How can we best study religious movements? What makes a religious movement religious? How can religious institutions be distinguished from secular institutions? Is Hindu religion or Hinduism a coherent concept? Can Hindu religion be accommodated within the general category of the so-called world religions like Islam, Buddhism and Christianity? Is Hindu religion more a ‘way of life’ or a culture than a religion per se? How do Hindus themselves define and negotiate their Hindu identity? Any scholar who studies religious movements in India and their migration abroad inevitably has to adopt at least implicit presuppositions and hypotheses about these questions.

A further set of questions relates to how a scholar’s own life experience may condition his or her views about specific religions and religious movements. Can a scholar who was raised outside of India and Indian culture have an authentic understanding of what it means to be a Hindu? Can a Christian, a Buddhist, a Muslim, or an atheist, even if raised in India, have such an understanding? What is the impact of colonialism and neocolonialism on the points of view of both Indian scholars and European and American scholars on these questions? Is it possible for scholars of different national and cultural backgrounds to establish a meaningful dialogue about these questions? Can they arrive at something resembling an international consensus about the possible answers? If not, what is the point of attempting the dialogue in the first place?
Obviously, no short essay can attempt to seriously engage with all these questions. Much research is done without any explicit considerations of them at all. Nonetheless it is sometimes useful to try to make what is normally implicit more explicit. Here I want to briefly discuss three of these related foundational issues. First is a look at how religion is being studied in modern universities, particularly in the United States, and the influence of Mircea Eliade on this study. Second is a discussion of the historical construction of the concept of Hindu religion or Hinduism. Third is an examination of how three medieval Indian religious poets—Gorakh, Kabir, and Guru Arjan—negotiated their own religious identities in a way at least partly independent of both Hindu religion and Islam.

ELIADE AND THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS

Most academic studies on the world’s major religions over the last fifty years owe much to the ideas of the Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade. Although a good part of Eliade’s best work was done in Europe in the 1940s and early 1950s, much of his influence stems from his presence as a distinguished professor in the University of Chicago where he arrived in 1956 to teach courses in the field he called ‘The history of religions’. This is particularly true of the studies done in the religion departments of American universities, but the influence of his ideas on studies of religions has, directly or indirectly, extended to scholars in other departments and in other countries including India.

During the last fifty years there has been an enormous increase in the number of scholars who teach and do research on most of the non-Christian religions in the religion
departments of American universities. Russell T. McCutcheon’s book, *Manufacturing Religion* (2003) argues convincingly that a key idea that has justified and promoted this increase and its location in religion departments is Eliade’s idea that religions are *sui generis* institutions, institutions that cannot be properly analysed using ‘reductive’ strategies that discuss religions, particularly their origins, in terms of their economic, social, and political motives and consequences.

I myself was first introduced to Eliade’s work when I was still an undergraduate. In about 1960, one of my professors, the psychoanalytic historian N. O. Brown, suggested that I read one of Eliade’s books, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (2005). I found it fascinating and proceeded to read all of his books that were available in our university library. Eliade’s excellent study of Yoga, entitled *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (1970) was one of the readings which helped turn my own academic interests toward India and Hinduism. Today, looking back on all this, I think the thing that most attracted me to Eliade was the vision he offered of exotic new worlds of ideas: the world of archaic man and the world of Hinduism. Ironically, much of the rest of my academic career has been dedicated to learning and showing that these exotic worlds are not, after all, so exotic or different from the world in which I grew up.

Eliade claims that all religions share a unique point of origin, a personal experience of the sacred, the experience that Rudolf Otto (1970) earlier called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. It is this experience that allowed Eliade and others associated with the history of religions approach to make the claim that religion is *sui generis* and needs to be studied by its own methodology and not reduced to secular history, sociology, anthropology,
philosophy or psychology. Although religion is necessarily manifested in historical time as specific, organized religions—each with its own history, churches, rituals, beliefs, customs, and social, economic and political programmes—nonetheless, behind all this empirical prolixity lies the experience of the sacred, the phenomenon that makes religions religious.

In terms of its consequences, the idea that Otto and Eliade promoted has proved to be a powerful idea. By concentrating his research on the effects of religious experience and not on its cause, Eliade offered a way to create an allegedly ‘scientific’ mode of studying religion, and this possibility in turn helped to legitimate the creation of new or expanded departments of religion in most American universities. Since Otto’s and Eliade’s idea also posited a common origin for all religions, these same religious departments were also now free to expand into studies not only of Christianity, Judaism and maybe Islam, but also other so-called ‘world religions’: Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Shinto and the like.

The idea and study of ‘world religions’ did, of course, exist in Europe and America well before Eliade and Otto. The field known as ‘comparative religion’ was a direct precursor. Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) has written an excellent account of the history of the idea of ‘world religions’ among European and American scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of the earlier discussions of these world religions arranged them in hierarchical subcategories such as universal and national, historical and ahistorical, ethical and ritualistic, monotheistic and polytheistic. In these arrangements Christianity always came out on top. These unequal evaluations were eventually dropped by most scholars, although traces of preference for Christianity or for other religions sometimes
survive in implicit form. The scholar who did most to eliminate such bias was Max Weber who defined ‘world religions’ simply as those with the largest number of adherents.

Eliade’s approach made possible a new and expanded effort to study world religions, an effort that at least partly freed the study of these religions both from a narrow-minded Christian or Jewish ideological focus and from the reductive methodologies of the secular historians, anthropologists, philosophers and psychologists. A new academic enterprise was born, one that had clear affinity with the general need of the new post-war American empire for more information about the cultures of the Asian and African countries where the political and economic involvement of this empire was growing rapidly.

This does not mean, however, that the young scholars, myself included, who worked on Hinduism and other Asian religions during the 1960s and 1970s, were simply the dupes and stooges of Eliade and the new American Empire. We were simply following our own hearts and our own curiosity, but the fact that the American universities were now willing to hire persons who worked in such fields certainly made things much easier. Nonetheless, my own enchantment with Eliade’s history of religions approach did not last long. I began to support the view that the chief function of religions was to ideologically express the economic, social, political and psychological needs of their adherents, needs that were often distorted by the priestly elites that usually managed and controlled the religions. This, of course, is an idea quite at odds with the view of Eliade that such material and psychological needs are purely incidental to the uniquely religious or spiritual foundation of all religions in the experience of the sacred.
More recently, however, I have come back to a position partly akin to that taken by Eliade, namely that religions are associated with a particular emotion or emotional experience that corresponds to Otto’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. I would argue, however, that Otto probably overemphasized the ‘terror’ and ‘awe’ aspects of this experience. Religions other than Christianity, Judaism and Islam usually describe what must be roughly the same experience without the same degree of terror and awe. We must assume, after all, that this is a *human* experience and that different religious cultures can have only a limited role in shaping how it is perceived. Sigmund Freud (1958: 1-12), in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, called the experience an ‘oceanic feeling’ and this description may be closer to what is common to it in all religious cultures.

In any case, it is the association with this experience that makes religious institutions religious. Furthermore, it is this association that imbués religious institutions and their leaders with an aura of authority that helps them to legitimate and prescribe the rules of the social moral and political order among their followers. Against Eliade’s view, however, it also seems to me to be more useful to seek the source of this experience in human genetic predispositions and not in an ineffable, empirically-unverifiable encounter with a supernatural ‘sacred’ identified as a god, a spirit, or some absolute reality. Several recent books by prominent geneticists, most notably Dean Hamer and Marc Hauser, point in precisely this biological direction.

The problem with Eliade’s approach to the study of world religions and of religion as a general category was not just its affinity to the practical needs of the American empire in the second half of the twentieth century. Another difficulty was that Eliade was never able
to fully divorce his history of religions methodology from the theistic and ultimately Christian biases that were built into his and Otto’s intellectual visions. In practice, the writings and teaching of many historians of religion in American universities have tended to offer too much religion, often surreptitiously Judeo-Christian religion, and too little history.

In India, both the political and religious problems of the history of religions approach were illustrated, making allowances for obvious differences, during the recent period of national rule in India by the Hindu nationalist BJP political party. Although Indian universities, unlike American ones, have no tradition of religion departments, efforts were made under the BJP to promote the creation of centres for Vedic ritual and astrological studies within Indian universities. Studies of such topics can, of course, be undertaken for strictly academic purposes, but in this case the main purposes seem to have been religious and political, namely the promotion of Hindu nationalism, and not academic. Certainly religion should be more and better studied in Indian universities, but a strong case can be made that this study is best left where it is: namely, dispersed among history, social science, literature and philosophy departments.

INVENTING HINDUISM

In an essay entitled ‘Who Invented Hinduism?’ (Lorenzen 2006), I attempted to trace back the history of the terms ‘Hindu’, ‘Hindu religion’, and ‘Hinduism’ and their near equivalents in a variety of earlier texts written by both Indians and Europeans (and also the Central Asian scholar al-Biruni). The main motive for writing the essay was to contradict
the view of several recent scholars who had claimed that Hinduism was in some sense first invented, imagined, constructed or fabricated by European scholars, principally those associated with the academic current known as Orientalism.

As far as the specific English word ‘Hinduism’ is concerned, the earliest published uses of the term that I had found were written by the early nineteenth-century Hindu reformer, Ram Mohan Roy (see Killingley 1993: 62-63). The Australian scholar, Geoffrey Oddie (2006: 68-72), has since noted that ‘Hinduism’ was earlier used by the evangelical writer, Charles Grant, in a text said to have been written in 1792 that was first published in 1797, as well as in some still earlier private letters by Grant. Although this fact overrules my suggestion that Roy might have been the first to coin the term ‘Hinduism’, I had also argued that the terms ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Hindu religion’ were basically synonyms and that ‘Hindu religion’ was used much earlier than ‘Hinduism’. It is worth noting, for example, that the essay by Charles Grant that Oddie cites as the earliest published text to use the word ‘Hinduism’ also uses the term ‘Hindu religion’ and uses it much more frequently and in exactly the same sense.

When it comes to early sources written in Indian languages (and also Persian and Arabic), the word ‘Hindu’ is used in a clearly religious sense in a great number of texts at least as early as the sixteenth century. The earliest important references seem to be the discussion of Indian religion by al-Biruni in the early eleventh century, and a text by the Vaishnava author Vidyapati written about 1400 (al-Biruni 1964; Simha 1988: 269-70). Although al-Biruni’s original Arabic text only uses a term equivalent to ‘the religion of the people of India’, his description of Hindu religion is in fact remarkably similar to those of nineteenth-
century European Orientalists. For his part, Vidyapati, in his Apabhransha text *Kirtilata*, makes use of the phrase ‘Hindu and Turk dharmas’ in a clearly religious sense and highlights the local conflicts between the two communities. In the early sixteenth-century texts attributed to Kabir, the references to ‘Hindus’ and to ‘Turks’ or ‘Muslims’ (*musalamans*) in a clearly religious context are numerous and unambiguous. The somewhat earlier Hindustani texts attributed to Gorakhnath also contain several unambiguous reference to Hindus and Muslims in a religious context.

Not only these various texts but also still earlier Sanskrit and Tamil texts such as the Puranas, Vedantic and Mimamsa commentaries, songs of the Nayanars and Alvars, and particularly the twelfth- or thirteenth-century *Sarva-darsana-samgraha* all show clear evidence that their authors recognized a close affinity and collective identity among all the religious currents that symbolically recognized the authority of the Vedas (Lorenzen 2010; Madhava 1964), an affinity and identity that is virtually indistinguishable from Hindu religion even if the religion was not then given a specific name beyond rather vague terms like ‘*sanatan dharma*’. Furthermore, these texts also make it clear that this Veda-based religious tradition and religious identity did not include Jainism, Buddhism, and materialism. Even less did it include the rarely-mentioned *mleccha* religions, Islam and Christianity.

All this is not meant to imply that Hindu religion has some unchanging essence beyond history, nor that the colonial experience did not provoke major changes in the ways Hindus organized their own religious beliefs and practices. Attacks on Hindu beliefs and practices by Europeans, particularly by Christian missionaries, certainly did foster responses by
Hindu religious intellectuals that led to important changes in Hindu religion. Vasudha Dalmia’s 1997 book, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, contains an exceptionally clear exposition of some of the ways in which the Christian challenge modified Hindu religion. Similarly, since Indian Independence in 1947, the combined influence of modern media, particularly television, and modern electoral politics have helped create what Romila Thapar (1985) has called a new ‘syndicated moksha’, a standardized and homogenized sort of Hindu religion that did not exist earlier.

Scholarly studies such as those by Dalmia and Thapar expand our understanding of the evolution of Hindu religion in important ways. When, however, scholars extrapolate from the existence of such changes and claim that Hindu religion as a unified conceptual identity did not exist prior to the British conquest of the sub-continent and that it was principally the British Orientalists who invented or constructed a unified Hindu religion, this seems to me to be at best a highly misleading exaggeration, a wilful denial of historical continuities that are also an evident part of the historical record. Outsiders like the colonial British may have been able to force or otherwise convince some people to change their religion and adopt the religion of the outsiders, in other words to become religious converts to Christianity, but the idea that colonial outsiders can somehow invent, construct or otherwise create a new religion, Hinduism, held not by themselves but only by those with whom they have come into contact, is clearly an unlikely hypothesis.

If we can accept that a single Hindu religion is not simply an artificial concept invented by European Orientalists, we can move on to discuss how Hindu religion differs from other world religions. As long as one discards the idea that one or more major religions are better
than others, some of the classification schemes of early world-religion scholars do indicate important ways in which religions differ. For instance, the dominant ideas of Hindu religion about history, salvation and God sharply contrast with the dominant ideas about these topics found in the so-called Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity). Each world religion also has different systems of internal organization, with Christianity having the most corporate structure and Hinduism probably the most fragmented. Similarly, all Abrahamic religions demand much more doctrinal unity than is usually demanded in Hindu religion (individual Hindu sects are often exceptions). In my opinion, however, none of this justifies an attempt to argue that Hindu religion is not a religion by claiming that it is rather a set of heterogeneous sects, rituals and creeds or that it is rather a general ‘way of life’ or cultural ethos. To a large extent, any world religion, not just the Hindu religion, can be said to comprise a set of sects, rituals and creeds and a way of life. The differences are those of emphasis, not of basic category.

GORAKH, KABIR AND GURU ARJAN

A more fruitful way of looking at religious differences in India is, I think, in terms of personal and corporate identities. A person’s overall identity is, of course, made up of a whole set of interlocking identities. A person can be simultaneously a father, brother, son, husband, merchant, stamp collector, gourmet, amateur musician, Hindu, Vaishnava, Ramanandi, Congress supporter, homeowner, etc., etc. What is interesting in the present context is how personal religious identities have been articulated in the writings of important religious intellectuals in India who lived in different historical periods. Here I will limit the discussion to the manner in which three intellectuals of precolonial India—or
at least the early songs and verses attributed to them—negotiate religious identities that are at least partly independent of both Hindu religion and Islam but nonetheless recognize the existence of these two religions as separate cultural entities. These three intellectuals are Kabir (died 1518), the charismatic nirguni poet of Benares; the Sikh guru Arjan (died 1606); and the Nath yogi Gorakh or Gorakhnath, who probably lived in about the eleventh or twelfth centuries.

One popular early song attributed to Kabir—a song found in all the early collections of his compositions except the Adi Granth—says the following:

These differences are full of confusions:
Vedas and Muslim books, religion and the world,
Who is male, who female?
Semen is one, piss and shit are one,
skin one, flesh one.
All arose from one light.
Who then is a Brahmin? Who a Shudra?
This body sprang from clay, spontaneously.
In it sound and semen joined together.
When it dies, what name will you bear?
You study and cogitate, but never learn the secret.
Brahma is red creation, Shiva black destruction.
And Hari is filled with white virtue.
Kabir says: Worship the one Ram.
Nobody is Hindu, nobody Turk.
What makes this song particularly interesting is the final phrase, ‘Nobody is Hindu, nobody Turk’ (*hindu turka na koi*). This phrase is remarkably similar, in wording and sense, to the one that Guru Nanak (1469-1539) is said to have uttered when he emerged from the river after his trance of enlightenment, namely ‘Nobody is Hindu, nobody Muslim’ (*na koi hindu hai na koi musalaman*). This statement, well known to all Sikhs, is found first not among Nanak’s compositions in the *Adi Granth*, but rather in an early legendary account of his life, the B40 *janam-sakhi* (see McLeod 1980a: 255; 1980b: 21).

A similar phrase does occur in the *Adi Granth*, however, in a song of the fifth Sikh guru, Guru Arjan (1563-1606). In this song Arjan says: ‘We are [or I am] neither Hindu nor Muslim’ (*na ham hindu na musalaman*). What is particularly interesting about this song is that Guru Arjan gives it Kabir’s signature (*kahu Kabir*). As Pashaura Singh has pointed out (2003: 16-17, 101-109), Guru Arjan several times quotes Kabir or uses his signature. Arjan does this either to show that the theme of his song or verse is associated with Kabir or to directly cite one or more verses from one of Kabir’s compositions. Guru Arjan sometimes uses the occasion to suggest some criticism or modification of Kabir’s point of view.

In the present case, the first three verses of Arjan’s song and the refrain appear to be a direct quote from an early song of Kabir that is found only in the *Kabir-granthavali* and in Gopaldas’s *Sarvangi* among the early collections.ii The last two verses are apparently written by Guru Arjan himself, although the first of these two verses includes the *na ham hindu na musalaman* phrase that, as we have seen, is probably an allusion to Kabir’s phrase
hindu turka na koi. Paradoxically, Arjan’s final verse that begins ‘Kabir says’ (kahu kabir) is evidently the verse that most clearly represents Guru Arjan’s own words. Here is Guru Arjan’s song:

I don’t keep [Hindu] vows, nor [fast] in Ramadan.
I serve Him who protects me when life is done.

For me the [Hindu] Lord and Allah are one.
I have separated from both the Hindu and the Turk.
I don’t go on Hajj to the Kaaba nor offer puja at [Hindu] holy sites.
I serve the One [God] and no other.
I don’t do puja and don’t offer namaz.
I welcome in my heart the one Formless God (niramkar)
I am neither Hindu nor Musalman.
Body and breath belong to Allah-Ram.
Kabir says: I made this declaration.
Meeting with pir and guru, I recognized the potential in myself.

(Adi Granth, bhairau 3, in Callewaert (ed.) 1996: 1136)

The final verse in Kabir’s original song (Kabir-granthavali, no. 338)—the only verse of the song that Guru Arjan does not quote from Kabir—reads: ‘Kabir says: All error has fled, my mind is attached to the one Niranjan.’

These texts of Kabir, Nanak and Arjan embody two overlapping senses. First, the key phrases can be taken to claim that all external markers of religious identity, all particular beliefs and practices, are essentially meaningless in the light of direct mystical
consciousness. Second, these phrases can be taken to indicate that Kabir, Nanak and Arjan all tended to reject a personal religious identity as either Hindus or Muslims and were moving in the direction of building an independent religious identity, separate from both Muslim and Hindu traditions. The change in pronominal reference from ‘no one is’ (na koi hai) in Kabir and Nanak, to ‘we are not’ (na ham hai) in Arjan also suggests a shift in this direction that accords well with the course of Sikh history.

The best available collection of the early Hindustani songs and verses attributed to Gorakh is the Gorakh-bani, edited by Pitambar Datta Barthwal in about 1942. These texts cannot be accurately dated, but they do seem to be earlier than the songs and verses attributed to Kabir in several collections of the sixteenth century. As noted, both Kabir and Gorakh repeatedly refer to both Hindus and either Turks or Musalmans in contexts that show that they are talking about religions, not ethnic groups. What is most interesting, however, is the way in which they situate their own religious beliefs and practices with relation to those of both the Hindus and Muslims.

The most intriguing verse from Barthwal’s Gorakh-bani (1960) relating to the issue of religious identity is sabadi 14:

By birth [I am] a Hindu, in mature age a Yogi and by intellect a Muslim.

O kazis and mullahs, recognize the path accepted by Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.

(sabadi 14 in Barthwal (ed.) 1960: 6)
What makes this passage significant is, first, the clear recognition of three separate religious traditions: Hindu, Yogic, and Muslim. Other Gorakh bani verses also support this division into three general categories of religious identity. Most intriguing, however, is the clear intent of the author to simultaneously identify with all three traditions. He is born a Hindu, later also becomes a Yogi, and intellectually adopts, in unfortunately unspecified fashion, the stance of a Muslim. The second line of the text seems to negate some of implications of the first line since it implies a rejection of Islam, but I take this to imply a rejection of Islam in terms of ritual practice and exclusiveness, not in terms of philosophical and metaphysical speculations.

Another Gorakh-bani verse makes a somewhat different argument for superseding religious boundaries, one that is similar to a view that is often argued by Kabir. Here is Gorakh’s verse:

A true Dervish is one who knows [how to find the divine] gate,
Who inverts the five breaths,
Who stays conscious day and night.
That Dervish truly belongs to the caste of Allah.

(sabadi 182 in Barthwal (ed.) 1960: 61)

Here Gorakh implicitly juxtaposes the ordinary dervish who knows nothing of yogic meditation and breath control with the dervish who does practice Yoga. The latter Dervish is the one who truly belongs to the caste of Allah (alah ki jati). In other words, Gorakh here claims that one can remain a Muslim and nonetheless reach enlightenment.
In one of Kabir’s songs in the *Kabir-bijak (ramaini 49)*, Kabir makes a direct comment on this same verse by Gorakh and argues, against Gorakh, that it is not through Yoga, but through moral conduct and inner meditation that Muslims, Yogis, Hindus, and Sants can all attain the enlightenment of spontaneous mystical consciousness. In particular, Kabir attacks the Muslims for their practice of killing buffaloes, goats, chickens and cows: iv

Tell me, Dervish, [how to find the divine] gate.

What does the Badshah [= Allah] wear?

Where does His army assemble?

Where does it camp?

I’m asking you, Muslim.

What colour are His robes?

Red, yellow, or multicoloured?

To what divine presence (*surati*)
do you offer homage?

Kazi, what are you doing?

In every house you have buffaloes killed.

Who ordered you to kill goats and chickens?

Who told you to wield a knife?

You know no pity, but are called a Pir.

Reciting verse, you lead the world astray.

Kabir says: You declare yourself a Sayyid,

And persuade everyone to be like you.

*They fast all day. At night they kill cows.*
Blood from one, a greeting for the other.

How can this please God?


Several other verses in the Gorakh-bani suggest a rather sharp rejection of both Muslim and Hindu traditions, at least in terms of ritual practice, and the affirmation of a superior and separate Yoga tradition. Here is the most striking of these Gorakh bani verses:

The Hindu meditates in the temple, the Muslim in the mosque.
The Yogi meditates on the supreme goal, where there is neither temple or mosque.

(sabadi 68-69 in Barthwal (ed.) 1960: 25)

The following two verses, similar to many verses by Kabir, reject Hindu and Islamic traditions in terms of the uselessness of both the Vedas the Koran:

Neither the Vedas nor the [Muslim] books, neither the khani-s nor the bani-s. All these appear as a cover [of the truth].’
The [true] word is manifested in the mountain peak in the sky [=Brahma-randhra]. There one perceives knowledge of the Ineffable.

Neither in the Vedas nor the Shastras, neither in the [Muslim] books nor the Koran, [the goal] is not read about in books.
Only the exceptional Yogi knows that goal. All others are absorbed in their daily tasks.

(sabadi 4 and 6 in Barthwal (ed.) 1960: 2-3)
In these verses the religion associated with Hatha Yoga, the religion of the Nath Yogis, is clearly preferred to the religions associated with the Vedas and the Koran, namely the Hindu religion and Islam. As in the verses of Kabir and Arjan we have already discussed, there is a clear attempt to move in an independent direction, to establish a religious tradition partly separate from the two dominant traditions. Although all three of these poets clearly recognized the religious boundaries and identities of the Hindus and Muslims, each attempted to negotiate a separate religious identity for themselves, and presumably their followers, by either rejecting both Hindu and Muslim identities or by seeking some sort of composite identity. In colonial times, the Sikhs eventually successfully negotiated an independent religious identity while the Naths and Kabir Panthis assumed identities as members of somewhat unorthodox Hindu sects.

CONCLUSION

This short essay has ranged widely: from a discussion of the influence of Mircea Eliade on the way world religions are studied in modern universities; to an examination of how Hindu religion has been defined by Europeans and Indians over the past six hundred years or more; to a look at the ways in which Gorakh, Kabir and Guru Arjan regarded their own religious identities. These different topics are connected mainly through the fact that they depend on ideas about what religions have in common and how they are best studied in an academic context. The topics are also part of a tacit dialogue with two scholars who participated in the discussions of the 2008 Delhi conference on religions in South Asia: Professors S. N. Balagangadhara and Timothy Fitzgerald.
One of Balagangadhara’s main theses, argued at length in his book ‘The Heathen in His Blindness...’ Asia, the West and the dynamic of religion (1994), is that Hindu religion is not really a religion at all in the sense that the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are religions. At the risk of oversimplifying his complex argument, I think that he generally supports the idea that Hindu ‘religion’ is more a culture or ‘way of life’ than a religion and has too loose an organizational and doctrinal structure to be classed as a single religion in the way that the Abrahamic religions are single religions. As should be clear, I do not share all of Balagangadhara’s views on this issue. In large part the disagreement has to do with our mutual ideas about what constitutes a religion and what does not, as viewed from the points of view of outside observers, on the one hand, and of inside participants, on the other. Without going into a long discussion about definitions, it is worth noting that Balagangadhara employs a narrower idea about what constitutes a religion, or that, expressed differently, his idea of religion is more precise.

Roughly speaking, I regard almost any set of normative ideas about how society should be organized and how its members should behave as a religion so long as the internal variations in these rules bear at least a reasonable family resemblance and so long as the source of authority for these normative ideas is considered to be supernatural or at least beyond reason. I have also noted that it seems probable that the propensity of human communities to accept such suprarational normative ideas is directly related to the propensity of human individuals to experience a particular sort of suprarational consciousness. The value of such sets of normative ideas and the related suprarational consciousness for human survival is, it seems to me, quite sufficient to explain why religions exist without recourse to supernatural explanations, although most members of
religious communities will continue to believe that a supernatural source does in fact underlie both the ideas and the consciousness. From this perspective, both Hindu religion and the Abrahamic religions clearly belong to the same general category. In this view, all the religions commonly classed as world religions do have enough in common, enough of a family resemblance, to be classed together in one general category. In these very general terms they are all religions.

Furthermore, once these religions are adopted into a given culture and society, the place of origin of any given religion soon becomes largely irrelevant. When religions extend into new regions, the moral and cultural norms that they sponsor are soon modified so that they better harmonize with the dominant culture of the new regions. Some religions are undoubtedly more ‘national’ than others in the sense that they remain more closely associated with a specific territory and nation. National religions in this sense include Hindu religion, Shinto, Taoism, the Sikh Panth, Jainism, and, to some extent, Judaism. Other religions have extended far from the regions in which they originated to other territories and nations by migration and/or conversion. Such more international religions include Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Nonetheless Christians, Muslims and Buddhists in India are culturally and religiously different from the Christians, Muslims and Buddhists of other regions, while, especially in recent years, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Jews have spread out to many regions and have modified their religious beliefs and practices in the process. Now more than ever, the distinction between national and non-national religions is problematic at best.
The sense of religious identity held by the Hindus themselves is, of course, also important. What I have argued is that Hindus did in fact share a religious identity as Hindus at least as far back as 1400 and probably much earlier as well. On the other hand, it is also clear that outside observers, both Hindus and non-Hindus, may justifiably regard the members of certain heterodox religious groups to be Hindus although these persons themselves may not regard themselves to be Hindus, or at least not exclusively Hindus. The examples cited were Gorakh, Kabir and Guru Arjan. Gorakh is particularly interesting since he in one passage directly suggests the possibility of simultaneously negotiating multiple religious identities: as a Hindu, as a Muslim, and as a Yogi. Kabir and Guru Arjan, for their part, both seem to be moving toward a religious identity that transcends and differs from both Hindu religion and Islam.

Another disagreement is with an argument put forward by Timothy Fitzgerald about the relation between the secular and the religious. In his essay entitled ‘Encompassing Religion, Privatized Religions and the Invention of Modern Politics’, and also in his book, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity*, Fitzgerald has shown in detail how the concepts of the secular and the religious are historically quite problematic (Fitzgerald 2007a and 2007b). He notes that secular institutions have traditionally carried out a great variety of functions that we normally think of as religious. Similarly, religious institutions have carried out an equally great variety of functions that we normally think of as secular. Essentially, Fitzgerald argues that we should abandon the distinction between the secular and the religious altogether. Although, as I have noted, my own ideas about what constitute a religion stress its social functions and downplay the supernatural element, nonetheless I
think that Fitzgerald goes too far in the direction of denying any meaningful difference between religious and secular institutions.

What is needed, as is often the case, is an approach that avoids extremes. Religious worldviews and religious institutions need not be regarded either as radically different from secular worldviews and secular institutions or as simply minor variants of each other. Religious and secular institutions serve complementary social ends but are different and are supported by different rationales. Religions are grounded in a certain type of mental experience or emotion that somehow gives authority to cultural and moral norms without the necessity of strict rational analysis. The extent of reliance on such mental experiences may vary among different religions, and religions can of course also differ in many other ways: the nature of their metaphysics, the content of their moral and social codes, their exclusivity or tolerance toward other religions, and the character of their rituals. Nonetheless, when all is said and done the churches, mosques and temples of different major religions and their approaches to philosophical, moral and social questions have much in common and are quite distinguishable from palaces and parliaments and their approaches to these same questions.
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i See also *Kabir-granthavali*, pad 57 and Kabir 2000: no. 77.

ii This song is Callewaert’s no. 423 (Kabir 2000). The number in the Sabha edition of the *Kabir-granthavali* is 338 (Kabir 1968: 347). See Pashaura Singh’s (2003: 31-33) important discussion of Arjan’s song and its relation to this song by Kabir. The fact that Kabir’s song is only found in the *Kabir-granthavali* and Gopaldas’s *Sarvangi* suggests that it could conceivably have been composed by a follower of Kabir sometime after Guru Arjan. Against this idea, Arjan does directly quote other texts by Kabir elsewhere in the *Adi Granth*.

iii My interpretation of the last verse differs slightly from that offered by Pashaura Singh (2003: 32). The song may also allude indirectly to at least one other Kabir song. This other song appears in most early Kabir collections including the *Adi Granth* (p. 1349), the *Kabir-granthavali* (pad 259) and the *Kabir-bijak* (pad 97). The song is no. 280 in Callewaert’s collection (Kabir 2000).

iv See also the fine translation of Hess and Singh (Kabir 1983: 87-88).

v These two terms reappear in *Gorakh-bani* pad 16.5. Barthwal has an explanatory note, but it is not clear on what his explanation is based.