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Imagined Religious Communities and the “Culture of Bible-Readers”: Hinduism’s Challenge to European Religious Studies



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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss the challenges posed by modern conceptions of Hinduism - in particular Heinrich von Stietencron’s conception of a “collection of religions” and Romila Thapar’s application of Benedict Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities” to Hinduism—to the European style of religious studies, particularly at the undergraduate level.

KEY WORDS: Hinduism, imagined communities, text-centered, historical approach, indigenous framework, culture of Bible-readers, therapeutic, religion, *moksha-shastra*

The indigenous religions of India, by which we mean Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, pose both a challenge and an opportunity to the field of religious studies. It is no great secret among Indologists, as well as a great many general scholars of religion, that what can be termed the “religious life” of India is a square peg to the round hole of the Western category of religion. While an American churchgoer may say, by way of platitude, that he cannot imagine his life without religion, to many Indians this is a literal truth: life, or more properly the cycle of life, is fundamentally inseparable from religion, and thus the very term “religion,” as most Europeans conceive it, begins to fall apart when confronted with the Indian experience.

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Before beginning to examine the challenges posed to European religious studies by Hinduism, it is necessary to define a few terms, and, as Agehananda Bharati would say, “state our axioms.” First of all, the United States, Canada, Australia, etc. - what may be term the “Europeanized world” - are all included under the heading of “European” (and thus the author, as an American). “Religious studies,” of course, is that area of study, whose pioneers were people like Ninian Smart and Mircea Eliade, which seeks to observe and describe religions on an etic level. While the clear-cut distinction between “emic” and “etic” has since been challenged, and perhaps rightfully so, it was nevertheless the *intention* of religious studies, at its inception, to remain faithful to etic categories, and to avoid especially questions of truth and authenticity in religious beliefs and practices. The program of religious studies, as well as its purpose, was summed up several times by Ninian Smart, in particular in the first chapter of his *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion*, as well as his contribution to the anthology of essays, *The Craft of Religious Studies*. Agehananda Bharati as well, who was influenced by and often wrote highly of Smart, emphasizes the differences between emic and etic categories, and the primary importance of the latter both to the student of anthropology and religious studies, in the first chapter of his *Light at the Center*.

Wherever we fall in the emic/etic, outsider/insider debate, in the course of our observations and descriptions of religious beliefs and practices, we must take as our watchword the warning of the renowned scholar of Mahayana Buddhism, Paul Williams, to avoid the “essentialist fallacy,” which “[gives] rise to the feeling that because we use the same word so there must be some unchanging core, perhaps a type of essence, to be identified by the relevant definition” (WILLIAMS 2009:2). I refer to this as the principle of “no center.” When one is presented with this principle, it seems so common sense as to be a truism, and yet we fall into the essentialist fallacy so easily that we often do not realize it. In fact, this is the main reason why I have chosen to concentrate on Hinduism to the exclusion of all other Indian traditions: it challenges the essentialist fallacy in ways no other religion does.

Since defining “religion” is no simple task, I will state my definitions axiomatically, rather than arguing for their suitability as opposed to other definitions. The reader is free to disagree, but within the confines of the argument presented here these definitions are actual. First, there is what I refer to as the “anthropological definition”, which basically matches the one proposed by Melford Spiro (quoted by Richard F. Gombrich in the introduction to his classic study on rural Ceylonese Buddhism): “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings” (GOMBRICH 1991:12). This definition works best for Hinduism at what Gombrich calls the “affective”

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level, i.e. how people actually practice their religion. The second definition is one I derived from Aghananda Bharati’s 1987 M.N. Roy Centenary Memorial Lecture at Ambedkar Open University, and which I like to call the “philosophical definition”: religion is essentially *therapeutic*, in that it is a solution to a universal, fundamental problem. Religion is what in Sanskrit would be called *moksha-shastra* (Bharati uses this term in his lecture), a methodical path to liberation, a “way out.” This definition is helpful because it offers a clear distinction between religion and magic, a distinction which many scholars are confused as to whether or not can be drawn at all. Gombrich is adamant that religion should not be identified with magic (GOMBRICH 1991:12), while Bharati, in his customarily blunt manner, assures us that they are identical (BHARATI 1975:128). I will have cause to refer to the philosophical definition more than the anthropological definition.

Romila Thapar applies Benedict Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities” to contemporary, highly politicized Hinduism (what she terms “syndicated Hinduism”), but for our purposes it applies equally as well to religious studies, as the “religions” (Hinduism and otherwise) commonly taught to undergraduate students of religious studies in the West are more often than not “imagined communities”: ideal versions of what the religions *should be*, based on an approach that is heavy on textual analysis and light on anthropology¹. A close consideration of Hinduism can bring this to light in ways other religions cannot, for, as Thapar herself says, Hinduism is especially “amorphous” (THAPAR 1989:210). “Amorphous” is as good a term as I have ever heard to describe how the European student of religious studies views Hinduism. The “definition” of Hinduism he is handed generally consists of explanations of the “caste system,” reincarnation, *ahimsa* (with special emphasis on vegetarianism), the four *ashramas*, the four *yogas*, the Upanishadic dicta, monism, the identity of *Brahman* with *atman*, and *moksha* as the ultimate goal of Hinduism². Usually this Hinduism is analogous in his mind with Buddhism (and both of them are seen through the lens of European Christianity, whether he considers himself a Christian or not): *moksha* corresponds to *nirvana*, *tat tvamasi* to the Four Noble Truths, the four *yogas* to the Noble Eightfold Path, and *Brahman*

¹ Before I proceed, allow me to emphasize that I am talking about primarily *undergraduate* courses, but of course at least a few undergraduate students go on to become graduate students, and often have to unlearn a great many things before they learn. I would also like to emphasize that I am not saying there are *no* anthropological or ethnographical approaches used in the teaching of Hinduism (or “world religions”) at the undergraduate level.

² A cursory perusal of four quite good introductions to Hinduism the author had to hand (Flood, Hopkins, Knipe and Lipner), as well as chapters on Hinduism in both Smith’s *The World’s Religions* and Smart’s *The Religious Experience*, confirmed these as the popularly touted “essentials” of Hinduism.

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as just another way of looking at *shunyata*. When presented with contradictions in Hinduism—mono- and polytheistic tendencies, animal sacrifice, Tantra, dualistic and pluralistic ontologies, absence of reincarnation in the teachings of some traditions, etc.—he is assured by the Brahmin swamis that these are just aberrations of the “true” *sanatana dharma*, and by an unfortunate number of scholars, both Indian and European, that these are mere manifestations of “folk” Hinduism, as opposed to “textual” Hinduism, probably due to adulteration with “tribal” beliefs. The elite status of “textual religion” is purely a European, Christian, and more specifically Protestant, prejudice. It is an example of the emic flow of European Christianity stealthily invading the etic discourse of religious studies.

It is true that textual approaches to studying religion are waning as our anthropological and ethnographical data become more comprehensive. Gone are the days of Max Müller, yet he still casts a very long shadow. Gone too are the days when the Brahmin swamis exclusively controlled the flow of information, both East to West and back again, yet their books are still propagated in editions that critical, peer-reviewed books and journals just cannot match in terms of price and volume. Thus, this writer argues that there is a very real, lingering hangover from those days, and it still influences the undergraduate classroom in the form of textbooks on Hinduism that take what is sometimes called a “historical” approach. All of the textbooks I mentioned in footnote 2 employ this approach. So does Kim Knott’s *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*, which seems to be the textbook of choice for both a “Religions of the World” course and a “Hinduism” course in the religion department at the University of Syracuse, where Bharati had his professorship for the last two decades or so of his life.³ They each more or less begin with a discussion of the Indus Valley civilization, the *Vedas*, the Brahmanic sacrifices, then move on to Upanishadic thought, the Epics, the *Gita*, the *Puranas* (usually with emphasis on the *Bhagavata*), the *bhakti* movements, then (if you’re lucky) you might get a very brief section on *tantra*, until finally a few remarks on modern Hinduism and (again, if you’re lucky) the Hindu diaspora. The problem with this approach, in the author’s opinion, is that it can be likened to asking a Slovak about what the average Slovak is like and getting a lecture on Great Moravia. The historical approach works well with “founder” religions because the founders and their companions are precisely those whom the devotee should imitate. Most

³ At the time of writing, these courses have their websites at http://religion.syr.edu/Courses/Fall2014_pdfs/REL101F14.pdf and http://religion.syr.edu/Courses/Spring2014_pdfs/REL185S14.pdf. I have to say, however, that the obvious ethnographic sensibilities inherent in Dr. Waghorne’s “Religions of the World” course (the former link) give this author joy.

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Christians would answer the question, “What is the average Christian like?” by referencing the personality of Christ in one way or another. Yet I am skeptical that the characteristics of, for example, Yajnavalkya have much bearing on what the average Hindu considers a Hindu to be “like.”

This is not to say that historical textbooks on Hinduism have no value or should no longer be written, but it is this author’s opinion that they should continue yielding pride of place to studies that *start* with everyday beliefs and practices, not with the Indus Valley civilization. Two good examples of this approach are Hirst and Zavos’s *Religious Traditions in Modern South Asia* and the anthology *Studying Hinduism in Practice*, edited by Hillary P. Rodrigues. Though both are perhaps a bit challenging for the undergraduate student of “world religions,” or even Hinduism specifically, I see no reason why their approaches cannot be adapted for the entry level. It is particularly strong medicine against European preconceptions.

This leads me to my idea of the “culture of Bible-readers.” Just as it is nearly impossible to imagine Indian life without Indian religion, be it Hinduism or otherwise, we Europeans have not managed to extract the essence of religion and conceptualize it as a phenomenon apart from “everyday life” as well as we like to think (though we have certainly got farther in that than the Indians, for good or ill). If a Christian becomes interested in Hinduism, as with any other religion, the first thing he will ask is, “What should I read?” He is not talking about introductory textbooks here, but rather the scriptures. Unless perhaps he is Catholic or Orthodox, he will be used to a text-centric view of religion, and just as in Sunday school when he asks, “What does the bible say about such-and-such,” when he comes to Hinduism he will look for a similarly authoritative text. Of course, he will find none. Instead, he will read a translation of the *Rig Veda* and try to puzzle out a lot of verses about clarified butter and gods whom very few Hindus even actively worship anymore, or, more likely, he will take Vivekananda’s and Gandhi’s advice and read the *Gita* or maybe an anthology of the “principle *Upanishads*” and go away, like even as venerable a figure as Hans Küng, saying something like, “As in the Hindu religions, so too in Christianity [. . .] there are *different ways* of salvation” (KÜNG 1985:226).

The problem with a statement like this is that “salvation” is a Christian category, and there is good reason why *moksha*, *mukti*, *kaivalya*, etc., are all usually translated “liberation” and not “salvation.” Furthermore, not all Hindu traditions are concerned with *moksha* at all. For the most part, the only person concerned with *moksha* is the ascetic, and despite his conspicuous presence in the West, in India he is firmly in a tiny minority. What Küng is conveying to us is the *opinion* of the Hindu “reformers” of the 19th and early 20th centuries, like Vivekananda and of course Gandhi, of what the “essentials” of Hinduism

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are. (In fact, I have a book in my possession, with Vivekananda on the frontispiece, called just that, *The Essentials of Hinduism*. No doubt its author would agree wholeheartedly with Küng.) This would be like a North Dakota Lutheran speaking for all of Christianity—with one key difference. If asked for justification of why his view of Christianity is valid, the North Dakotan would answer, “the Bible.” A Hindu reformer like Vivekananda, however, *might* vaguely reply “the scriptures” (especially if he knows he is talking to a Christian audience), but he does not mean the same thing. The Protestant world is obsessed with “proof texts,” another Christian category. The Hindu reformer’s audience might go looking for proof texts to support his view in the Hindu “scriptures,” but, as I said, they would either be confronted with poems about clarified butter or, if they read the *Gita*, a bunch of platitudes that can be interpreted almost any which way. To the Hindu ascetic, especially on the reformer model, the scriptures live *in the guru*. The Hindu religious path is experiential and experimental (the Sanskrit word *veda* is of course completely cognate with the Slovak “veda”)—so much so that the modern Hindu loves to refer to his religion as “scientific” (something Bharati rails against in almost every one of his books, because to call a religion “scientific” is, of course, a contradiction in terms).

Now, all of this is perfectly fine when we are talking about Protestant missionaries and Hindu reformers, but such emic thinking has no place in religious studies, yet our classrooms are rife with it. I once asked to see a textbook on “world religions” that a student had on his desk in the Lutheran secondary school where I currently teach. The book was used with the fifth-formers in their religious education courses. I saw that each chapter ended with a sort of chart detailing what each religion “said” about such things as “sin,” “salvation,” “the afterlife,” etc. This is the application of emic Christian categories in what should be an etic context, and the only thing that made it forgivable was the fact that the book was being used in the context of Christian religious instruction, not religious studies.⁴ It reflects the human love of analogy. Probably the most popular textbook given to American undergraduates by professors in their “world religions” courses is *The World’s Religions* by Huston Smith. I was given it as an undergraduate. Smith uses analogy so often that sometimes it seems he talks about everything *but* “the world’s religions.” He seems to doubt his readers’ ability to approach a system of thought *on its own terms*.

⁴ At the time of the writing, I have not been able to locate a copy of this book. It seems it is no longer in use among the students and the head of religious education was unable to find it. Therefore I regret I cannot include any publication information. At the time I saw it, I did not even check the title.

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Yet this is precisely what must be done. As much as is possible, each religion must be approached *from zero*, particularly in the area of linguistics. Having lived as an expatriate (what Americans prefer to call themselves rather than “immigrant”) in Slovakia for over a decade, it is my firm belief that words which do not have a clear one-to-one translation should not be given one. For example, calling *bryndzové halušky* “dumplings with sheep cheese” is a pointless waste of time, as “dumplings with sheep cheese” will not call up an accurate image of the dish in the mind of the native English speaker.⁵ A further explanation will be required, and if a translation requires further explanation to avoid mistaken impressions, it is not a translation at all. So with Hinduism: why we insist on using “religion,” “idol,” “worship,” and “scriptures” when *dharma*, *murti*, *puja*, and *shruti* are available is beyond my ken. As Bharati suggested in the lecture I referred to above, most Sanskrit terms should be left as they are and explained in a glossary. Only by putting ourselves in the mindset of the indigenous practitioner of a religion can we ever begin to understand it: gruesome, arduous work no doubt, but in any area of cross-cultural dialogue there are no shortcuts. Analogy and essentialism are the tools of the intellectually lazy at best, and the intellectually dishonest at worst.

As I said at the beginning of this paper, no religion exposes the emic subconscious of European religious studies as well as Hinduism. Hinduism challenges our essentialist views not just where it itself is concerned, but also where “religion” in general is concerned. We are a culture of Bible-readers, whether we have ever picked up a Bible or not. As I have already said, in each religion we examine, we look for the holy book and try to find out what it “says” about the Christian categories that concern us. We read about *Brahman* (or, more often than not, Vivekananda’s views on *Brahman* related second- or third-hand) and exclaim, “Ah! So *Brahman* is like God!” No, *Brahman* certainly is not like God. *Brahman* is like *Brahman*. Of course, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Radhakrisnan, Gandhi, *et al* often called *Brahman* “God,” but we have Bharati’s famous idea of the pizza effect to thank for that, rather than anything found in the *shruti*. The temptation to analogy must be avoided diligently, both by the educator and the student. This is so much more the case in terms of philosophical concepts like *Brahman* and God than in terms of food. “Dumplings with sheep cheese” has no prior connotation in English—it will not call up any clear picture at all—while “God” has millennia of cultural baggage behind it. The reader might well ask, however, if some intercultural understanding of the Vedantic *Brahman* as “God,” and vice-versa, might not someday be reached? Indeed, would it not be desirable? Must the two

⁵ This is not to say it never could. If enough native English speakers became familiar with the dish, and its proposed translation, then of course the translation would become valid.

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concepts remain incompatible, and indeed incommunicable, cross-culturally? If it is indeed possible, it is this author’s contention that it is only possible through clear communication. When it comes to religious studies, the ends of sensitivity do not justify the means of wooly thinking and syncretism, something I share Aghananda Bharati’s open contempt for (again, see the first chapter of *Light at the Center*).

One symptom of Hinduism’s challenge to the Bible-reader’s essentialist views, manifested through his historical and textual predispositions, is the ongoing debate over what Hinduism *is*. *Hinduism Reconsidered*, a very fine anthology of papers indeed, is devoted purely to this debate. In this anthology, Aditya Malik, in “Hinduism or Three-thousand-three-hundred-and-six Ways to Invoke a Construct,” identifies two basic approaches in the efforts of scholars to define Hinduism: that which tries to construct a “unity within Hinduism” (which I call the *unitive* approach), and that which emphasizes “historicity and multiplicity of meaning,” which Malik identifies as the *non-essentialist* approach. On the extreme end of the non-essentialist school you have Heinrich von Stietencron. His paper “Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term” begins with an etymological history of the terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism,” demonstrating that their origins are ethnic and geographical rather than religious. The religious usage was imposed from without, first by Muslims, then by Christians, until it was finally picked up by “Hindus” themselves sometime in the 19th century. Stietencron proceeds to refute the typical “essentials” of Hinduism, which are supposed to give unity to this chaotic “religion,” given by myriad textbooks and introductory treatments (including the ones I have already mentioned): the centrality of the Vedas, reincarnation, and the “caste system.” He then comes to perhaps the most radically deconstructionist conclusion in all the anthology’s theoretical papers: Hinduism, as a religion, quite simply does not exist. At face value, this may seem a non-essentialist position, and, regarding Hinduism, it is. Yet Stietencron in particular fell under Malik’s criticism of those scholars affected by the “cognitive and cultural hegemony” of the West (MALIK 1997:22), reflected mainly in the unitive approach. In reality, Stietencron’s position is very much essentialist: not when it comes to Hinduism, but when it comes to religion.

Stietencron, perhaps not wishing to throw the baby out with the bathwater, does not propose jettisoning the term “Hinduism” altogether. Instead, he proposes we conceive of “Hinduism” as meaning “a whole group of related but distinct religions” (STIETENCRON 1997:41). In other words, he is perfectly satisfied awarding the status of “religion” to, say, the *bhakti* traditions, the various *sannyasi* orders, or Vedic Brahmanism—just not Hinduism. His intentions are honorable: as I have been saying, identifying Hinduism as a “world religion” leads Europeans to draw hasty parallels with Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, which causes breakdowns in communication. But is it not perhaps better for

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Westerners to reexamine the term “religion” rather than the term “Hinduism”? Might it not be more beneficial to take the tack of Paul Williams, that the worst thing a person can try to look for in any religion is a “core” that makes one “truly” a Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, etc.? Might we not be better served just accepting the idea that one is a Hindu if he *calls himself* a Hindu?⁶ One can hardly expect this to happen anytime soon, but I at least think it is worth considering. Regardless, we can only speculate whether or not Vivekananda, Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, or for that matter Agha Khan - all men who unequivocally self-identified as “Hindus” - would be satisfied with Stietencron’s new definition. Anyway it is a moot point. “Hindu” as a religious identity cannot be got rid of by the very virtue of its existence.

Lest I am being too unfair to European scholars and educators, let me say that I realize the difficulty of the fundamental shift in thinking I am proposing. Like Malik, I lament the fact that South Asian scholars have for the most part adopted (and thus reinforced) the European scholar’s way of talking about South Asian religions, and have yet to create “‘indigenous’ interpretive frameworks that contest those from the West” (MALIK 1997:22). However, I rather doubt the possibility of creating such frameworks, just as I doubt any Western culture or society being able to create truly “indigenous frameworks” for doing *darshana* or practicing *yoga*. Despite the allure of *darshana* (or “Indian philosophy,” another clumsy example of the “dumplings with sheep cheese” effect) and *yoga* to the Western student, both are outgrowths of the South Asian mindset, and can be approached syncretistically at best by the vast majority of Westerners. The same goes for the non-Western student’s fascination with religious studies. Religious studies is the direct child of the “culture of Bible-readers.” Religious studies did not spring from the intellectual tradition of Panini, Shankaracharya, and Nagarjuna, but rather from that of Spinoza, Adolf von Harnack, and Albert Schweitzer. To criticize non-Westerners for having trouble finding a non-Western way of doing an essentially Western thing may be as easy as ridiculing Western *yoga* enthusiasts for their Sanskrit tattoos and whispered namastes, but it is equally as unfair.

Let me end by saying I do not believe in the impossibility of “indigenous frameworks” for doing nonindigenous things. As a colleague pointed out, isn’t the very fact that South Asians are doing religious studies at all enough to qualify as an “indigenous framework”? I tend to agree. I am skeptical of Malik’s misgivings not because I do not

⁶ Whenever discussing the so-called “Hare Krishna” movement with students - which happens often, as they have a very conspicuous presence in Košice - inevitably the question put to me is, “Yes, but are they *really* Hindu?”

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believe a South Asian scholar can do traditionally Western scholarship well. That is obviously untrue. On the contrary, I am skeptical because I think Malik is being unfair. The point of this paper, which I hope I have made clear, is that cross-cultural understanding in the field of religious studies can occur much more efficiently, and with fewer misunderstandings, if our concepts are refined and clarified, and outmoded approaches either abandoned or relegated to secondary status. This must begin in the classroom, and I see no reason why it should not begin at the undergraduate level. Since I am European (now geographically as well as culturally), I feel best equipped to offer criticisms and suggestions to the European side of the exchange. I will leave the South Asian side to those who understand its problems in the field better.

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