Who Invented Hinduism?

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> . . . moreover if people of Arabia or Persia would ask of the men of this country whether they are Moors or Gentoos, they ask in these words: 'Art thou Mosalman or Indu?'
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> *Dr. García de Orta, 1563.*[1]

Over the past decade, many scholars have put forward the claim that Hinduism was constructed, invented, or imagined by British scholars and colonial administrators in the nineteenth century and did not exist, in any meaningful sense, before this date.[2] Prominent among scholars who have made this constructionist argument, if I can call it that, are Vasudha Dalmia, Robert Frykenberg, Christopher Fuller, John Hawley, Gerald Larson, Harjot Oberoi, Brian Smith, and Heinrich von Stietencron.[3] W. C. Smith is sometimes identified, quite correctly, as a noteworthy precursor of these scholars.[4] Romila Thapar (1985; 1989, 1996) and Dermot Killingley (1993:61–64) have offered somewhat similar arguments, but both display greater sensitivity to historical ambiguities, distributing the construction of a distinctly modern Hinduism among British orientalists and missionaries and indigenous nationalists and communalists. Carl Ernst (1992:22–29, *n.b.* 23) discusses early Muslim references to "Hindus" and their religion, but he joins the above scholars in claiming that the terms "do not correspond to any indigenous Indian concept, either of geography or religion." J. Laine (1983) agrees with Smith and his modern epigones that Hinduism was invented in the nineteenth century, but credits the invention to the Indians rather than to the British.

On the other side of the argument are several scholars who have directly questioned this claim from various points of view. They include Lawrence A. Babb, Wendy Doniger, Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, Alf Hiltebeitel, Cynthia Talbot, Thomas Trautmann, Peter van der Veer, and myself.[5] A recent re-

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[1] As cited in Yule and Burnell 1968:415. Their bibliography lists the book as being published in Portuguese at Goa in 1563, but the English translation they give seems to be an old one.

[2] I thank many scholars for their comments on this and earlier versions of this essay, particularly Saurabh Dube and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya.

[3] See Dalmia 1995; Frykenberg 1989; Fuller 1992; Hawley 1991; Larson 1995; Oberoi 1994:16–17; B. Smith 1989; Stietencron 1989 and 1995.

[4] Smith 1991. First ed. 1962.

[5] See Babb 1986, Doniger 1991, Ferro-Luzzi 1989, Hiltebeitel 1991, Talbot 1995:694, Trautmann 1996:64–80, van der Veer 1994, and Lorenzen 1995:11–13. Somewhat different but compatible arguments can also be found in Bayly 1985, Pollock 1993, and Rogers 1994 (this last reference on Sri Lanka).

view of the issue by Saurabh Dube (1998:4–7) makes a valiant attempt to mark out a compromise position, but ends up, I think, straddling the fence rather than finding a new synthesis. In addition, it should be noted that most scholars of Indian religions who have not directly addressed this question—and even several who claim that Hinduism is a modern construction—continue to write about Hinduism as if it in fact existed many centuries earlier.

This essay argues that the claim that Hinduism was invented or constructed by European colonizers, mostly British, sometime after 1800 is false. The evidence instead suggests that a Hindu religion theologically and devotionally grounded in texts such as the *Bhagavad-gita,* the Puranas, and philosophical commentaries on the six *darśanas* gradually acquired a much sharper self-conscious identity through the rivalry between Muslims and Hindus in the period between 1200 and 1500, and was firmly established long before 1800. The obvious danger of this thesis is that it can be modified to provide support to a Hindu communalist argument that a self-conscious Hindu identity arose out of the violent persecution of Hindus by Muslims. In fact state-sponsored persecution was only sporadic and directed mostly at temple buildings, not people. Nonetheless, religious literature by Hindu poets such as Kabir, Ekanath, and Vidyapati (some of this quoted below) suggests that socioreligious conflict—occasionally violent conflict—did occur among people on a local level. In any case, only a recognition of the fact that much of modern Hindu identity is rooted in the history of the rivalry between Hinduism and Islam will enable us to correctly gauge the strength of communalist forces and wage war against them.

INVENTING HINDUISM

If what one means by Hinduism is simply the English word itself, then the claim that it did not exist before the nineteenth century is correct. Several scholars cite the date 1829 for the first known occurrence in English, in the form "Hindooism". W.C. Smith is sometimes given credit for this reference, but Smith cites the *Oxford English Dictionary* as his source.[6] In a search through several early nineteenth-century journals, I managed to find one example of the word "Hinduism" (with a "u") in a letter published in the 1818 volume of *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register* (London) and no less than seven examples (also with a "u") in an article by John Crawfurd on Hinduism in Bali, published in the 1820 volume of *Asiatick Researches* (Calcutta).[7] More significant are two appearances of the term in English language texts by Rammohan Roy published in 1816 and 1817, which have recently been noted and discussed recently by Dermot Killingley.[8] In 1816 Rammohan made this critical comment: "The chief part of the theory and practice of Hindooism, I am sorry to say, is made to consist in the adoption of a peculiar mode of diet." In 1817, on the other hand, he claimed that "the doctrines of the unity of God are real Hinduism, as that reli-

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[6] W.C. Smith 1991:61, 253.   [7] Civis 1818:107; Crawfurd 1820:129, 135, 139, 147, 151.
[8] See Killingley (1993:62–63). This reference was brought to my attention by Patricio Nelson.

gion was practiced by our ancestors, and as it is well known at the present day to many learned Brahmins."[9] This puts the proponents of the British construction of Hinduism in the embarrassing situation of having to admit that an India-born Hindu seems to have coined the label for this supposedly British construct.

It is true, however, that the word "Hinduism" became common in English only in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and mostly in books by British authors. One important milestone was the publication of Alexander Duff's popular book, *India and India Missions: Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism Both in Theory and Practice,* in 1839. M. Monier-Williams' introductory text, *Hinduism,* first published in 1877, also did much to popularize the term.

What contemporary scholars generally mean by the construction or invention of Hinduism, however, is not simply the coining of the name. What they claim is that the Europeans, and more specifically the British, imposed a single conceptual category on a heterogeneous collection of sects, doctrines, and customs that the Hindus themselves did not recognize as having anything essential in common. In this view, it was only after the concept of Hinduism was constructed by these Europeans that the Hindus themselves adopted the idea that they all belonged to a single religious community.

Although this argument about the construction or invention of Hinduism has a strong postmodern flavor, it was first developed by W.C. Smith in his 1962 book, *The Meaning and End of Religion.* Smith insists that religion must be analyzed using specifically religious categories, rather than through the medium of disciplines such as sociology, psychology, literature, or even philosophy and history. For this reason he strongly opposes any attempt by outside observers to impose their own categories and explanations on religious phenomena. In the case of Hinduism, he argues that the naming of this religion by Europeans was a mistake: there is no Hinduism either in the minds of the Hindus or in empirical reality itself.[10]

What exists cannot be defined. What obstructs a definition of Hinduism, for instance, is precisely the richness of what exists, in all its extravagant variety from century to century and from village to village. The empirical religious tradition of the Hindus developing historically in the minds and hearts and institutions and literatures and societies of untold millions of actual people is not a form, but a growing congeries of living realities. It is not to be compressed within or eviscerated into or confused with any systematic intellectual pattern.

As an ideal "Hinduism" might conceivably be defined (though only by a Hindu), but not as an historical reality. The sheer facts, in all their intractable toughness, stand in the way.

"Hinduism" refers not to an entity; it is a name that the West has given to a prodigiously variegated series of facts. It is a notion in men's minds—and a notion that cannot but be inadequate. To use this term at all is inescapably a gross oversimplification.

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[9] These two references (from Rammohan Roy 1978:73, 90.) are cited from Killingley.
[10] Smith 1991:144–45.

To define Hinduism is to deny the Hindu his right to the freedom and integrity of his faith. What he may do tomorrow no man can say today.

Turning to more recent statements of similar positions, one of the wittiest is by John Hawley (1991: 20–21). Hawley also comes close to identifying the construction of Hinduism with the coining of the word itself.

Hinduism—the word and perhaps the reality too—was born in the 19th century, a notoriously illegitimate child. The father was middle-class and British, and the mother, of course, was India. The circumstances of the conception are not altogether clear. One heard of the "goodly habits and observances of Hindooism" in a Bengali-English grammar written in 1829, and the Reverend William Tennant had spoken of "the Hindoo system" in a book on Indian manners and history written at the beginning of the century. Yet it was not until the inexpensive handbook *Hinduism* was published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in 1877 that the term came into general English usage.

Brian Smith (1989:5–6) makes a similar argument in a more typically postmodern style. Here Hinduism is, to use two words much in vogue, simply "invented" or "imagined."

Just who invented "Hinduism" first is a matter of scholarly debate. Almost everyone agrees that it was not the Hindus. . . . As a discrete Indic religion among others, however, "Hinduism" was probably first imagined by the British in the early part of the nineteenth century to describe (and create and control) an enormously complex configuration of people and their traditions found in the South Asian subcontinent. "Hinduism" made it possible for the British, and for us all (including Hindus), to speak of *a* religion when before there was none or, at best, many.

To give yet another example, Harjot Oberoi presents roughly the same argument, albeit in a somewhat more nuanced form, in the introduction to his recent work on the construction of a modern Sikh identity.

It is most striking that people we now call Hindus never used this term to describe themselves. The Vedas, the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita, which today are seen by many as the religious texts of the Hindus, do not employ the word Hindu. That term was first used by the Achaemenid Persians to describe all those people who lived on or beyond the banks of the river Sindhu, or Indus. Therefore, at one stage the word Hindu as an ethno-geographic category came to englobe all those who lived in India, without ethnic distinction. It was only under the Muslim rulers of India that the term began to gain a religious connotation. But it was not until colonial times that the term 'Hinduism' was coined and acquired wide currency as referring collectively to a wide variety of religious communities, some of them with distinct traditions and opposed practices. Communities like the Saivites, Vaishnavites, and Lingayats, each with their own history and specific view of the world, were tied together under the blanket category Hinduism.

Robert Frykenberg (1989:29) insists, with categorical bluntness, that even today "Hindu" and "Hinduism" are terms without any substantive content:

Unless by "Hindu" one means nothing more, nor less, than "Indian" (something native to, pertaining to, or found within the continent of India), there has never been any such a thing as a single "Hinduism" or any single "Hindu community" for all of India. Nor,

for that matter, can one find any such thing as a single "Hinduism" or "Hindu community" even for any one socio-cultural region of the continent. Furthermore, there has never been any one religion—nor even one system of religions—to which the term "Hindu" can accurately be applied. No one so-called religion, moreover, can lay exclusive claim to or be defined by the term "Hinduism."

In order to present an alternative argument, we need to divide the topic into two separate questions. First, when did the British and other Europeans begin to conceptualize Hinduism as a single religious system? Second, when did the Hindus and other Indians begin to do the same? In both cases, the argument for a nineteenth century construction of the concept does not agree with the available evidence. Before presenting this evidence, however, one other key issue has to be addressed: the meaning of the term "Hindu."

THE WORD "HINDU"

It is well known that variants of the word "Hindu" were current in Persian and vernacular Indian languages long before the nineteenth century. If this word always meant simply a follower of beliefs and practices drawn from the religion we now call Hinduism, then the constructionist argument would be refuted from the start. This would be the case even if no specific word or phrase equivalent to "Hinduism" could be identified. In point of fact, however, the religious sense of Hindu has long coexisted and overlapped with an ethnic and geographical sense. What the constructionists are obliged to argue is that this ethno-geographical sense of Hindu remained overwhelmingly dominant up until the nineteenth century, and that only then did the religious sense become widespread as a result of the British invention of Hinduism.

Etymology clearly supports an ethno-geographical meaning of Hindu. Early European scholars, it is true, did sometimes claim either a biblical derivation from Hind, a supposed son of Ham and grandson of Noah, or a Sanskrit derivation from *indu* meaning "moon."[11] Now, however, everyone agrees that the

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[11] The derivation from *indu* was suggested by Alexander Dow in a text published in 1768 (Marshall 1970:114): "The Hindoos are so called from Indoo or Hindoo, which, in the Shanscrita language, signifies the Moon; for from that luminary, and the sun, they deduce their fabulous origin." In the same text Dow also offers the biblical derivation, but Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, in a text published in 1776, suggests that the derivation from *sindhu* is probably the correct one. He also claims that the name Hindu was probably adopted by the Hindus to distinguish themselves from the Muslims (Marshall 1970:149–50):

Hindostan is a Persian word, equally unknown to the old and modern Shanscrit, compounded of Stan, a region, and the word Hind or Hindoo: probably Colonel Dow's elegant translation of Ferishteh's History gives us the true derivation, in that author's conjecture, that it is taken from Hind, a supposed son of Ham, the son of Noah; and, whatever antiquity the Indians may assert for themselves (of which some notice will subsequently be taken) the Persians, we believe, will rest contented to allow, that the first intercourse between the two nations commenced in the third descent from the deluge. But, if this definition were rejected, the common opinion, that India was so named by foreigners after the river Indus, is by no means repugnant to probability. . . . Hindoo therefore is not the term by which the inhabitants originally stiled themselves . . . and it is only since the aera of the Tartar government that they have assumed the name of Hindoos, to distinguish themselves from their conquerors, the Mussulmen.

word derives from Sindhu, the native name for the river Indus. There is also a consensus that the name Sindhu became "Hind" or "Hindu" in Persian languages and then reentered Indian languages as "Hindu," originally with the sense of an inhabitant of the lands near and to the east of the Indus. Most proponents of the British construction of Hinduism not surprisingly begin by stressing this geographical etymology and then simply deny that use of the word "Hindu" in a religious sense was of any importance until the nineteenth century, without any close examination of the actual use in texts written before this date.

Take, for example, the comments of Heinrich von Stietencron:[12]

> The term Hindu itself is a Persian term. Used in the plural it denotes the people of Hind, the Indians, and in this sense it occurs in the inscriptions of Darius I and other rulers of ancient Persia from the sixth century B.C. onwards. It certainly goes to the credit of Persian scholars like Al-Biruni, Abu-l Qasim, al-Masudi, al-Idrisi and Shahrastani that they knew and distinguished different religions among the Hindus. Administrators were less exact or they saw no need for such differentiation between Hindus for taxation purposes. The British adopted the term from administrators, not from the scholars.

Here von Stietencron here quite blithely jumps from the sixth century B.C. to the nineteenth century A.D. with virtually no discussion whatever of the intervening uses of the term "Hindu," either by foreigners or by native Indians. He admits that several Persian scholars did discuss the religions of the Hindus, but implies that they never identified any one religion as *the* principal religion of this group. In the case of al-Biruni at least, this is simply not so, as we shall see. Finally, von Stietencron asserts that the British, in any case, took the term "Hindu" not from these scholars but from administrators, who, he implies, were still using this term in the geographical sense found in the inscriptions of Darius I, written over 2400 years earlier.

If, however, the word "Hindu" had a purely geographical sense up until the nineteenth century, as von Stietencron claims, then why were the foreign Muslims who permanently settled in India, or at least their descendants born in India, not called Hindus? He attempts to answer this objection by insisting that the Muslim rulers persistently maintained a foreign self-identity for generations, while the Hindus, i.e. native Indians, just as persistently maintained a separate, indigenous identity (Ibid., 78):

> It was this feeling of superiority and the continuing linkage of social prestige to origins outside India which, even after centuries of settlement in the country, prevented upper class Muslims from considering themselves Hindus, i.e., indigenous Indians. The Hindus remained a separate population—natives the British would later call them—and, in spite of all differentiation according to caste and status, they continued to form a distinct entity characterized by their indigenous Indian origin. Whether caste Hindus, outcastes, or tribals, they were all designated as Hindus. It was a sad mistake of the British when they adopted this term from the Persian administrators, to believe that it was a religious term.

[12] 1995:77. See also Smith 1991:256. I have criticized C. Fuller's similar resort to this etymology in Lorenzen 1995:11–12.

What then of the vast majority of Muslims in India who were indigenous converts of low-caste Hindu origin? If "Hindu" remained a purely ethno-geographical term, except perhaps in the eyes of a few Muslim intellectuals, at least these converts should have been called "Hindus" or "Hindu Muslims." There is in fact little or no evidence that this ever happened, but about this von Stietencron has nothing to say.[13]

THE STANDARD MODEL

Introductory books about Hinduism written by modern scholars tend to follow three different models or formats. Some books are organized primarily in terms of major metaphysical and theological concepts (karma, samsara, dharma, God, bhakti); some in terms of the textual history of gods, schools of thought, and rituals; and some in terms of a catalog of sects, beliefs and practices.[14] Speaking more abstractly, these three models represent three different master narratives: one metaphysical, one historical, and one classificatory. Books in each of these three modes have been written both from the inside, by practicing Hindus, and from the outside, by followers of other religions and nonbelievers. A modern academic or textbook style—and an insistence on at least a minimum of historical plausibility and contextualization—does separate these books from traditional texts such as the Puranas and the *Bhagavad-gita,* but their authors have not invented or constructed anything radically new. Indeed, their main purpose is to represent observed Hinduism, both textual and contextual, as accurately as possible within the limits imposed by their varied ideological perspectives.

Since each of these three models or formats is obviously an ideal type, there is almost no text on Hinduism that follows any one model exclusively. Nonetheless, the dominant model is undoubtedly the historical one, and one of the first fully-developed examples of this model is presented in Monier Monier-Williams' influential book *Hinduism,* first published in 1877 and later reprinted in several revised editions. The importance of this text justifies, I think, taking its account of Hinduism as a "standard model" of the religion.

Monier-Williams begins with an analysis of what allows us to speak of Hinduism as one religion, rather than simply a motley collection of sects, beliefs,

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[13] It may be possible, as W.C. Smith (1991:256) suggests, that examples of the term "Hindu Muslim" can be found in European languages. Even if such examples could be found, and Smith does not cite any, I doubt that the authors would have had any significant contact with or knowledge of India. Similarly, Dermot Killingley reports (1993:61) that the term "Hindu Christian" has sometimes been used, again without citing examples. In Spanish the word *hindú* is still used in popular speech to mean "Indian," but news reports and educated speech now generally use *indio* or *de la India* for "Indian" and reserve *hindú* or *hinduísta* for "Hindu." In Latin America, the original motive for preferring *hindú* was probably to distinguish the South Asian Indians from the large population of Amerindians, normally called *indios.*

[14] Good examples of the metaphysical approach include the texts of Zaehner (1969), Radhakrishnan (1957), and, in a somewhat different vein, Biardeau (1991). The historical and catalog approaches are discussed further below.

and practices. He claims to find the basis of unity in two historical factors: first, an origin in a "simple, pantheistic doctrine, but branching out into an endless variety of polytheistic superstitions"; and, second, the fact that there is "only one sacred language and only one sacred literature, accepted and revered by all adherents of Hinduism alike," namely Sanskrit. He identifies the founding principle as "*Ekam eva advitīyam,* 'There is but one Being, without a second'" and makes this principle the basis of the first and highest of three ways of salvation in "popular Hinduism." These three are the well-known paths of knowledge, works and devotion (*jñāna-mārga, karma-mārga,* and *bhakti-mārga*) described in the *Bhagavad-gita.*[15] Monier-Williams here is undoubtedly influenced by the rising importance given to the *Bhagavad-gita* and to Advaita by Hindu reformers of the nineteenth century, but this is simply a process of selective emphasis, not invention.

Monier-Williams then runs though a step-by-step historical survey of the development of Brahmanism—the name he gives to the religion before the writing of the epics and Puranas—through Hinduism, properly so called, starting from these texts down to the present day. A list of the chapter titles will give a sufficient idea of how the author organizes the material: "The Vedic hymns; The Brahmanas and the sacrificial system; The Upanishads and Brahmanical philosophy; Brahmanical law, domestic usages, and caste; The Buddhistic movement, and its influence on Brahmanism; Development of Hinduism and the doctrine of triple manifestation (*tri-mūrti*); Development of Saivism, Vaishnavism, and the doctrine of incarnation; The doctrine of devotion (*bhakti*) as developed in the Puranas and Tantras; Medieval and modern sects; Modern castes; Modern idol-worship, sacred objects, holy places, and times"; and all this is followed by an appendix on the six schools of philosophy (*darśanas*), the *Bhagavad-gita,* Jainism, and the Carvakas.

The key chapters on Hinduism proper include discussions of the mythology of Siva and Vishnu, including the latter's ten chief avatars, a brief summary of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* epics; a list of the thirty-six major and minor Puranas and a summary of the five major topics ideally found in each; a discussion of the doctrine of the four yugas; and a summary of the major ideas of the Tantras including the importance of the female power of *śakti* and its embodiments in various goddesses, the infamous five *makāras,* and the importance of mantras, *yantras,* and *siddhis.* The chapter on Hindu sects includes a discussion of the different ideal types of devotion and of several orthodox Vaishnava sects, with brief mentions of Kabir and Nanak. About the division between Saivism and Vaishnavism, Monier-Williams insists (1993:97) that they "are not opposite or incompatible creeds. They represent different lines of religious thought . . . quite allowable within the limits of one and the same sys-

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[15] The quotes are from Monier-Williams 1993:11, 13. This photo-reprint edition is probably based on the edition of 1919.

tem." The chapter on idol worship discusses Hindu devotion to stone idols, cows, other animals and plants; pilgrimages to various sacred places *(tīrthas)* and rivers; the twenty-seven astrological *nakṣatras;* and various festivals. The earlier chapters on Brahmanism include, besides the topics mentioned above, summaries of the four Vedas, transmigration, the three qualities *(guṇas),* the four stages of life *(āśramas),* the four social classes *(varṇas)* and the twelve basic life-cycle rites *(saṃskāras).*

This outline of what Monier-Williams regarded as the key characteristics of Hinduism can easily be read forward as the model, direct or indirect, for a host of later historical summaries of Hinduism, including those of A. L. Basham (1975), K. M. Sen (1961),Thomas J. Hopkins (1971), Klaus K. Klostermaier (1994), and even that of Benjamín Preciado Solís and myself (1996). The fact that many such books have been written by Europeans and Americans does not, I think, have anything to do with a European predilection for inventing things. Rather it reflects the need for textbooks in European and American universities, where basic Hinduism is more likely to be taught as an academic subject than in universities in India itself.

More interesting than a forward reading of Monier-Williams' text is a backward reading that compares his treatment of Hinduism with earlier European (Christian), Hindu, and Muslim attempts to summarize its more important characteristics. In what follows I will attempt to show how such earlier accounts, although generally more fragmentary, consistently embody substantial parts of Monier-Williams' standard model.

EUROPEAN SOURCES BEFORE 1800

When, then, did British and other European observers first identify Hinduism— whether called Hinduism, Hindu religion or religion of the Hindus—as a single set of religious beliefs and practices? I have already mentioned the 1820 article by John Crawfurd as one of the earliest sources to use the word "Hinduism." What is also interesting is the fact that Crawfurd uses the terms "Hinduism," "Hindu religion," and "Hindus" in the context of Bali, where the Hindus are clearly not Indians in any racial or ethno-geographical sense. What I want to show here, however, is that virtually all of the more scholarly observers among the European visitors and residents in India before 1800 had identified Hinduism as a diverse but identifiable set of beliefs and practices clearly distinguished from Islam and, less clearly, from the Sikh and Parsi religions as well.

Between 1775 and 1800, as the British commercial beachhead in Bengal transformed itself into an Indian empire, English language studies of Hinduism became more numerous and accurate, particularly after the founding of the Bengal Asiatic Society by William Jones and his friends in 1784. Noteworthy in this period are Nathaniel Brassey Halhed's *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776), Charles Wilkins' translation of the *Bhagavad-gita* (1785), several articles on

Hinduism by William Jones and Henry Colebrooke in *Asiatick Researches,* and Charles Grant's *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain.*[16] Wilkins, Jones and Colebrooke all read and translated texts from Sanskrit, while Halhed worked with Persian texts.

Even scholars who acquired the linguistic competence to work directly with sources in Indian languages, however, regularly employed native intellectuals as teachers and informants. In most cases, the contributions of these native scholars to the construction of European knowledge about India and other Asian regions were never adequately acknowledged. Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi (1996) has called this "orientalism's genesis amnesia," a criticism that is applicable not only to the original orientalists themselves but also to Edward Said and other modern opponents of traditional European orientalist scholarship. If Hinduism was invented, it was invented by European and Indian scholars working in tandem.

Of more interest here than the professional scholars such as Jones, Wilkins and Colebrooke, however, are two rather dilettantish writers, John Zephaniah Holwell and Alexander Dow, who wrote about Hinduism in the 1760s, before the East India Company regime was well-established and before its authorities had begun to sponsor more serious research.[17] The accounts of Hinduism by Holwell and Dow display large gaps in their knowledge, mangle most Sanskrit words, and betray several mutual disagreements, but overall both their accounts contain the same basic elements found in any modern textbook variant of the standard model: the four Vedas; the social system of four *varṇas;* the division of powers among the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Siva; goddess worship; basic elements of the mythology of these gods, including several of the avatars of Vishnu; the theory of the four yugas; some idea of the various *darśanas;* and the theodicy of karma, transmigration and rebirth.

One curious word used to refer to Hindus in many eighteenth century (and even earlier) English texts, including those of Holwell and Halhed (but not Dow), is "Gentoo."[18] This term is not a corruption of "Hindu." "Gentoo" is derived from the Portuguese word *gentio,* meaning "gentile," "pagan," or "native." From the sixteenth century on, Portuguese texts regularly distinguish *gentios,* meaning Hindus, from both Muslims *(moros)* and native Christians.[19] The word *gentio* is in turn derived from *gentil,* which in Portuguese normally means "of noble descent" or "of good family." The collective noun *gentilidade* is sometimes used for Hindus in Portuguese texts. In early Italian texts about

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[16] Representative texts by Halhed, Wilkins, and Jones are all conveniently collected in P.J. Marshall's *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (1970). See also Grant 1970.

[17] Their accounts of Hinduism are also available in P. J. Marshall's book (1970).

[18] See the references in Yule and Burnell 1968:367.

[19] See, for example, the texts in Wicki 1948–1972, vol. I, pp. 45 ("*moros, gentivos e maos christãos*"), 87 ("*mouros e jemtios*"), 629 ("*gentilidade*"). In early nineteenth century usage in South India, "Gentoo" signified "Telugu" (language or person) as opposed to "Malabar" or "Tamil" (language or person) (Trautmann 1998).

India, the word *gentile* (literally "gentile" or "pagan") is regularly used for "Hindu." Similarly, in early Spanish texts the word *gentil* has this same sense.[20]

The Spanish language *Itinerario* of the Augustinian Sebastiao Manrique, published in 1649, identifies the *gentiles* with the Hindus (written as *indus*) in a passage that is one of the earliest uses of the word "Hindu" in a European language,[21] and one which gives the word a specifically religious, not a geographical, meaning. Here Manrique quotes, with his own gloss in parentheses, the harsh words of a Mughal official in Bengal against a Muslim member of Manrique's party who had offended the Hindu population by killing a peacock: " 'Are you not, in appearance, a Bengali and a Muslim (which means "Moor" and follower of the true law)? How did you dare, in a district of Hindus (which means *Gentiles*), kill a living thing?' "[22]

Early European missionaries who wrote on Hindu religion before 1800, mostly in languages other than English, are of particular interest to our discussion since their observations were often recorded in territories outside the direct influence of colonial rule[23] and since the post-1800 British Orientalists who supposedly invented Hinduism were almost entirely unaware of what these missionaries had written about Hindu beliefs and practices. If we can show that the view of Hinduism presented by these pre–1800 Europeans closely resembles that of later British colonial scholars, then we have moved much closer to being able to say that Hinduism is not a colonial construct or invention, nor even a European one, but rather that European observers were attempting, with native help, to describe something that had a practical and conceptual coherence both for outside observers and the Hindus themselves.

The lives and writings of the European missionaries who worked in India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have still not been adequately studied. The best-known of these missionaries is the Italian Jesuit Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656), who lived for many years in south India. Some of his works have been published and the modern Jesuit scholar S. Rajamanickam has written

[20] For Italian texts, see below. For Spanish, see the *Itinerario* of Sebastian Manrique (1946), written in 1649. N. B. Halhed, however, preferred a fanciful derivation of "Gentoo" from the Sanskrit *jantu,* meaning "animal" and also, he claims, "mankind" (Marshall 1970:150).

[21] See also the quote from Dr. García de Orta, dated 1563, used as the epigraph to this essay.

[22] Manrique 1649:319: "Tu no eres, en lo que muestras, Bengala, y Mussulamane? (que quiere dezir, Moro, y sequaz de la verdadera ley) pues como tuuiste atreuimiento para empragana de indus, (que quiere dezir Gentiles) matar cosa viviente?" A translation of this passage, minus Manrique's gloss, is quoted at greater length in Eaton 1996:181. Eaton's note (p. 182) on the use of the word *indus* in this passage is not completely convincing. In the passage Eaton quotes, the original has *indus* not once but twice. The incident referred to took place in 1640.

[23] One quite mundane reason why European states supported missionary endeavors in such remote and exotic locations was undoubtedly the usefulness of the monks' reports as military, political and economic intelligence. The monks themselves, on the other hand, were certainly more intent on saving souls than on gathering intelligence for European rulers. The essential point for present purposes is that the monks were observing Hinduism in societies in which the influence of European imperial expansion was still negligible.

about him.[24] The writings of four other early missionary intellectuals have also been at least partially published: the Portuguese Jesuit Gonçalo Fernandes Trancoso (1541–1621), the British Jesuit Thomas Stephens (1549–1619), the Lutheran Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1683–1719), and the Italian Franciscan monk Marco della Tomba (1726–1803).[25] One important unpublished text is a long dialogue between a Christian and a Hindu written in Hindi and Italian by another Italian Fransciscan, Giuseppe Maria da Gargnano, who was in North India from 1749 to 1761.[26]

The descriptions of Hinduism by these early missionaries, like those of Holwell and Dow, generally feature the same set of beliefs, gods, and practices found in the writings of later scholars associated with the British colonial project and the standard model. Since the missionaries had religious training and often knew the local languages, however, the scope and detail of their accounts rival those of the later colonial scholars. A few examples will have to suffice to illustrate this point. Although some of the concerns of both the precolonial and colonial writers are related to an implicit, or sometimes explicit, comparison with Christianity, on the whole they describe a Hinduism whose main features correspond to those found in the Puranas, supplemented by visual observations of temples, ascetics, pilgrimages, and daily or occasional rituals. Whether all of the early missionaries had any direct knowledge of the Sanskrit Puranas is uncertain—although at least de Nobili, Zeigenbalg and Marco della Tomba probably did—but most of them knew the local vernaculars well enough to get information about the Hindu beliefs, practices and myths directly from local informants.

[24] See especially Rajamanickam 1972a and 1972b. See also Halbfass 1988:38–43 and Neill 1984:279–300. Halbfass and Neill give references to several other texts by and about de Nobili in their notes.

[25] See Fernandes Trancoso 1973, Stephens 1945, Ziegenbalg 1867 and 1926, and Marco della Tomba 1878. On Ziegenbalg and Stephens, see also Halbfass 1988 and Neill 1984. Other general works useful for a study of these and other early missionaries include Lach 1965, Murr 1983, Petech 1952–1956; and Wicki 1948–1972. None of these works have much to say about Fernandes Trancoso or Marco della Tomba.

Marco della Tomba was part of a large Italian Franciscan mission to Tibet, Nepal and North India that was active throughout the eighteenth century. An important seven volume collection of some of the writings of those of these Italian Franciscans—and one important Jesuit, Ippolito Desideri—who worked in Nepal and Tibet has been published by Luciano Petech (1952–56). Unfortunately, no comparable collection of writings by the Franciscans of this mission who worked in North India has been published apart from the single volume of selected texts by Marco della Tomba.

[26] The Hindi dialogue by Giuseppe Maria da Gargnano (1709–61) is entitled "*Jababasvala aik Kristian aur aik Hindu ke bic mo iman ke upar*" (A dialogue about religion between a Christian and a Hindu). Another work by this same title has been attributed to Costanzo da Borgo San Sepolcro (in India and Tibet from about 1775 to 1787), but this is in fact a slightly modified version of Giuseppe Maria's text together with Costanzo's line-by-line Italian translation. A few facsimile pages of the manuscripts of both versions have been published in an article by Umberto Nardella (1989:57–63, 67–68). Both manuscripts are now in the Vatican Library. I am currently working on a study of the texts by Giuseppe Maria, Costanzo, Marco della Tomba and other Franciscans of this mission.

The Franciscan Marco della Tomba lived in various parts of northeastern India, especially the princely state of Bettiah just south of Nepal, from 1757 until 1773, and again from 1786 until his death in 1803. His writings include several essays on Indian religion and translations of various religious texts from Hindi to Italian. Among these translations is at least one chapter of Tulasidas's *Ram-carit-manas.* This is by far the earliest translation of this key Hindu text into any European language, but Marco has never been credited with the feat, since the few scholars who have commented on this translation, including Charlotte Vaudeville, all mistakenly took it to be based on an original text associated with the Kabir Panth.[27]

In an essay on the "Diversi sistemi della religione dell'Indostano," written in 1766, Marco refers to the Hindus as "Gentili" and contrasts their religion with that of both the Christians and Muslims (1878:69–98). He divides up the "diverse tribes of men" that, he says, are believed to originate from the body of Brahma, and hence that are all in some sense Brahmins, into eight religious sects: the tribe of Brahmins and cows, the Vaishnavas *(Bisnuas),* the Ramanandis, the Saivas, the Smartas *(Asmaetr)* of Sankaracarya, the Nastikas or atheists, the Pasandas or hedonists (according to Marco), and the Saktas. He further subdivides the religious practitioners of these groups or sects, according to their style of observance, into Yogis, Vanaprasthas, Sannyasis, Nagas, Vairagis, and Avadhutas. Marco ends his essay with discussion of the Kabir Panthis *(Cabiristi)* and the Sikhs *(Nanekpanti),* two groups that he regards as somewhat separate from the other eight. In his discussion of the Sikhs (1878: 98), he quotes the Hindi phrase "Nānak fakīr, hindū kā guru, musalamān kā pīr" in order to show that the Sikhs had staked out a religious position combining elements of the religions of the Hindus and Muslims.

At first glance Marco's essay seems to confirm the constructionist view that there was no Hinduism, in the sense of a coherent set of beliefs and practices, before 1800, for what we have here is a heterogeneous collection of sects and ascetics, each with its own set of beliefs and practices. Against this I would argue that what is more significant is the clear distinction that he draws among the *gentili,* the Muslims, and Christians, and also the correctly ambiguous distinction that he draws between the *gentili* and the Sikhs and Kabir Panthis. In addition, another of Marco's essays, *Libri indiani* (1878:99–127), contains a discussion of the four Vedas, eighteen Puranas, and different philosophical *darśanas* more in line with the standard model of Hinduism.

There is, however, an alternative way of looking at this question. A strong case can, I think, be made that Marco's conceptualization of Hinduism in *Diversi sistemi* represents a more specifically Christian construct than the stan-

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[27] I discussed Marco's translation of this text and its misidentification by several scholars in a paper presented at a June 1999 Heidelberg conference held to celebrate 600 years of Kabir. A revised version of the paper will appear in a book being edited for Manohar by Monika Boehm-Tettelbach.

dard model of Monier-Williams and his precursors. What could be more convenient from a Christian point of view than the idea that Hinduism was not really a single coherent religion at all, that it was not viewed as such by its followers, and that it was instead a heterogeneous collection of miscellaneous sects, beliefs, and idolatrous practices?

Since many later colonial scholars were also committed Christians and, even if not, had little good to say about Hindu beliefs and practices, it is not surprising that they sometimes adopted similar views. The locus classicus of arguments for the diffuse and incoherent nature of Hinduism is the famous study by H. H. Wilson, *Religious Sects of the Hindus,* first published in 1828 and 1832 in *Asiatic Researches.* Wilson begins his study with these words (1972:1): "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." Here Wilson does accept some sort of overall Hindu unity, but the emphasis is clearly on internal divisions and differences. This sort of catalog approach to the conceptualization of Hinduism can be traced forward to imperialistic works such as John Campbell Oman's *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India* (1903) and the many semi-official studies of the "tribes and castes" of various regions, and also to more nuanced academic studies such as Sir R. G. Bhandarkar's *Vaisnavism Saivism and Minor Religious Systems* (1965), first published in 1913, Jan Gonda's *Der jüngere Hinduismus* (1963), and Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya's *Evolution of Hindu Sects* (1970).

We cannot, however, correctly claim that even this catalog approach to Hinduism is wholly a Christian or colonial construct. H. H. Wilson (1972:6) himself refers back to two earlier Sanskrit works—Madhavacarya's *Sarvadarsana-samgraha* and Ananda-giri's *Sankara-digvijaya*—as native precedents and sources for his own study. Other such early works can easily be cited. It is an empirical fact that the beliefs, practices and human organization of Hinduism are less standardized and centralized than, say, those of Roman Catholicism or Sunni Islam. For this reason a description of Hinduism in terms of its various sects, gods, ascetics, and metaphysical doctrines is often appropriate and useful.

Half a century earlier than Marco della Tomba's essay, on July 29, 1717, Giuseppe Felice da Morro, another Italian member of the Franciscan mission, wrote a letter from Kathmandu, Nepal, that sets out a short account of Hindu religion closer to the standard model.[28] Like Marco, he calls the Hindus "Gentili," and like most European writers, and many Sanskrit Puranas, he begins with the story of the creation of the world. He correctly notes that Hindus refuse to believe that God created the universe out of nothing, as Christian doctrine

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[28] Published in Petech 1952–56:part 1, pp. 96–106. Giuseppe Felice da Morro was in Katmandu from the beginning of 1715 to about 1719, then in Dvags-po, returning to Katmandu in 1721. He died there the following year, at about forty years of age.

asserts. Instead, he claims, they insist that the souls of every person, the souls of every thing, and God himself are all one and the same. According to the somewhat curious account told to Giuseppe Felice by his Nepalese informant, God first created a woman named Manasa,[29] who soon began to long for offspring. God then created the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesa (Siva). Manasa invited Brahma to mate with her, but he refused. Next she asked Vishnu and he too refused. Mahesa, however, accepted, provided Manasa would change her form to that of Parvati. Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesa each assumed different functions: Brahma would concern himself with spiritual matters and scripture, Vishnu with conserving and governing, Mahesa with punishment and death.

Giuseppe Felice then notes the Hindus regard all the thirty-three crore male gods to be transformations of these three gods while the many goddesses are transformations of Manasa. He gives a list of the names of nine goddesses that corresponds roughly to the list of emanations of Devi found in the well-known Purana text, the *Devi-mahatmya*. Next, he turns to a discussion of the ten avatars of Vishnu, a standard topic of most Puranas. After this he gives a descriptive list of the gods associated with the various planets, the north star (Dhruva), eclipses (Rahu), followed by a list of some of minor gods such as Yama, Kubera, Indra, Varuna, Agni, Vayu, Kumara, Ganesa, and the eight Bhairavas. The discussion then turns briefly to the Brahmins' veneration of the sacred cow, followed by the story of the origin of the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Shudras from God's mouth, shoulders, thighs, and feet respectively. Giuseppe Felice concludes his account with a description of the four yugas and the Hindus' belief in enormously long time periods.

One-hundred years earlier, in the first part of the seventeenth century, the abovementioned Jesuits de Nobili, Stephens, and Fernandes Trancoso were working and writing in south India, while the Augustinian Manrique worked in Bengal and elsewhere. Rather than review the works of these authors, however, I want to use the example of a less well-informed tract from about the same period, *A Discoverie of the Sect of the Banians,* published by the Anglican chaplain Henry Lord, in 1630. Lord describes, with mixed success, the beliefs and practices of some Banias he encountered during a stay at the East India Company factory at Surat in Gujarat in the early seventeenth century. He claims to have gone through their Bible, the so-called "Shaster," with the help of interpreters.[30]

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[29] As the editor, Petech, notes, this goddess apparently has nothing to do with the serpent goddess Manasa of Nepal. Rather she seems to be equivalent to God's power or *śakti*. There does not seem to be any identifiable textual source for this story.

[30] Lord 1630:[A]13. Lord arrived in Surat in 1624. It is curious that John Zephaniah Holwell claims that during the capture of Calcutta in 1756, he "lost many curious Gentoo manuscripts, and among them two very correct and valuable copies of the Gentoo *Shastah*" as well as "a translation I made of a considerable part of the *Shastah,* which had cost me eighteen months hard labour." (Marshall 1970:46). *Shaster* and *Shastah* are of course equivalent to *śāstra,* a general type of text and not a specific title. I suspect that Holwell may have Lord's *Shaster* in mind.

I that thought my observance would bee well tooke, if I could present my Countreymen with any thing new from these forraigne parts, begun my worke, and essayed to fetch materials for the same out of their Manuscripts, and by renewed accesse, with the helpe of Interpreters, made my collections out of a booke of theirs called the Shaster which is to them as their Bible, containing the grounds of their Religion in a written word.

Lord then presents those scattered bits of information that managed to pass through the filter of his interpreters. He begins with a confused account of God's creation of the world and of Pourous (Purusa) and Parcoutee (Prakrti) that reads like a twisted version of the creation in Genesis.

For this cause that Almighty consulted with himselfe, about the making of this great worke which men call the world or Universe, and as the Ancient (say they) have delivered; the Lord made foure Elements as the ground-worke of this mighty frame; to wit, Earth, Aire, Fire, and Water, which foure Elements were at first all mingled together in a confusion, but the Almighty separated them in manner following.

First, it is delivered, that by some great Cane or like instrument, hee blew upon the Waters, which arose into a bubble, of a round form like an egge, which spreading it selfe further and further, made the Firmament so cleare and transparent, which now compasseth the world about.

[God then created Earth, Sun, Moon, the points of the compass, and finally Man.] That this creature might not bee alone, who was made by nature socieable; God seconded him with a Companion, which was Woman; to whom not so much the outward shape, as the likenesse of the minde and disposition seemed agreeing: and the first mans name was *Pourous,* and the womans name was Parcoutee, and they lived conioyned together as Man and Wife, feeding on the fruites of the earth, without the destruction of any living creature.

Next Lord claims that the "Banians" have a social system based on descent from the four sons of Pourous and Parcoutee named Brammon, Cuttery, Shuddery, and Wyse (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Shudra, and Vaishya). This account, however confused, seems to be indirectly based on the sacrifice of the primeval Purusa in the *Rg-veda* hymn x. 90. Although Lord inverts the names of Vaishya and Shudra, his description of the division of labor among these four *varṇas* is otherwise more or less accurate. He also manages a rather confused but recognizable account of the cycle of transmigration and its connection to vegetarian *ahiṃsā;* of the trio of gods Bremaw (Brahma), Vystney (Vishnu), and Ruddery (Rudra-Siva); and of the four yugas. In his discussion of the Parsis, he also manages to recognize the basic differences of religion among the Banians (i.e. the Hindus), the Muslims, and the Parsis (Lord 1630: [D]1):

Having declared the Religion, Rites, Customes & Ceremonies, of a people living in the *East Indies* called the *Banians,* a Sect not throughly publisht by any heretofore, whilst my observation was bestowed in such Inquiry, I observed in the towne of *Surratt* the place where I resided, another Sect called the *Persees,* who because I did discerne them to differ both frõ the *Moore* & *Banian* in the course of their living, & in the forme of their Religion.

Even in Lord's rather garbled account, which was based on his visual observations and conversations with native interpreters (whose grasp of English was

evidently limited), the basic outline of the set of beliefs and practices that came to be known as Hinduism is clearly visible. Since this is one of the earliest known extended European descriptions of Hinduism, it seems fair to claim that Hinduism, if it was in fact constructed by the Europeans, can be traced back to the very earliest European accounts. The fact that virtually all European accounts—whatever the language or period in which they were written, and whether or not they are likely to have mutually influenced each other—follow this same general outline suggests that the European writers were in fact "constructing" Hinduism directly on the basis of what they observed and what they were told by their native informants. These informants were in turn simply summarizing a construction of Hinduism that already existed in their own collective consciousness. This does not mean that Hinduism was unchanged during this period, nor that the European and colonial presence did not foster important changes in the way Hinduism was conceptualized by the Hindus themselves, but it does clearly show that the idea that Hinduism was constructed or invented by nineteenth century Europeans is mistaken.

HINDU IDENTITY BEFORE 1800

A large part of the claim that Hinduism did not exist before it was invented by the British in the early 1800s depends on the belief that before this date the Hindus themselves lacked a self-conscious religious identity, as opposed to a diffuse ethno-geographical identity. The textual evidence against this claim is so overwhelming that I am frankly at a loss to explain why so many worthy scholars apparently accept it. I have only two tentative ideas to offer as at least partial explanations.

First, many liberal and left scholars have been reluctant to accept the idea that the often antagonistic modern Hindu and Muslim identities, both individual and communitarian, arose out of political and religious conflicts during the historical periods of the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughal Empire, and the regional Sultanates. These scholars tend to attribute the invention, construction, or imagining of the modern form of all major Indian institutions to the influence of the colonial state in particular, and the nineteenth-century imaginary in general. As the political scientist Paul Brass once said to me, only half joking: "Everything was invented in the nineteenth century." When it comes to communalism per se, as opposed to the wider concept of Hindu identity, most liberal and left scholars—from Bipan Chandra (1984) to Gyanendra Pandey (1990) to Veena Das (1990) and beyond—insist that it was originally a product of the colonial period. The arguments of scholars like Christopher Bayly and Sheldon Pollock that the roots of communalism lie deeper in the past have often met with open hostility.[31]

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[31] See Pandey's (1990:15) hostile reaction to Bayly's 1985 article about the "pre-history" of communalism and B. Chattopadhyaya's (1998:98–115) extended criticism of Pollock's 1993 article. "Ramayana and Political Imagination in India." Chattopadhyaya's most palpable hit is that Pol-

The second possible reason why many scholars have not acknowledged the existence of a conscious Hindu religious identity before 1800 is perhaps more interesting. My argument here starts from the fact that Sanskrit literature written before this date systematically ignores the Muslim presence. Muslims, when they appear, are mostly described simply as "foreigners." In his fascinating new book on references to Muslims in Sanskrit sources, mostly inscriptions, B. Chattopadhyaya (1998:92–97) lists about seventy-five Sanskrit references to Muslims. Among the terms used are *tājika, turuṣka, mleccha, pārasīka, yavana, hammīra,* and *sáka.* The term *musalamāna* is listed only once, from an inscription of 1264 C.E. Although some of these terms are ethnic in origin, most had acquired the broad generic meaning of "foreigner" or "west Asian" by the time they were applied to Muslims.

In both Sanskrit and vernacular literature, Muslims were often portrayed in the implicit, coded form of demons, as evidently happened in several medieval renderings of the *Ramayana.* Most important in North India was, of course, Tulasi-das's late sixteenth century Hindi *Ram-carit-manas,* which soon achieved the status of a foundational text for the Hinduism of a broad range of castes, with the notable exception of the mostly low-caste followers of the Kabir Panth and related *nirguṇī* sects. Kampan's Tamil *Iramavataram* plays a somewhat analogous role in the South. Early Europeans and Christians were sometimes similarly coded as demons.

As far as I know, no premodern Sanskrit text includes anything approaching a systematic discussion of Muslim beliefs and practices. Similarly, the terms "Hindu" and "Hindu dharma" were never admitted to the premodern Sanskrit lexicon. The roughly equivalent term "sanātana-dharma" can, it is true, be traced back to the *Bhagavad-gita* and the Puranas, but, as Wilhelm Halbfass and other scholars have argued, its precise meaning has always been ambiguous.[32]

Why exactly Hindu Sanskrit literature written before 1800 treated foreigners and foreign religions, even indigenous Buddhism, in this Olympian fashion is not easy to understand, and would make an excellent topic for a separate essay, but here it is sufficient to note that this systematic ignoring of non-Hindu cultural traditions, whatever its cause, was a deeply embedded trait of premodern Hinduism. Halbfass's (1988:187) rather harsh judgment in this regard is, I think, inescapable:

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lock has made a very selective reading of the evidence when he associates the reaction by Hindus against Islam and Turko-Afghan or Mughal conquest exclusively with the rise of the devotional cult to Rama. The Hindus undoubtedly conceptualized and mythologically represented the conflict between Hindu kings and Turko-Afghans or Mughals with figures other than just Rama and Ravana, but this, I think, only puts an interesting qualification to Pollock's basic argument.

[32] See the discussion and references in Halbfass 1988:310–48. I suspect that the use of the term "eternal dharma" may have been used in part to distinguish Brahmanical and Hindu religion from the more historical religions of Buddhism and Jainism, but Buddhist scholars have told me that Buddhism itself is sometimes called the "eternal dharma."

The Indocentrism developed in "orthodox" Hindu thought transcends by far what is ordinarily called "ethnocentrism." It is not simply an unquestioned perspective or bias, but a sophisticated theoretical structure of self-universalization and self-isolation. Seen from within this complex, highly differentiated structure, the *mlecchas* are nothing but a faint and distant phenomenon at the horizon of the indigenous tradition. They do not possess an "otherness" against which one's own identity could be asserted, or in which it could be reflected. They are neither targets of possible conversion, nor sources of potential inspiration.

What I am suggesting here is that many modern scholars, especially those who work principally with Sanskrit sources, may have unconsciously absorbed some of the self-imposed cultural isolation of premodern Sanskrit literature and then concluded that there was no Hindu awareness of the Muslim Other. As a consequence, they may also have assumed that the Hindus had no clear contrastive awareness of their own religious identity.

Whatever the reason for the scholarly acceptance of the idea that there was no religious Hindu self-identity before 1800, the evidence against this view in vernacular Hindu literature is clear and abundant. The bulk of this evidence takes the form of texts composed by the popular religious poet-singers of North India, most of them members of non-Brahmin castes. This literature does precisely what Sanskrit literature refuses to do: it establishes a Hindu religious identity through a process of mutual self-definition with a contrasting Muslim Other. In practice, there can be no Hindu identity unless this is defined by contrast against such an Other. Without the Muslim (or some other non-Hindu), Hindus can only be Vaishnavas, Saivas, Smartas or the like. The presence of the Other is a necessary prerequisite for an active recognition of what the different Hindu sects and schools hold in common.

To illustrate this process of mutual self definition, I will use passages from the *nirguṇī* poet Kabir, the Ramanandi Anantadas, the Varakari Ekanath, and the Krishna devotee Vidyapati. Many more such passages can easily be cited, especially from the poets of the *nirguṇī* sant tradition such as Raidas, Nanak, Dadu, Rajjab, and Palatu Das, to name just a few. More orthodox vernacular poets such as Tulasi Das generally follow the evasive Sanskritic strategies of representing Muslims as ill-defined *mlecchas* or coded demons, but even in these writings such coded Muslims are often a palpable, and even necessary, presence.

Ekanath was a Brahmin, a scholar and author, who spent most of his life at Paithan in Maharashtra. He was born there in 1533 and died there in 1599. Although he knew Sanskrit well, most of his numerous compositions were written in Marathi. Among them is a humorous poetic dialogue between a Hindu Brahmin and a Muslim, the *Hindu-turka-samvada.*[33] The term "Turk" (*turka*), like "Hindu," can be used in a ethno-geographical sense, but here—as in the

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[33] The text has been translated and commented on in English by Eleanor Zelliot (1982). The passages cited are from this translation.

texts of Anantadas, Kabir, and Vidyapati cited below, as well as in those of many other medieval poets—its primary meaning is clearly "Muslim."

In Ekanath's dialogue, cited here from Eleanor Zelliot's translation (1982), the Hindu and the Muslim mock the absurdities manifest in the popular rituals and myths of each other's faiths. Among the aspects of Hinduism attacked by the Muslim are the anthropomorphic forms of the Hindu gods ("God has hands and feet, you say / This is really impossible!"), the Hindus' ritual bathing ("You leap in the water like water ducks."), various improprieties committed by the gods in the myths of Hindu scripture ("It says God goes out to beg." "Your Brahma laid his daughter." "Thieves took away God's wife / So monkeys came to help him!" "Fool! Your God [Krishna] was imprisoned." "You call God a keeper of cows."), the general falsity of Hindu scripture ("The Vedas he preaches are all false. / Your Sastras, your Vedas, your 'OM' / Are all evil tricks."), the Hindu practice of idolatry ("A stone statue rules over you. / You give it the name of God. / . . . You bow and scrape in front of it."), the Hindu practices of ritual purity in cooking and eating ("If so much as a grain of his food falls on yours, / You catch him by the throat!"), and the Hindu male's hypocrisy in applying impurity rules to women ("That girl you have taken as mistress / You don't eat in the house of her people.").

The Hindu's main attack and defense is that the Muslim refuses to admit that God is everywhere, rather than just at Mecca. If God is everywhere, why not in idols or the avatars of Hindu mythology? ("God is present in every place / Why not in prison?" "God is in water, in places, in wood, in stone."). The Brahmin also attacks the Muslim's animal sacrifices ("When one creature gives pain to another, / How can he go to heaven?") and his efforts to convert Hindus to Islam ("He is supposed to catch a Hindu and make him a Muslim! / Did God make a mistake in making the Hindu?").

The dialogue concludes, in somewhat unlikely fashion, with a reconciliation between the two, on the basis that, for God, all are equal.

> The Brahman says, O yes, swami.
> As a matter of fact, you and I are one.
> This controversy grew over caste and *dharma.*
> When we go to God, there are no such things.
> The Turk says, that is the truth.
> For God there is no caste.
> There is no separation between devotee and God
> Even though the Prophet has said God is hidden.

The Ramanandi author Anantadas is the author of several verse biographies, or *paracaīs,* of Hindu saints and poets such as Namadev, Pipa, Kabir and Raidas. He wrote his *Namadev paracai* in 1588 A.D. and is associated with the Raivasa ashram at Sikar in Rajasthan (Lorenzen 1991:9–13, 75). A key passage that illustrates his view of the contents of Hindu is found in his *Kabir paracai.* According to Anantadas, when the Lodi sultan, Sikandar, came to Banaras, a

delegation of both Hindus and Muslims went to Sikandar to complain about Kabir's activities. When Sikandar asks what crime Kabir has committed, they reply that he has "done an unconventional thing."[34]

He has abandoned the customs of the Muslims (*musalamāṃna*) and has broken the touchability rules of the Hindus. He has scorned the sacred bathing places (*tīratha*) and the Vedas. He has scorned the nine planets, the sun and the moon. He has scorned Sankara and the Mother. He has scorned the Sarada and Ganapati. He has scorned the rites of the eleventh day of the fortnight, the offerings to the sacred fire and the cere-monies for the dead. He has scorned the Brahmans, whom the whole world worships. He has scorned service to one's mother and father, sisters, nieces, and all the gods. He has scorned the hope of all religion [*dharama*], the six systems of metaphysics [*darasana*] and the rites of the twelve months.

He has scorned the [Hindu] rosary, forehead mark, sacred thread, the Salagram stone and the ten avatars. Kabir tells all these lies. He respects neither the Hindus nor the Turks. In this way he has corrupted everyone. He has put both the Hindus and the Turks in the same situation. As long as this low-caste weaver [*julahā*] stays in Banaras, no one will respect us.

Here Anantadas is staking out a position for Kabir as separate from both the Muslims and Hindus. Almost all the objects of Kabir's scorn that Anantadas specifies, however, come directly from Hindu beliefs and practices, not Mus-lim ones. Including as they do the major gods, avatars and goddesses, the life cycle rites, the six *darśanas,* the sacred bathing places, the Vedas, the touch-ability rules of caste, the sacred fire, and various seasonal observances, they comprise a substantial part of the standard model of Hinduism.

The songs and verses of Kabir himself display a similar rejection of the be-liefs and practices of both Hinduism and Islam. Kabir lived in Banaras between about 1450 and 1520 A.D., and is said to have been raised in a Muslim family before becoming a follower of the Vaishnava guru Ramananda. The following song from the *Kabir-bijak* illustrates his often reiterated assertion that both Hin-duism and Islam, as commonly practiced, had lost their grasp on spiritual truth:[35]

> Tell me, brother. How can there be
> Not one Lord of the world but two?
> Who has led you so astray?
> God has taken many names:

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[34] The preceding phrase and the first paragraph of the quote are from my published translation of the Niranjani recension. The second paragraph is from the text in the oldest manuscript of 1636 (Lorenzen 1991:107, 230).

[35] *Kabir-bijak* (Kabir 1982), *śabda* 30. The *Bijak,* associated with the Kabir Panth, is one of three old collections of his compositions. The others are the Dadu Panthi *Kabir-granthavali* and the Sikh *Adi-grantha.* Not all the compositions attributed to Kabir in these collections are neces-sarily his, but all date from the sixteenth century. Many other songs with a similar message can be quoted from all collections. See, for instance, *Kabir-bijak, śabdas* 4 (anti-idolatry), 8 (anti-avatars), 10 (anti-sacrifice), 61 (cremation/burial), 75 (Hindu/Turk bodies the same); *Adi-grantha, āsā* 5 (anti-yoga, anti-*śāstras*), *bhairo* 20 (God is above Puranic gods), *vibhāsa-prabhātī* 2 (anti-ritual). Translations can be found in Hess and Singh 1983, and Dass 1991, respectively.

> Names like Allah, Ram, Karim,
> Kesav, Hari, and Hajarat.
> Gold may be shaped into rings and bangles.
> Isn't it gold all the same?
> Distinctions are only words we invent.
> One does *namāz,* one does *pūjā.*
> One has Siva, one Mohammed,
> One has Adam, one Brahma.
> Who is a Hindu, who a Turk?
> Both must share a single world.
> Koran or Vedas, both read their books.
> One is a *pāṇḍā,* one a mullah.
> Each of them bears a separate name,
> But every pot is made from clay.
> Kabir says they are both mistaken.
> Neither has found the only Ram.
> One kills goats, the other cows.
> They waste their lives in disputation.

The most interesting evidence relating to the Hindus' religious identity in the period before 1800 comes from the historical romance called *Kirtilata,* a text written in a dialect of *Apabhraṃśa* by the poet Vidyapati sometime early in fifteenth century, roughly a hundred years before Kabir's songs.[36] The hero of the romance, Prince Kirtisimha, at one point passes through the city of Jonapur, identified with modern Jaunpur. Vidyapati's description of the Muslim quarter of this city is imbued with a sharp anti-Muslim bias. In it he sets out a series of contrasts between the religious customs of the Hindus and Muslims:[37]

> The Hindus and the Turks live close together.
> Each makes fun of the other's religion (*dhamme*).
> One calls the faithful to prayer. The other recites the Vedas.
> One butchers animals by bleeding,
> The other cuts (off their heads).
> Some are called *ojhās,* others *khvājās.*
> Some (read) astrological signs, others fast in Ramadan.
> Some eat from copper plates, others from pottery.
> Some practice *namāz,* others do *pūjā.*
> The Turks coerce passers by into doing forced labor.
> Grabbing hold of a Brahmin boy, they put a cow's vagina on his head.
> They rub out his *tilak* and break his sacred thread.
> They want to ride on horses. They use rice to make liquor.
> They destroy temples and construct mosques.

One noteworthy aspect of this passage is the use of the word *dharma* (here *dhamme*)—coupled with the words *hindū* and *turake*—to apparently mean

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[36] This difficult text has been well edited, analyzed and translated into modern Hindi by Sivaprasad Simha (1988). The passages discussed here are also discussed by Gaeffke 1977 and Lutgendorf 1997:31–35. I thank Lutgendorf for bringing this text to my attention.

[37] Simha 1988:269–70. I have followed Simha's interpretation throughout. *Ojhās* are a type of Hindu healer and *khvājās* a type of Muslim ascetic.

something quite close to "religion of the Hindus" and "religion of the Muslims." This clearly shows that this sense of *dharma* as "religion" (at the least "a set of religious customs") is not simply a modern usage for a borrowed European concept as Halbfass (1988:310) and others have suggested.

One other point that can be made here is that the above cited passages and others of this type generally emphasize the differences in religious customs and rituals rather than in philosophy or theology, between Hindus and Muslims, although differences in religious texts and ideas are also noted. Customs and rituals are, after all, the primary practical means that ordinary people use to establish and mark off separate religious identities. In addition, we should remember that poets such as Kabir, Dadu, Palatu, and Nanak repeatedly insist on the one religious message that God and spiritual reality are the same no matter what names we give them, nor what ideas we have about them. In their view, the separate religious identities of Hindus and Muslims are based on mostly worthless customs and ultimately false ideas. Only by seeing beyond such customs and ideas can one establish a true religious identity: an identity that their followers paradoxically define once again in sectarian terms.

Evidence of Hindus directly expressing consciousness of their identity as Hindus is more difficult to encounter in the period before 1400, at least in North Indian Hindu sources. One interesting earlier reference comes from Andhra Pradesh. Cynthia Talbot has analyzed how the military expansion of Muslim dynasties into the Andhra region in 1323 A.D: led to a sharper sense of regional, political and religious identity among the Hindu population of the region. She notes (1995:700) that the title "Sultan among Hindu kings (*hindu-raya-suratrana*)," perhaps the earliest use of the term "Hindu" in an Indian language, "begins to figure in Andhra inscriptions from 1352 C.E. onward." Talbot suggests that these references to Hindu kings likely implied more a geographical than a religious identity. Arguing against this, however, is the fact that Muslim dynasties had already been in control of most of the Ganges valley since the end of the twelfth century, *i.e.,* for about 150 years before the first appearance of the phrase "Sultan among Hindu kings" in the Andhra inscriptions. In the circumstances, how could the Andhra kings consider their Muslim opponents to be non-Hindu in a merely geographical sense, *i.e.,* non-Indians?

There is one other early Hindu source that should be mentioned here. This is the *Prthviraj raso,* a historical romance attributed to Canda Baradai. This text exists in several versions of quite different lengths, and its date has long been disputed. Traditionally it is said to have been composed not long after Muhammad Ghuri's 1192 A.D. defeat of the hero of the story, King Prthviraj. Most scholars have argued that all, or all but one, of the versions of the text are more recent, but they have not reached any consensus about which was written when. All versions are full of references to "Hindus" and "Turks" (sometimes "*mlecchas*"), but these references do not permit a clear distinction between the ethnic and religious senses of the words, with one interesting exception. In the Asi-

atic Society of Bengal's version, the text at one point states that "both religions have drawn their curved swords" (*doū dīna dīnaṃ kaḍhī baṃki assiṃ*).[38] The Hindi word *dīn* is of Arabic rather than Sanskrit origin, but its meaning as "faith" or "religion" is not in doubt.

MUSLIM SOURCES

References to the Hindus and their religion in Muslim sources, mostly written in Persian, are of less direct relevance here since they be cannot be used to directly prove or disprove the existence of the self-identity of Hindus as Hindus. These references also take the discussion into areas beyond my own linguistic competence. Nonetheless, these texts, like the early sources in European languages, are important for the evidence they offer about the existence of Hinduism from the point of view of outside observers. According to Richard Eaton, one of the earliest occurrences of the word "Hindu" in Islamic literature appears in ʿAbd al-Malik ʿIsami's Persian work, *Futuhu's-salatin,* composed in the Deccan in 1350. In this text ʿIsami uses the word *hindi* to mean "Indian" in the ethno-geographical sense, and the word *hindu* to mean "Hindu" in the sense of a follower of the Hindu religion.[39]

According to Carl Ernst (1992), "the beginnings of the concept of 'Hindu' religion are to be sought in the Persian literature of the Ghaznavid period, beginning about 990," and its "more precise formulation" in the famous Arabic work of al-Biruni (d. 1048). While Ernst curiously ignores the ample evidence for the Hindus' own conceptualization of their religion, his identification of al-Biruni as the first outside observer to formulate a clear and detailed representation of Hinduism is undoubtedly correct. Al-Biruni was attempting to write a general account of Indian religion, philosophy, literature, history, geography, manners and customs, and festivals, and especially of Indian cosmography, astrology, and astronomy. Although his emphases are different than those of the other authors we have been discussing, his account of Hinduism covers most of the topics of Monier-Williams' standard model.

Al-Biruni's text includes—roughly in order, and omitting secular topics—discussions of the Hindu concepts of God, the soul, transmigration, heaven and hell, morality and law, the three different paths to salvation, the pantheon of gods, idol worship, the four social classes (*varṇas*), the four Vedas, the eighteen major Puranas, the law books (*smṛti*), the *Mahabharata,* cosmogonic and cosmographic theories and myths, theories of time cycles including the four yugas, the mythology of Vishnu and his more important avatars, calendrical and astronomical rites, linga worship and its mythology, the four life stages (*āśramas*), the rites and customs of various castes, pilgrimages, life cycle rites, dietary customs and fasting, and calendrical festivals. Al-Biruni knew Sanskrit

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[38] Canda Baradai 1992:59.
[39] Personal communication from Richard Eaton citing the edition and translation of Agha Mahdi Husain (London: Asia Publishing House, 1967): texts 405 and 606, trans. 2:613 and 3:902.

and used various Sanskrit texts in his research, including the *Bhagavad-gita,* Patanjali's *Yoga-sutra,* a text on *Samkhya,* the *Visnu-purana,* several other Puranas, and many texts on astronomy, astrology, geography, and chronology. Although the English translator liberally uses the word "Hindu," the original Arabic text appears to only use phrases literally equivalent to "[of] the people of India [*hind*]."[40] Nonetheless, al-Biruni clearly understood the difference between the people of India as a geographical or ethnic entity and as a religious group.

CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this essay has been to show that the claim of many scholars—that Hinduism was invented by the British in the early nineteenth century—is false. A larger issue, however, is also implicitly involved. This is the tendency of many historians of modern India—especially those associated with the subaltern school—to adopt a postcolonialist perspective that privileges the British colonial period as the period in which almost all the major institutions of Indian society and politics were invented or constructed. As Richard Eaton (1998) notes in a recent critique of these historians: "The notion of 'postcoloniality' situated *all* Indian time in reference to the British imperial period: time was either precolonial, colonial, or postcolonial."

One postcolonialist historian, Nicholas Dirks (1989:43), has claimed that even caste, that uniquely Indian institution, was in some sense invented by the British: "Colonialism seems to have created much of what is now accepted as Indian 'tradition,' including an autonomous caste structure with the Brahman clearly and unambiguously at the head." Although Dirks is using hyperbole to make his point, and he does include some important but easily overlooked qualifications, the argument seems to me to be grossly overstated.[41] As the Hindi critic Purushottam Agrawal recently quipped: "We Indians may well have been denied the capacity to solve our own problems, but are we so incapable that we could not even create them on our own?" Caste, like Hinduism, undoubtedly responded to the British conquest with significant changes, but neither institution was so radically transformed during the colonial period that it makes any sense, even in terms of a transformation of preexisting institutions or concepts, to claim that the British invented them. Whatever cultural garments the British stitched together, caste and Hinduism weren't among them. At least in these respects, the Empire has no clothes.

If Hinduism is a construct or invention, then, it is not a colonial one, nor a European one, nor even an exclusively Indian one. It is a construct or invention

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[40] This at least is the preliminary conclusion of Richard Eaton, who kindly looked through the Arabic text for the original equivalents at my request.

[41] To this statement, from Dirks' essay "The Invention of Caste: Civil Society in Colonial India" (1989) can be added another ambitious claim he makes in a more recent text (1992:3): "Even as much of what we now recognize as culture was produced by the colonial encounter, the concept itself was in part invented because of it." Both these passages are cited in Eaton 1998.

only in the vague and commonsensical way that any large institution is, be it Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, communism, or parliamentary democracy. In other words, it is an institution created out of a long historical interaction between a set of basic ideas and the infinitely complex and variegated socio-religious beliefs and practices that structure the everyday life of individuals and small, local groups.

In this interaction, both the basic ideas and the everyday beliefs and practices are constantly changing—sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly. Major historical changes in the economic and political institutions of India during the Turco-Afghan conquest, the Mughal invasion, the consolidation of the Mughal polity, and the establishment of the British colonial regime undoubtedly effected important changes in the religious traditions of India, but the rapid changes of early colonial times never had such an overwhelming impact that they could have led to the invention of Hinduism. Hinduism wasn't invented sometime after 1800, or even around the time of the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. What did happen during the centuries of rule by dynasties of Muslim sultans and emperors was that Hindus developed a consciousness of a shared religious identity based on the loose family resemblance among the variegated beliefs and practices of Hindus, whatever their sect, caste, chosen deity, or theological school.

From the point of view of a modern observer, one can see the family resemblance taking a recognizably Hindu shape in the early Puranas, roughly around the period 300–600 C.E. Although the religion of these Puranas displays many continuities with the earlier Vedic religion, its principal features and emphases—particularly its greatly expanded mythology of the gods Vishnu, Siva and Devi—do, I think, justify marking this religion off as something new, as the beginning of medieval and modern Hinduism. This Hinduism wasn't invented by anyone, European or Indian. Like Topsy, it just grow'd.

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