Hindu Sects and Hindu Religion
Precolonia and Colonial Concepts

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The modern study of Indian history, Indian religions, Indian languages and other aspects of Indian society and culture essentially dates back only to the formation of the Asiatic Society by Sir William Jones and his colleagues in 1784. These European scholars, the so-called Orientalists, and their mostly anonymous and more traditional Indian teachers revolutionized both the content and the epistemological methods and models used for studies of Indian history and culture. Among contemporary scholars, Thomas Trautmann has long been at the forefront of those who have been reexamining the contributions of the early Orientalists and their Indian colleagues to this revolution in the way Indian society and culture has been studied.

One of the chief aims of Trautmann and of others who agree with his main arguments, myself included, has been to try to find a middle way between scholars influenced by postmodern and postcolonial approaches and the more traditional (although also modern) views associated with scholars not influenced by these approaches. Postcolonial scholars often argue that the epistemological break introduced in the early British colonial period was so dramatic as to virtually create or invent Indian institutions of all sorts—social, religious, political, and economic—both in the sense that new
institutions were, in fact, created and in the sense that existing institutions were reconceptualized in so radical a fashion that they too became something quite different and, in a certain sense, new. Institutions and cultural categories such as Hinduism, Indian history, and even caste have come to be seen, conceptually at least, as recent and essentially European inventions. More traditional contemporary scholars have generally considered such conclusions as hyperbole disguised as insight and have gone on about their business as usual. What Trautmann and those who follow him have done is to try to identify and compare what was new and what was not new, the continuities as well as the discontinuities, in the way that the Orientalists—and by implication virtually all modern scholars, postcolonial ones included—have looked at Indian history, Indian society, and Indian culture.¹

Trautmann's more recent work has been mainly on the ways in which the early Orientalists, especially Sir William Jones in Calcutta and F.W. Ellis in Madras, changed our views of the deep history of Indian languages. This was done with the collaboration of the Indian scholars with whom they worked. The Europeans added something new to this study, but also did not ignore the powerful insights of pre-modern Sanskrit and Tamil grammarians, most notably Panini, into the science of linguistics (Trautmann 1997, 2006). That these European scholars rarely if ever publically acknowledged their debt to their Indian collaborators is a sad product of imperial hubris, but this does not substantially change the fact of what happened.

My own work has concentrated more on the contributions of the early European missionaries and Orientalists to the study of Indian religions and religious history rather than historical linguistics (Lorenzen 2006a, 2006b, forthcoming). Much of this work has tried to show how early European missionaries and Orientalists built on previously existing Indian concepts of Hindu religion in their own modern conceptualizations of this religion. Here in this essay I want to extend this line of research to consider the ways
in which pre-modern intellectuals writing in Indian languages and missionaries and Orientalists writing in European languages conceptualized the relation between the major religious traditions that have come to be called Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism, on the one hand, and, on the other, the smaller Brahmanical, Buddhist, Jain and Hindu sects that have historically made up a substantial part of the major traditions.

My main argument here is that, starting from premodern scholars right through to twentieth-century Orientalists, there has been an awareness of a dynamic and historically changing relation between religious sects and the larger religious traditions with which they were associated. Each important author nonetheless gave his own slant on the nature of sects and on how their relation to the larger traditions should be conceptualized. Early Sanskrit texts described different sects principally in terms of their metaphysical doctrines. Vernacular texts like the *Bhaktamals* turned to hagiographies of the founders of the various sects. The studies introduced by the Orientalists, on the other hand, emphasized an empirical, historical, and ethnographic epistemology, sometimes highlighting the relation between sect and caste. These changing views about the nature of sects, and their relation to wider traditions, undoubtedly reflect the differing concerns of the authors of the texts, but they also provide evidence about the historically changing nature of the sects and traditions themselves.

The views discussed here will include those of Asoka, Madhava, Anantanandagiri, Nabhasdas, Raghavdas, Roberto de Nobili, Horace Hayman Wilson, Sir R.G. Bhandarkar, and J.N. Farquhar. For the most part I will not pay much attention to the contributions of Christian missionaries, except insofar as they can be classed primarily as Orientalists. This omission is merely intended to better focus the discussion and not to deny the importance of missionary criticisms of Hindu religion in influencing the responses of colonial-period Hindu intellectuals.
By the time of King Asoka (ca. 269–232 BC), we find already in place a clear division between brahmanas and sramanas, between those who followed Vedic tradition and those who followed newer religions that did not recognize the authority of the Vedas, meaning principally the Buddhists, Jains, and the Ajivikas. At the least, this division into brahmanas (Brahmans) and sramanas implies that the Vedic tradition was still more or less intact and clearly distinguished itself from Buddhism, Jainism, and other non-Vedic religions. In addition, Asoka proposed a still broader religious concept that he called dhamma that was apparently meant to bring social harmony among smaller sects and even between the Brahmans and sramanas.

Among Asoka’s inscribed edicts, a key text with regard to what his dhamma actually meant in terms of human conduct is his fourth major rock edict (Thapar 1961: 251; Goyal 1982: 43):

In the past, the killing and injuring of living beings, [and] lack of respect towards relatives, brahmans, and sramanas had increased. But today, thanks to the practice of Dhamma on the part of the Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi [i.e., Asoka], the sound of the drum has become the sound of Dhamma, showing the people displays of heavenly chariots, elephants, balls of fire, and other divine forms. Through his instruction in Dhamma, abstention from killing and non-injury to living beings, deference to relatives, brahmans, and sramanas, obedience to mother and father, and obedience to elders have all increased as never before for many centuries. These and many other forms of the practice of Dhamma have increased and will increase.

The scope of Asoka’s dhamma has been much debated among modern historians. Some identified the dhamma fairly closely with Buddhist doctrine, the Buddhist dhamma, but the Asokan texts clearly suggest that Asoka regarded his dhamma as something more general, a doctrine that encompassed not only Buddhism but also other religious groups including the Brahmans and the non-Buddhist
sramanas. Other scholars attempted to give Asoka a decidedly secular and practical purpose. Romila Thapar, the leading historian of Asoka’s period, argued that Asoka’s dhamma is basically an attempt to find a common religious morality that can help overcome sectarian conflict. Thapar called this “a policy rather of social responsibility... a plea for the recognition of the dignity of man, and for a humanistic spirit in the activities of society” (Thapar 1961: 3).

Amartya Sen recently attempted to secularize Asoka and his dhamma still further, arguing that Asoka was a sterling example of a champion “of tolerance and freedom ... who during the third century BCE covered the country with inscriptions on stone tablets about good behavior and wise governance, including a demand for basic freedoms for all—indeed, he did not exclude women and slaves as Aristotle did; he even insisted that these rights must be enjoyed also by ‘the forest people’ living in pre-agricultural communities distant from Indian cities” (Sen 2005: 284).

Although Thapar’s and Sen’s appreciations of Asoka have a slightly anachronistic flavor, there is no doubt that Asoka’s principal concern was to avoid conflict between the Brahmans and sramanas, and among the smaller groups or “sects,” through the promotion of a policy of religious tolerance and harmony. In his twelfth major rock edict, for instance, Asoka advocates “the essential doctrine of all sects” (Thapar 1961: 255; Goyal 1982: 58–62):

The Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, honours all sects and both ascetics and laymen, with gifts and various forms of recognition. But the Beloved of the Gods does not consider gifts or honour to be as important as the advancement of the essential doctrine of all sects (saravadhi asa savapasamdanam). This progress of the essential doctrine takes many forms, but its basis is the control of one’s speech, so as not to extoll one’s own sect or disparage another’s on unsuitable occasions, or at least to do so only mildly on certain occasions…. Many are concerned with this matter—the officers of Dhamma, the women’s officers, the managers of the state farms, and other classes of officers. The result of this is the increased influence of one’s own sect and glory to Dhamma.
The word here translated as “sect” is, in Asoka’s original Prakrit text, *pasanda*. Scholars are divided about whether this word is related to Sanskrit *parsada* (parisad) (“assembly, council”) or to Sanskrit *pasanda* (a word that later comes to mean “heretic,” often referring to Jains and Buddhists). *Pasanda* seems the more likely candidate. Asoka does not specify whether by *pasanda* he is referring to groups associated with the Brahmins or the *sramanas* or with both, but in any case he tells them to behave toward each other in a courteous manner, a plea that clearly implies that they did not always do so. Kautilya’s *Arthasastra* and the *Manusmrti* are early Sanskrit works that contain interesting references to *pasandas*, apparently in the sense of heretics, especially Buddhist and Jain monks.

**MADHAVA AND ANANTANANDAGIRI**

The most important catalogues of religious and metaphysical traditions found in pre-modern Sanskrit literature are two texts: Madhava’s *Sarvadarsanasamgraha* (1882, 1964) and Anantanandagiri’s *Samkaravijaya* (1971). Both these works were written in southern India and in a historical environment that probably had only a small Muslim and Christian presence. The dates of both texts are somewhat uncertain, but the text attributed to Madhava probably dates from about the fourteenth century while Anantanandagiri’s text is more recent, perhaps belonging to the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Later pre-British catalogues of Hindu sects were mostly written in vernacular or foreign languages. I will discuss some of these texts shortly.

The catalogues of sects and religions described in the *Sarvadarsanasamgraha* and the *Samkaravijaya* are quite different from each other, as are the strategies that authors used in organizing them. The *Sarvadarsanasamgraha* comprises a set of quite detailed descriptions of the sixteen different metaphysical systems or doctrines (*darsanas*). These are, in the order of the text: the Carvaka system, the Buddhist system, the Arhata (or Jain)
system, the Ramanuja system, the Purnaprajña system (associated with the Vaishnava dualist Madhvacarya), the Nakulisa-Pasupata system, the Saiva system (meaning the mainly south Indian Saiva-siddhanta system), the Pratyabhijña system (a Tantrik Saiva school associated with Abhinavagupta of Kashmir), the Rasesvara system (a school of alchemy), the Aulukya (or Vaiseshika) system, the Aksapada (or Nyaya) system, the Jaimini (or Mimamsa) system, the Panini system (centered on grammatical and semantic analysis), the Samkhya system, the Patanjali (or Yoga) system, and finally the Samkara (or Advaita Vedanta system).

Apart from the fact that the first three non-Vedic systems mentioned by Madhava—namely, the Carvakas, the Buddhists, and the Jains—are clearly considered by the author to be the worst and the final Advaita system was considered to be the best, the content and order of the list of doctrines appears to be rather haphazard. It includes, in addition to three non-Vedic schools, the traditional six systems of Brahmanic metaphysics (Samkhya-Yoga, Vaiseshika-Nyaya, and Mimamsa-Vedanta), with Vedanta represented in three variants (Ramanuja’s, Madhva’s, and Samkara’s), three Saiva systems (Pasupata, Saiva-siddhanta, and Pratyabhijña), and the rather anomalous grammatical and alchemical systems. The Buddhist, Jain, and Carvaka systems are attacked from time to time throughout the rest of the work and in the final chapter expounding the Advaita system (not included in the Cowell and Gough translation). The author also criticizes the Samkhya and Mimamsa systems at length.

The Sarvadarsanasamgraha offers little information about the extent to which Madhava regarded the Vedic/Brahmanic philosophical schools to be part of a single religion. In all chapters of the work, the discussion is consistently focused on metaphysics and has virtually nothing to say about issues of religious practice and community identity. Metaphysical concepts and views were, in fact, freely debated among Jains, Buddhists, and the followers of Vedic schools, and they frequently borrowed from each other.
That Samkaracarya’s use of ideas derived in part from Buddhist Madhyamika philosophers is only the most obvious example. What Madhava does do, however, is accept Vedic statements as a legitimate source of authority or pramana. In this way the Sarvadarsanasamgraha draws a reasonably clear distinction between what are called nastika traditions—such as those of the Carvakas, Jains, and Buddhists—that do not accept the Vedas as eternal and divine and the astika traditions followed by all the schools and sects that do accept the divine authority of the Vedas.  

Anantanandagiri’s Samkaravijaya is a quite a different text. Its criticisms cover more than just the metaphysical views of various sects and schools. It also criticizes aspects of their religious ethical practices. The number of sects and schools criticized is also much larger than in the Sarvadarsanasamgraha. Anantanandagiri’s work is divided into seventy-four chapters, a majority of which relate the victory (vijaya) of the Advaita philosopher Samkaracarya over the leaders of various sects. In total Samkara’s encounters with about fifty rival groups are described. The basic principle of organization is, at least in theory, geographical and historical. Samkara one by one meets representatives of the different rival sects in the course of his “tour of victory” around the Indian subcontinent. In practice, however, these rival sects are grouped together in smaller sets.  

The non-Vedic Carvakas, Jains, and Buddhists are placed in chapters 25–28. Sects devoted to a series of relatively minor deities (Mallari, Visvaksena, Manmatha, Kubera, Indra, Yama, Varuna, Vayu, Bhumi and Jala, and Varaha) follow in chapters 29–39. The adherents of the classical Brahmanical schools of Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, and Vaiseshika form another subset (chapters 40–42). The fifth of the six classical schools, Kumarila Bhatta’s Mimamsa, is set apart in its own chapter (chapter 55). Several different sects devoted to Vishnu (the Bhagavatas, Pancaratras, the Vaikhanasas, and the Karma-hina Vaishnavas) form another category (chapters 6–10), as do a variety of groups devoted to Ganesa (chapters 15–18) and several types of Saktas (chapters 19–22). Other sects and
schools mentioned in the text include various Saiva sects (chapters 4–5), the sect of the Kapalikas (chapters 23–24), and those of the worshippers of the Pitrs, Sesha and Garuda, the Siddhas, the Gandharvas, and the Bhutas and Vetalas (chapters 47–51).

A principal aim of both the *Sarvadarsanasamgraha* and the *Samkaravijaya* is to demonstrate the superiority of Samkaracarya’s Advaita Vedanta. In the case of the *Sarvadarsanasamgraha*, all the rival schools whose views are discussed (with the possible exception of the Carvakas) really existed. In the case of the *Samkaravijaya*, however, many of the sects mentioned, most notably those dedicated to minor deities, probably never existed. The author’s purpose in including these imaginary sects is not clear. Perhaps he simply wished to disparage any sort of worship directed at these minor deities. Notable in both works is the absence of any mention of Christians or Muslims. Some Christians were present in south India from the third or fourth centuries and possibly even earlier and some Muslims were in the same region (chiefly in Kerala) from the eighth or ninth centuries.

**VERNACULAR HAGIOGRAPHIES**

The *Sarvadarsanasamgraha* and the *Samkaravijaya* were both written in Sanskrit. When we come to literature about religious sects written in Indian vernacular languages, we find that a quite different sort of text predominates. At least in northern India, the basic model was established sometime during the late sixteenth century by Nabhadas in his *Bhaktamal* and its later commentaries. Here the emphasis is placed squarely on hagiography, the life stories of individual religious poets and saints. Many saints described by Nabhadas are not closely associated with any sectarian groups, but at least a few were the reputed founders of lasting sectarian movements. These include Nimbaditya, Ramanuja, Vishnusvami, Madhva, Samkaracarya, Ramananda, Kabir, Caitanya, and Vallabha. With the notable exception of Samkaracarya, virtually all the saints described by Nabhadas were Vaishnavas of one sort or another.
Other texts similar in many respects to Nabhas’s *Bhaktamal* include Anantadas’s *paracai* legends of various saints (composed ca. 1600), Raghavdas’s *Bhaktamal* (ca. 1720), and Mahipati’s Marathi *Bhaktavijaya* (1762). Although all these texts have a strong bias in favor of Vaishnava religion, none of them restricts the stories to the founders of a single sect. Mahipati and Raghavdas even include descriptions of Saivite Nath saints such as Matsyendranath and Gorakhnath. Raghavdas’s encyclopedic *Bhaktamal* also includes some Jain, Buddhist, and Muslim saints, although Raghavdas himself is explicitly a follower of the nirguni (worshipping a formless god) Vaishnava saint Dadu Dayal.

Caturdas, who wrote his commentary on Raghavdas’s text in 1800 AD, begins with a verse that offers homage to “the millions of Hari devotees, the Dasanami samnyasis, the Jains and the lords of Yoga, the blissful jangama ascetics, the Buddhists and the dervishes, the nine Naths and the eighty-four Siddhas, the Muslim teachers (pir) and prophets (paigambar), Brahma, Vishnu and Siva” (Raghavdas 1969: 6). Only the Christians are missing.

A text in many ways in a class by itself is Muhbad Shah’s *Dabistan*. This seventeenth-century text, written in Persian by a Parsi author, contains stories about a great number of medieval Indian saints from various sects and both Muslim and Hindu religions. An English translation of this text was published in 1843, and at present Aditya Behl (2008) is about to publish an important essay on the text and its author. Nonetheless, further work on it is still needed.

Other texts that might be discussed in this context include South Indian Tamil and Kannada hagiographies such as Cekkilar’s twelfth-century *Periya Puranam* and the fifteenth-century Virasaiva *Sunyasampadane*. These texts are similar to the *Bhaktamals* in that they contain hagiographies of large numbers of saints, but are different in that all the saints belong to, or are posthumously associated with, a single religious sect. In northern India, the same can be said of Gokulnath’s sixteenth-century text, *Caurasi
Vaishnavan ki Varta, containing stories about saints associated with the Vallabha sect.  

In India, hagiography can, of course, be traced back long before Nabhadas. The legendary lives of Buddha and of Mahavira and other Jain saints, in particular, were integral parts of Buddhism and Jainism. Vedic and early Puranic tradition, however, never paid much attention to this genre. The Puranas certainly did present detailed narratives of the lives of gods, especially Vishnu’s avatars, but the avatars are more mythological than historical or even legendary figures. Their mythological status is suggested by the fact that several of the main ten avatars are non-human (Fish, Turtle, Boar, Manlion) and by the fact that all of these avatars (including Vamana, Parasurama, Rama and Krishna) lived in former yugas or ages (except for the Buddha and the yet-to-appear Kalkin). Puranic stories about the ancient rishis (seers) also seem to be basically mythological, and none of these rishis are known to be the founders of historical religious sects in any case. The Samkaravijaya and other collections of legends about Samkara do contain many stories about the historical Samkara, but it is not clear if these texts are substantially older than vernacular hagiographies like that of Nabhadas. In addition, the Samkara hagiographies do not contain stories about the lives of multiple saints as is the case in Nabhadas’s Bhaktamal and similar texts.

What produced this medieval explosion of hagiographic texts containing legends about historical poets and saints? Was this explosion simply the result of a mostly spontaneous change of literary fashion, or do these texts reflect important historical changes in the nature of Hindu religion? One possible answer is that the turning away from a reliance on the eternal and impersonal authority of the Vedas in medieval bhakti-based Hinduism, particularly among more radical sects such as those of the followers of Kabir, Nanak, and Dadu, led to a reliance on the words and persons of the founders of these sects, the guru and his bani, as sources of divine authority. The Vedas existed from the beginning
of time, but bhakti sects were founded by historical persons. When these sects ignored or rejected the Vedas, they replaced Vedic authority with that of the guru, his words and the lessons of his legendary life story (Lorenzen 1996: 155–56).

The authors themselves generally have surprisingly little to say about why they wrote their texts. Nabhadas, however, comes close to explaining why he wrote his Bhaktamal in four doha verses near the beginning of the text (Nabhadas 1969: 37–42):

The devotees (bhakta), devotion (bhakti), the Lord (bhagavanta) and the guru. These are four in name only, in fact they are one. When one offers homage to their feet, many obstacles are destroyed.

Thinking about auspicious things is splendid. The devotee of God (harijan) who sings about the fame of the devotees (jan) becomes auspiciousness itself.

All the saints (santan), the Vedas (sruti), the Puranas, and history (itihas) have declared that one should worship both God (Hari) and God’s servants (Haridas).

[My guru] Agradev commanded me: “Sing about the fame of the devotees. There exists no other means to cross the ocean of existence.”

There are in fact several things that the authors of these texts tend to have in common besides their taste for hagiography. All of them support a religion based on devotion (bhakti) to Puranic gods (Vishnu, his avatars, Siva, or Sakti) and to the human saints themselves. Few of the authors seem to be learned in Sanskrit. Few demonstrate much interest in or knowledge of the Vedas or the six traditional darsanas (the hagiographers of Samkara and of the yogic Naths are notable exceptions). Many of the authors are probably not Brahmans (e.g., Nabhadas, Raghavdas, Anantadas, Muhbad Shah). Few have any known association with specific temples (the early Alvars and Nayanars and the somewhat later early Virasaivas are exceptions).

The overall picture suggests both a gradual breakdown in traditional Brahmanic and Sanskrit learning and a general lessening of the importance of big temple and matha (monastery) complexes.
Implicit in the process is also an increasing importance of religious sects and the founders or leaders of these sects. Nonetheless, most of these authors do not discuss the sects per se or their relation to larger religious categories such as, for lack of a better term, religious currents (chiefly Vaishnavism, Saivism, and Saktaism) or the Hindu religious tradition as a whole.

**ROBERTO DE NOBILI**

Roberto de Nobili was an Italian Jesuit who worked as a missionary in southern India in the period from 1605 until his death in 1656. This makes him slightly later than Nabhadas but earlier than Nabhadas’s commentator Priyadas. De Nobili is now famous for his scholarly works on Hindu religion and for his advocacy of a policy of Christian accommodation to Hindu customs that, in his view, were not clearly religious, most notably the use of the sacred thread. During the seventeenth century, he was the Christian missionary in India who made the most serious studies of Indian religions and his views on these religions and their sectarian and theological divisions are worth a closer examination.⁹

De Nobili’s most accessible work on Indian religions is his *Informatio de Quibusdam Moribus Nationis Indicae*, edited and translated from Latin into English by S. Rajamanickam as *Roberto de Nobili on Indian Customs* (1972). De Nobili here divides Indian religions into three “sects” (he reserves the term “religion” for the “one true religion,” namely, Christianity). These three sects are the Buddhists or Atheists, the “Gnanis” (i.e., the Jains or Tamil Siddhas?), and the Idolaters (i.e., the Hindus). De Nobili states quite clearly that these three “sects” had little or nothing to do with each other, in other words, that they were, in our terms, independent religions: “Again, that the sect of the Atheists cannot be said to be an unorthodox offspring of the sects of idolaters is clear under yet another head, namely the fact that these sects do not agree in any of their tenets, just as the sects of the Gnanis have nothing in common with these same idolaters” (1972: 36-37).
De Nobili in turn divides the Idolaters up into their own sects, the main ones being four. The first of these he calls the “Mayavadis,” those “who hold in equal honour the three gods Brumna, Visnu, [and] Rudhren.” The second sect is called that of the Xaivas, the third is that of the Vaishnavas, and the fourth is that of the “Tadvavadis.” The members of the first are said to be followers of “Ciancaraciaria” (i.e., Samkaracarya), the second of “Given” (Siva?), the third of Ramanuja, and the fourth of “Madhuva” (i.e. Madhva). These groups or sects are clearly those more properly known as the Advaita Vedantins or Smartas, the Saiva-siddhantins, the Sri-Vaishnavas, and the Dvaitins or followers of Madhva. De Nobili also mentions the existence of minor Idolater sects including the “Logaidas” (Lokayatas), the “Sciandra vadis” (worshippers of the Moon), the “Suria vadis” (Sauryas or worshippers of the Sun), the “Mavivadis” (?), the “Vamas” who follow the god “Siacti” (Sakti, i.e., the Saktas), and the “Aginager” (?).

On the whole, this analysis of the Hindu sects of seventeenth-century southern India seems to be reasonably complete and accurate, at least as far as sects led by Brahmans are concerned. What is important for this discussion is the fact that de Nobili clearly saw all these Idolater sects as members of one big “sect” or religion which is clearly distinguished from that of the Buddhists and the Gnanis. It is also interesting that de Nobili did not seriously attempt any historical or geographical analysis of Idolater religion and its composite sects, a type of analysis that H.H. Wilson and other later Orientalist scholars generally thought was necessary. For the most part de Nobili adopted a model similar to that found in the Sarvadarsanasamgraha and the Samkaradigvijaya. I strongly suspect that de Nobili was following a classification system offered to him by some learned Brahman interlocutor, perhaps one acquainted with the texts by Madhava and Anantanandagiri.
What happens when we come to the English Orientalist, H.H. Wilson (1786–1860)? Although the earliest British Orientalists like Sir William Jones and H.T. Colebrooke were also interested in Hindu religion and Hindu mythology, Wilson was the first Orientalist to look at the beliefs and practices of Hindu sects in detail. Wilson’s “Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus,” first published in 1828 and 1832, begins with a discussion of the lists of sects in the Sarvadarsanasamgraha and in the Samkaravijaya. In later chapters he in several places makes use of Nabhadas’s Bhaktamal. Wilson also claims to have based his essay largely on two Persian language texts by Hindu authors, one text by Sital Singh, munshito the Raja of Banaras, and one by Mathura Nath, a librarian at the Hindu College in the same city. Wilson does not mention the title of either work, and I have not been able to identify them. Wilson apparently did not make use of the Dabistan.

Wilson was, of course, not a Hindu and had no interest in showing that Advaita Vedanta was superior to all other sects and schools. He also had no interest in inventing sects centered on minor deities. The opening paragraph of his essay states his aim as follows (1828: 1): “The Hindu religion is a term that has been hitherto employed in a collective sense, to designate a faith and worship of an almost endlessly diversified description: to trace some of its varieties is the object of the present enquiry.”

The most obvious thing to note about this statement is that Wilson is affirming both the great diversity and an implicit underlying unity in Hindu religion. Since this text was written in the period of what Thomas Trautmann (1997) calls the shift or transition from Indomania to Indophobia among British-born scholars of Indian history and culture, and since Wilson belongs more to the Indophiles than to the Indophobes, his recognition of the underlying unity of Hindu religion deserves more attention than the view of missionary scholars like Alexander Duff (1839),
who also saw in Hindu religion a unity, but the unity of a giant conspiracy against Christian reason and morality.

The actual procedure of Wilson differs from his Indian pre-colonial predecessors most notably in his reliance on a fairly strict empirically-grounded historical methodology rather than an emphasis on metaphysics or on hagiographic legends. He also shifts the emphasis of his descriptions onto the religious communities. Where and how did they originate? Where are their chief centers located? What social groups belong to them? How numerous are their supporters? What are their religious rituals and customs? All these questions are discussed only in passing by earlier authors, but in Wilson’s text they move to center stage. The later authors I will discuss here are J.N. Farquhar and R.G. Bhandarkar. They mostly follow Wilson in employing such an empirical historical methodology, but they also each apply particular emphases to their discussions.

Let us take as an example of Wilson’s methodology, his treatment of the Kabir Panth. Nabhadas’s commentator, Priyadas, was mostly content to narrate a series of legends that together amounted to a legendary biography of Kabir, without questioning the historicity of these legends. Wilson, in his “Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus,” begins by briefly summarizing a few key legends about Kabir, but he also indicates several times that he doubts that the legends are historically true, using phrases like “according to them [the Kabir Panthis],” “the story…perhaps not literally true in any fashion,” “according to one account,” and “it is said.” Wilson then passes to a discussion of the Vaishnava affiliation of the Kabir Panthi followers of Kabir and of the various customs, rituals, and dress adopted by members of the sect. Next he presents a detailed discussion of the literary texts of the Kabir Panth including those composed by Kabir and by later authors. Wilson also gives some translations of selected passages from the Kabir bijak, the text considered authoritative by the Kabir Panthis, most notably of Kabir’s sakhis (verse couplets), and also a summary of a Kabir
Panthi (Dharamdasi) work titled *Sukh nidhan*. Finally Wilson gives a short historical summary of the branches of the Kabir Panth: who founded them, where their chief centers are located, and an estimate of the numerical size of their ascetic and lay followers.

To a considerable extent, the model set by Wilson in 1828–32 for discussing the Kabir Panth and other sects was followed by virtually all subsequent scholars. Nonetheless, the information available to later scholars about Hindu sects year by year increased in exponential fashion. In at least this respect, the differences between Wilson, on the one hand, and R.G. Bhandarkar and J.N. Farquhar, authors who published surveys of Hindu sects in 1913 and 1920 respectively, on the other, amount to a sea change in the academic study of Indian religions. When Wilson wrote in the first half of the nineteenth century, much basic information about the history of Indian religions was still unknown to European scholars. For instance, in his first Oxford lecture on the “Religious Practices and Opinions of the Hindus,” delivered in 1840, Wilson notes ([1862] 1976: 44): “The oldest monuments of the Hindu religion are the Vedas. It is much to be regretted that we have not a translation of these works in any of the languages of Europe.” In fact, several Vedic translations and Sanskrit editions were published in Europe in the 1840s and 1850s, including Wilson’s own translation of the first four books of the *Rg-veda* (done from 1850 to 1857). By the time that Bhandarkar and Farquhar wrote their surveys, most Vedic literature had already been published in editions and translations by European and Indian Orientalist scholars.

Another significant difference between Wilson, on the one hand, and Bhandarkar and Farquhar, on the other, centers on their respective attitudes towards Sanskrit and the vernacular languages. Wilson—like H.T. Colebrooke and Sir William Jones before him—had a decided prejudice in favor of Sanskrit and against vernacular languages. It must be noted that Wilson did make use of some vernacular-language texts in his 1828–32 essay on Hindu sects, as in his translations of some of Kabir’s *sakhis*. Nonetheless, in his
discussion of Hindu sects in his 1840 essay, Wilson had this to say about their vernacular literature ([1862] 1976: 72–73): “Such literature as they occasionally cultivate—and it is one of the means by which they act upon the people—is vernacular literature, compositions in the spoken languages. These are mostly songs and hymns addressed to Vishnu, Krishna or Radha, tales and legends of individuals celebrated amongst them as saints, always marvelous, mostly absurd and not infrequently immoral, and vague and dogmatic expositions of elements of belief.”

Compare this with what Farquhar wrote about vernacular religious texts in the following passage in which he also moves toward attributing an overall coherence to all the religions and sects born on Indian soil ([1920] 1967: x): “The three religions [Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain] are moments in a single religious movement; and they have reacted on each other throughout their history. Vernacular religious books are as truly a vital part of the growth of the sects as their more formal Sanskrit manuals are. For a full understanding of the history, the whole must be envisaged as one great movement.”

Chronologically, the next important survey of Hindu sects published after Wilson’s *Religious Sects of the Hindus* was Sir R.G. Bhandarkar’s *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems*, first published in 1913. Bhandarkar was a Maharashtrian Brahman who had fully appropriated the historical methodology of the European Orientalists. Bhandarkar’s survey of Hindu sects is much more contemporary in style and content than Wilson’s. Bhandarkar does perhaps display a preference for Sanskrit as the language of religious authority, hardly surprising in a Brahman Sanskritist, but he also makes ample use of vernacular sources. *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems* also offers almost no theoretical statements about the ways in which sects are articulated with the larger category of Hindu religion. Bhandarkar’s own ambiguous situation as an Indian Hindu writing in English and using a western intellectual methodology undoubtedly had much to do with his
reluctance to theorize. Another factor was probably the constraints of colonial politics and censorship.

One text by Bhandarkar that does give us at least some idea of his personal and theoretical views about Hindu religion is a talk he gave to the Hindu reformist organization he supported, the Prarthana Samaj, in 1883. In this talk he attempted to characterize the metaphysical organization of Hindu religion and the need for Hindus to defend their religion from foreign criticism. He says (1928: 604):

The prevailing Hindu Religion is a religion in which we find various shades of belief and modes of action confused together. We cannot say it is not monotheism, we cannot say it is not polytheism or even fetishism. It is neither simply a religion of external observances nor is it a religion enjoining purity of heart only. We are dissatisfied with this state of things and have been seeking a more consistent and rational system of religious faith and action. A foreign religion has for some time been knocking at our door and claiming admission. If we have deliberately refused to admit it we must give our reasons.

J.N. Farquhar first published his book *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India* in 1920, only seven years after Bhandarkar’s survey. By this time, Farquhar felt that ([1920] 1967: ix): “the Vedic literature has been studied with the utmost care by a company of brilliant scholars; certain sections of the philosophical literature have been critically examined; the classical Sanskrit literature is well known; and portions of the literature of Buddhism and of Jainism have been carefully described; but on the mass of the books produced by Hindu sects and on great sections of Buddhist and Jain literature very little labor has yet been expended.” In other words, Farquhar viewed the study of vernacular texts (including those written in Buddhist Pali and Jain Apabhramsa) as important not only in their own right, but also because he felt that Vedic and classical Sanskrit texts had already been amply studied.

A curious difference between Wilson and Farquhar concerns the ways they each negotiated the Christian prejudices of their
English and European readers. Wilson—who in fact personally seems not to have been very religious—felt obliged to pay homage to the anti-Hinduism sentiments of the Christian establishment in his 1840 Oxford lecture. For instance, in this address Wilson mentions, with apparent approval, an “invitation which has been addressed to the University by the Bishop of Calcutta.… The task that has been proposed to the members of the University is twofold. They are invited to confute the falsities of Hinduism, and affirm to the conviction of a reasonable Hindu the truths of Christianity” ([1862] 1976: 40–41). Farquhar, in contrast, wrote his *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India* with hardly any kowtowing to common Christian prejudice. On the other hand, Farquhar was himself a missionary and his most popular book, *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913), does argue that Hindu religious beliefs and practices were inferior to those of Christianity. Nonetheless, in at least his *Outline*, his approach differs radically from that of earlier, more polemical and anti-Hindu missionary scholars such as W. Ward (1822) and A. Duff (1839). Here Farquhar clearly belongs with the Orientalists, not with the missionaries.

**CONCLUSIONS**

What I have tried to do here is use historical evidence to indicate a path between the extremes of the claim that Hindu religion was invented, conceptually at least, in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, largely through the agency of foreign missionaries and Orientalists, on the one hand, and the claim that Hindu religion has some sort of absolute historical continuity that has survived from Vedic times until the present. I prefer to argue that the history of Hindu religion can be compared to the Buddhist conception of the person. Hindu religion has no eternal essence, no soul, no *atman*, but over time it is constantly being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. It has no essence, but it does have causal continuity over time, stretching back even to Vedic times. Its present character may have little resemblance to that of
its distant past, and Vedic religion certainly bears little resemblance to modern Hindu religion, but the causal genealogy does reveal a continuous chain of historical metamorphoses, some slow and some rapid.

One central element in this chain of metamorphoses has been the dialectic between sectarian and universally-shared Hindu identities. Asoka contrasts two general categories, *brahmanas* and *sramanas*, but he also complains about the conflicts among smaller sectarian groups, the *pasandas*. By the early centuries of the Christian era, the religion of the Brahmans had metamorphosed into that of the Puranas. Here again we have little historical information about the specific sectarian groups within Puranic religion, but the evidence does certainly suggest that some such groups did exist. At the same time there was a broader general division into the followers of Vishnu, Siva and Sakti. Nonetheless, all these gods were clearly part of a single pantheon whose myths are all interrelated and told, with varying emphases, in the same Puranas.

By early medieval times we have a much clearer picture of what seems to be a virtual explosion of sectarian groups. This explosion is evidently not just an artifact created by more historical information. Political, social, economic, and demographic changes appear to have fostered the creation of smaller, more tightly organized Hindu sects in both northern and southern India. Clear evidence in found in Madhava’s *Sarvadarshanasaamgraha* and Anantanandagiri’s *Samkaravijaya*. Although these texts take as their primary purpose the descriptions of this sectarian diversity, they also register a difference between *astikas* and *nastikas*, those groups that accept the Vedas as a source of divine authority and those that do not (the Carvakas, Buddhists, and Jains).

By about 1400 if not before, there is clear evidence of the existence of a conscious religious identity among the followers of “Hindu dharma” (explicitly so-called). Usually this Hindu identity is contrasted to the Muslim identity of the followers of a “Muslman” or “Turk dharma.” The early collections of songs
and verses by the religious poet Kabir (ca. 1440–1518) are full of attacks against the religious practices of both the Hindus and the Turks or Musalmans. Many other such references are found in the compositions of other early *nirgundi* poets, including those attributed to the Nath yogi Gorakhnath and those of Guru Nanak and other Sikh gurus.\(^\text{13}\)

At the same time, some of these same poets seem to have been striving for a more complex personal religious identity which somehow went beyond Hindu, Musalman, and Yogi identities. This was done without any hint of an attempt to create “Hindu-Muslim unity” (Hedayetullah 1977) or “inter-religious tolerance” (Sen 2005: 19), as some modern scholars have claimed. Nonetheless, a curious verse attributed to Gorakhnath offers an unusual comment on one possible way to combine these multiple religious (and not just sectarian) identities: “I am a Hindu by birth, I am a Yogi in my maturity, and by intellect I am a Muslim. Recognize, Oh Kazis and Mullahs, the path accepted by Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahadev.”\(^\text{14}\)

The early Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili described Hindu religion pejoratively as the “sect of the Idolaters,” but he did so in fairly accurate fashion with a metaphysical emphasis somewhat similar to that of Madhava and Anantanandagiri. The English, European, and Indian Orientalists, on the other hand, introduced a new way of describing Hindu religion based on an empirical historical methodology. This new historical methodology, exemplified in the work of scholars such as H.H. Wilson, R.G. Bhandarkar, and J.N. Farquhar, saw the interplay of religious sects and currents within Hindu religion as a historical phenomenon that depended not just on theological debates and charismatic leaders but also on political, economic, and social changes including the arrival of new political elites from distant regions. These colonial-period scholars did not, however, thereby invent Hindu religion. Hindu religion had already long since been invented.

On the other hand, the Christian and rationalist biases and criticisms of the Orientalists and also of Christian missionaries in
India, coupled with the scientific, political, economic, and social changes being introduced by the modern world dominated by Europe, certainly did produce dramatic changes in the nature of Hindu religion. Other scholars have done much to identify the major contours of these changes. Nonetheless, this is an area of research that remains relatively underdeveloped, and much work remains to be done.

NOTES

1. The discussion here is obviously very general and does not attempt to enter into the many associated debates. The published materials related to these debates are enormous, and there is little point in trying to offer a full guide here. Good starting points to look at the differing views involved are the books by Chaturvedi 2000, Dube 2004, Llewellyn 2005, Nanda 2003, the various volumes of the series Subaltern Studies, and back issues of the journal that Trautmann edited for many years, Comparative Studies in Society and History.

2. The key original texts are found in Thapar 1961; Madhava 1882, 1964; Anantanandagiri 1971; Nabhadas 1969; Raghavdas 1969; De Nobili 1972; Wilson 1828 & 1832, 1862; Bhandarkar 1913, 1928; and Farquhar 1920.


4. It should be noted, however, that the text explicitly uses the term nastika only for the Carvakas, who are called “crest-jewels among the nastikas.” Nonetheless, the nastika/astika distinction was in common use among Brahmanic-tradition metaphysicians like the Vedantins in this period.

5. A fair amount of work on the hagiography of Indian saints has been done in recent years. For a general introduction, see the articles in Callewaert and Snell 1994.


8. On this Vaishnava sect and its hagiography collections, see Barz 1976.
9. On De Nobili, see Zupanov 1999. I have discussed De Nobili’s description of “Idolater” religion further in Lorenzen 2007. Other missionaries who did some scholarly or semi-scholarly work on Hinduism in the 1500s and 1600s include the Jesuits Gonçalo Fernandes Trancoso (d. 1621), Henrique Henriques (or Anrique Anriquez, 1520–1600), Andrew Freyre (1625–92), Jacomé Fenicio (1558–1632), Antonio Rubino, Diogo Gonsalves (1561–1640), Francisco Garcia (1580–1659), and Thomas Stephens (1549–1619), the Augustinian Agostinho de Azevedo, and the Franciscan Francisco Negrão. On this topic see Rubiis 2000: n.b. 315–17.

10. Interest in the Orientalists has increased dramatically since the publication of Edward Said’s seminal work, *Orientalism*, in 1978. Many of these recent studies tend to vitiate their usefulness through their authors’ attempts to extend Said’s Foucault-based claim that the Orientalists *created* the Orient, in some ontological sense. A more reasonable view, in my opinion, is that the Orientalists simply projected deeply-rooted stereotypes, sometimes positive but more often pejorative, onto Oriental peoples and cultures. Two important exceptions to this Foucault-mania are the fine historical studies on the Orientalists by T.R. Trautmann (1997, 2006).

11. It is also worth noting that Wilson refers to a legend of Kabir being born from a Brahmin virgin widow and claims that the story is “told in the *Bhakta Mala*.” In fact this story is not found in Nabhadas’s *Bhaktamal* or in Priyadas’s commentary. It is not clear where Wilson got the legend. It also appears in Westcott’s 1907 monograph on the Kabir Panth and in many subsequent scholarly texts (but not in most texts by Kabir Panthi authors).

12. This is not to say that there were no significant books and essays on Hindu religion published by European Orientalist scholars in the interim. Among the authors who published such studies can be mentioned Max Müller, H.H. Wilson himself, A. Barth, M. Monier-Williams, E.W. Hopkins, E. Hardy, and H. Oldenberg. On this topic, see Dandekar 1979: 229–31.

13. For a more detailed discussion of these references to Hindus and Turks, see Lorenzen 1999 and forthcoming.


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