to be understood entirely as a reaction to European views, but the European understanding of the prestige of scripture in general and of the Vedas in particular contributed to their thinking. How delicious it was in the late 19th century for Swami Dayanand, founder of the influential Arya Samaj, a major Hindu revivalist organization, to excoriate the impurities and superstitions of the Bible before Christian missionaries in the Punjab, confident that his own Vedas, once cleansed of their unessential elements, could stand pristine.

Yet there has been another approach to the creation of a pan-Indian or "syndicated" Hinduism. Once again the European intervention is significant, but this time at a bureaucratic level. Early in the 19th century, British officials in Madras began administering religious properties such as the great temples of South India. Back home, upright Britons, thinking it dreadful for a Christian nation to sully its hands with paganism, created an Anti-Idolatry Connexion

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League. The government slowly had to retreat, but not before Brahman lawyers formed the Madras Hindoo Association and began to learn to manipulate the emerging law of the Raj to their own ends. They ultimately created a body of legal precedent, which treated the "Hindu religion" as a single, legal entity, and in doing so they not only named but defined a Hinduism that never before had existed—"an entirely new religion," as the historian Robert Frykenberg has said.

**T**he Madras instance is only the first link in a considerable chain. Over the years a number of half-political, half-religious issues have led Indians to form self-consciously Hindu groups. The latest and most serious eruption began during the late 1980s in the holy city of Ayodhya in North India where Hindu militants mounted a loud campaign to "liberate" the birthplace of the god Rama from its captivity in a Muslim jail—that is, from a 16th-century mosque built on that site by the Mughal emperor Babar. Hindus from all over India and abroad as well have contributed to construct a new temple on the site. It is no accident that this Ayodhya campaign was timed to precede the critical national parliamentary elections of 1989, and many felt it was responsible that year for turning out of office Rajiv Gandhi's Congress Party, which had cautiously opposed the campaign. As the Congress Home Minister, Buta Singh, quipped at the time: "It's

hard to win when you're running against Rama himself."

Today's Hindu activists who press the struggle at Ayodhya are seeking to create a homogenized Hinduism in other ways, too. They borrow from the religious practices of England, the nation that first produced the word Hinduism—and, incidentally, from Islam as well: They advocate a congregational form of temple worship that is utterly different from the clangor of simultaneous individual devotions one often finds in a Hindu temple. They also want to replace the elastic rhythms of traditional Hindu piety, which filled the temples at all hours, with exact and invariant times of worship—again borrowing from Christianity and Islam. And instead of—or in addition to—the crazy quilt of Hindu pilgrimages to hundreds of holy sites scattered throughout India, they orchestrate a common, central pilgrimage point at Ayodhya, hoping thereby to establish that Hinduism is indeed a shared, single faith.

Given Hinduism's recent birth, it comes as no surprise that such efforts of self-definition are still required. Yet few doubt—and many fear—that the great rising force in Indian national identity is a Hindu force, far removed from the secularism that Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi and his grandson Rajiv propounded. Unmistakably, Hinduism is still abuilding, and the bricks assembled in Ayodhya may indeed contribute to the edifice that is yet to be.

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