

## **Hinduism**

One of the most striking advances in modern scholarship is the view that there is no such thing as an unbroken tradition of Hinduism, only a set of discrete traditions and practices reorganized into a larger entity called “Hinduism”. If there is any disagreement at all in this scholarship, it centers on whether Hinduism is exclusively a construct of western scholars studying India or of anticolonial Hindus looking toward the systematization of disparate practices as a means of recovering a precolonial, national identity.<sup>1</sup>

The irony of the fact that the titles of both the chapter and the volume in which this statement appears include the word ‘Hinduism’ reflects the problematic status of the term. Despite sustained critique of the term, especially over the last two decades, the continued widespread use of the term, both within and beyond scholarly writing, suggests that it will remain a keyword in South Asian Studies for some time to come.

## **Origin**

The literature on the derivation of the term Hindu, and by extension Hinduism, from the word Sindhu has recently been summarised by Arvind Sharma,<sup>2</sup> who emphasizes that the essential ambiguity of the word Hindu—whether its referent is primarily geographical or religious—goes back to the earliest traceable use of the word in the Zend Avesta. Although in later Persian (6th century BCE) and Greek sources the territorial sense predominated, and was the first sense to be taken over in pre-Islamic Arabic and later Muslim sources, a religious dimension is apparent in both Chinese (7th century CE) and Muslim (8th century CE) uses of the term.

The term ‘Hindu’ was in use among Europeans from the early seventeenth century, and while the ambiguity of earlier usage persists, the term does at times have a clear religious sense, albeit usually by contrast with some more clearly-defined religious group. Thus in 1616 Edward Terry contrasted the ‘notorious Idolaters, called in generall Hindoos’ with the ‘Mahometans’.<sup>3</sup> In the same year, the Portuguese Jesuit Gonçalo Fernandes Trancoso referred to ‘Bramanismo’, and this and related terms such as ‘Gentilism’ and ‘Gentooism’ which appear in the eighteenth century are

arguably precursors for the term Hinduism.<sup>4</sup> ‘Hinduism’ itself can be documented from the 1780s. Charles Grant mentions ‘Hindooism’ in a letter in 1787, and again in 1792.<sup>5</sup> As Dermot Killingley notes, Rammohun Roy, who used the term in 1816 and again in 1817, was probably the first Hindu to do so.<sup>6</sup>

### **Recent scholarly debate**

Perhaps the first to criticise the term Hinduism and to advocate abandoning its use was Wilfred Cantwell Smith:

The term “Hinduism” is, in my judgement, a particularly false conceptualization, one that is conspicuously incompatible with any adequate understanding of the religious outlook of Hindus. Even the term “Hindu” was unknown to the classical Hindus. “Hinduism” as a concept certainly they did not have. And indeed one has only to reflect on the situation carefully to realize that it would necessarily have been quite meaningless to them.

Smith’s rejection of the term is based in part on the principle that ‘no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion’s believers’.<sup>7</sup> While Smith is unusual in stating the principle explicitly, it is implicit in the arguments of many other scholars who have suggested that there is no evidence of a clearly-defined sense of ‘Hindu’ as a religious identity prior to its articulation and imposition by Europeans in the colonial period. Even if the principle of privileging its adherents’ perspective (or rather, perspectives) be accepted, this is at best an argument from silence. Moreover, both Sharma and David Lorenzen cite evidence of Hindu self-consciousness of a religious identity from as early as the fourteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

An alternative argument against the use of the term ‘Hinduism’ proceeds from the heterogeneous nature of the beliefs and practices it labels. Heinrich von Stietencron writes that ‘[t]here is hardly a single important teaching in “Hinduism” which can be shown to be valid for all Hindus, much less a comprehensive set of teachings.’<sup>9</sup> He argues that the perception of Hinduism as a unified religion arose when Europeans misunderstood the term ‘Hindu’ when they took it over from Persian authors:

Most people failed to realize that the term “Hindu” corresponded exactly to their own word “Indian” which is derived, like the name “India”, from the same Indus river, the *indos* of the Greek. The Hindu, they knew, was distinct from the Muslim, the Jew, the Christian, the Parsee and the Jain who were all present in the Indian coastal area known to western trade. Therefore, they took the term “Hindu” to designate the follower of a particular Indian religion. This was a fundamental misunderstanding of the term.<sup>10</sup>

Stietencron identifies two other factors which further predisposed Europeans to this erroneous perception of Hinduism as a single unified religion. First, the Christian concept of heathenism: ‘heathen all over the world formed only one religion. There was no room in this concept, for more than one religion among the heathen of India.’<sup>11</sup> Second, ‘the Christian tradition of an absolute claim for only one truth’ which meant that ‘they were unable even to conceive of such religious liberality as would give members of the same society the freedom, by individual choice, to practise the religion they like. As a result, Western students saw Hinduism as a unity.’<sup>12</sup> To these Richard King adds the predominance of brahmanical perspectives in European views of Hinduism: ‘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... The Sanskrit “brahmanization” of Hindu religion... was filtered through colonial discourses, thereby furnishing a new holistic and unified conception of the multiplicity of Indian religious phenomena throughout history.’<sup>13</sup>

While the semantic overlap between ‘Indian’ and ‘Hindu’ certainly created the scope for confusion between a geographical or religious connotation in the use of ‘Hindu’, the ambiguity is, as Sharma shows, inherent in the term itself and there is evidence that this was understood by European writers from as early as the seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup> Several important early European writers on Indian religions, including Roberto de Nobili and Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, explicitly acknowledge the plurality of heathen religions in India.<sup>15</sup> Moreover those who, in the nineteenth century, first gave wide currency to the term ‘Hinduism’ and the concept of ‘the Hindu religion’ typically seek to make clear the generalised nature of the term.

H. H. Wilson, one of the most authoritative European writers on Hinduism in the first half of the nineteenth century, emphasized in 1840 that ‘the practical religion of the Hindus is by no means a concentrated and compact system, but a heterogeneous compound, made up of various and not unfrequently incompatible ingredients.’<sup>16</sup> Monier Monier-Williams, whose 1877 introductory work *Hinduism*, is said by several writers to have helped popularise the term, found it ‘a remarkable circumstance that the Queen of Great Britain rules over two hundred millions of people, who though deeply religious, possess a religion which cannot be designated by any one name.’<sup>17</sup>

There can be little doubt that the close connection between and colonial officials and their brahman pandits tended to privilege brahmanical perspectives in what Tony Ballantyne calls the ‘Company Orientalism’ of the late eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> The same is not true, however, for what we might call ‘Mission Orientalism’, or for many of the earliest Company officials, who found Brahmans unwilling to interact with them and drew their knowledge of Hinduism from other sources. Missionaries, especially but not only Protestants, were far more likely to have close contact with low-caste Hindus, and this is reflected in their view of Hinduism. The very first Protestant missionary in India, and one of the outstanding missionary scholars on Hinduism, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, all but ignored the Vedas, commenting that although the Brahmans make much of them, the ‘common people’ based their religion on other works. Ziegenbalg’s account of Hinduism draws heavily on texts such as the *Civavakkiam*, which rejects many elements of brahmanical Hinduism, including caste.<sup>19</sup> The nineteenth-century missionary Robert Caldwell, reflects both the missionary interest in low-caste groups and a thoroughly pluralist view of Hinduism in his work on the Shanars:

The Shanars, though not of the Brahmanical or Sanscrit-speaking race, are as truly Hindus as are any class in India. Nevertheless their connection with the Brahmanical systems of dogmas and observances, commonly described in the mass as Hinduism, is so small that they may be considered votaries of a different religion.<sup>20</sup>

A final argument against the term Hinduism points to the political consequences of its use. Robert Frykenberg argues that

the concept of “Hinduism” as denoting a single religious community has already done enormous, even incalculable, damage to structures undergirding the peace, security, and unity of the whole Indian political system. What’s more, continued popular use of this concept and popular belief in the existence of a monolithic “Hinduism”—in short, fervent adherence to any doctrine which assumes that there is one single religion embraced by the “majority” of all peoples in India—can still do even greater damage. If such usages and beliefs continue to be dogmatically and persistently maintained, there is no telling how much more harm such a notion may do to the wellbeing of India’s peoples.<sup>21</sup>

While accepting that ‘one may very well doubt whether there was ever an identifiable “Muslim”, “Hindu” or “Sikh” identity’ prior to the mid-nineteenth century, C.A. Bayly has cautioned against relying on ‘assumptions about the nature of, often the absence of, communal conflict before 1860 which remain largely untested.’<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless Frykenberg’s is a weighty point, deserving of consideration by anyone concerned with the responsibility of scholarship for its impact outside of the academy. For while we might want to say that it is not the term itself, but rather those who have appealed to it in the service of chauvinist ends, who have done damage to India’s wellbeing, the possibility remains that continued academic use of the term—however critically nuanced—will make their work easier. It should be noted, however, that academic critique of the term Hinduism may have its own unintended consequences. It is undeniable that there is now a sense of Hindu religious self-consciousness among at least some of those who have been called Hindus. Academic critiques of the concept of Hinduism as a single religion are liable to be perceived as attacks on that religion and, if anything, to reinforce a sense of a monolithic Hindu identity under siege from outsiders. Making much of the difficulty of sharply delineating Hinduism from other Indian religious traditions may equally bolster those who would assimilate all such traditions to a single Hindu dharma.

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<sup>1</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, 'Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism', in Gavin A. Flood, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, Oxford, 2003, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Arvind Sharma, 'On Hindu, Hindustan, Hinduism and Hindutva', *NUMEN*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 2002, pp. 1-36.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Terry, 'A Relation of a Voyage to the Easterne India' in Samuel Purchas, ed., *Hakluytus Posthumus; or, Purchas his Pilgrimes, contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and others* (London, 1625), repr. 20 vols., Glasgow, 1905, Vol. 9, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Will Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism: 'Hinduism' and the study of Indian religions, 1600-1776*. Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen zu Halle, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Oddie, 'Constructing Hinduism: The Impact of the Protestant Missionary Movement on Hindu Self-Understanding', in Robert E. Frykenberg, ed., *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*, Richmond, 2003, pp. 156-7.

<sup>6</sup> Dermot Killingley, *Rammohun Roy in Hindu and Christian Tradition: The Teape Lectures 1990*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1993, pp. 62-3.

<sup>7</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 'Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why?', in Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa, ed., *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, Chicago, 1959, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> Sharma 'On Hindu, Hindustan, Hinduism and Hindutva', pp. 13-15; David N. Lorenzen, 'Who invented Hinduism?', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1999, pp. 648-653.

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- <sup>9</sup> Heinrich von Stietencron, 'Hinduism: On the proper use of a deceptive term', in Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke, ed. *Hinduism Reconsidered* (1989) 2nd ed., Delhi, 1997, p. 36.
- <sup>10</sup> Stietencron, 'Hinduism', p. 33.
- <sup>11</sup> Stietencron, 'Hinduism', p. 35, cf. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: India and 'the mystic east.'* London, 1999, p. 99.
- <sup>12</sup> Stietencron, 'Hinduism', p. 37, cf. King, *Orientalism and Religion*, p. 105.
- <sup>13</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion*, p. 104.
- <sup>14</sup> Sharfaat Ahmed Khan, ed., *John Marshall in India. Notes and Observations in Bengal, 1668–1672*, London, 1927, p.182.
- <sup>15</sup> Will Sweetman, 'Unity and Plurality: Hinduism and the Religions of India in Early European Scholarship', *Religion*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2001, pp. 209-224.
- <sup>16</sup> Horace Hayman Wilson, *Two lectures on the Religious Practices and Opinions of the Hindus delivered before the University of Oxford*, Oxford, 1840, p. 35.
- <sup>17</sup> Monier Monier Williams, 'The Vaishnava Religion, with special reference to the Siksha-patri of the modern sect called Svami-Narayana', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* Vol. XIV, 1882, p. 289.
- <sup>18</sup> Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire*, Basingstoke, 2001, p. 19.
- <sup>19</sup> Will Sweetman, 'The prehistory of Orientalism: colonialism and the textual basis for Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg's account of Hinduism', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2004, pp. 7-33.
- <sup>20</sup> Robert Caldwell, *The Tinnevelly Shanars: a Sketch of their Religion and their Moral Conditions and Characteristics as a Caste*, Madras, 1849, p. 13.
- <sup>21</sup> Robert Eric Frykenberg, 'The emergence of Modern "Hinduism" as a concept and an institution: A reappraisal with special reference to South India', in Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke, ed. *Hinduism Reconsidered* (1989) 2nd ed., Delhi, 1997, pp. 82-3.

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<sup>22</sup> C.A. Bayly, 'The Pre-history of "Communalism"? Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1985, pp. 202, 178.