

Preface

How the Hindus Got Their Religion

Of making many books on the invention of that which we thought to have been given, natural or ancient there seems, indeed, to be no end. What Homer, Shaka Zulu, India, the Middle Ages, women, communities, tradition, the Victorians and the Pacific all have in common, we have recently been told, is that they were invented, constructed, created or imagined, mostly in the nineteenth century. Several writers have argued that Hinduism should be added to this list – it is this 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’¹ which will be examined here through a study of several important European works on Hinduism from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The significance of the study of Hinduism – and the formation of the concept ‘Hinduism’ itself – is not only historical. ‘The Hindu tradition has seemed to many of those who study it to be particularly refractory to definition’.² Virtually every introductory work on Hinduism begins with a discussion of the difficulty of defining its subject matter.³ Although there are acknowledged difficulties with the definition of other religions, it is noticeable that, even in the context of the other Indian religions, Hinduism remains for some the indefinable religion *par excellence*: ‘To study “Hinduism” is not the same as to study Buddhism, for unlike the latter, the former is not a defined (or probably, definable) entity.’⁴ Given the apparent resistance of Hinduism to definition, the scholarly constitution of Hinduism as an object of study might well be thought to be paradigmatic of, and for, the study of religions.

The emergence of the concept ‘Hinduism’ may be seen as part of a wider process involving two further concepts, namely, ‘religion’ and ‘the Orient’. These concepts, and the discourses associated with them, have

¹ Lorenzen 1999: 630. Lorenzen cites some of the ‘many scholars’ who have put forward this claim over the past decade arguing himself (1999: 631) that ‘the claim that Hinduism was invented or constructed by European colonizers, mostly British, sometime after 1800 is false.’

² Smith 1987: 34.

³ Nevertheless it should be noted that every such work is dependent on some conception of Hinduism, even if none is made explicit.

⁴ Hardy 1990: 145.

recently been subject to extensive critique.⁵ As both dependent upon and partly constitutive of these concepts, the construction of 'Hinduism' has not been exempt from these critiques.⁶ The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a change in the meaning and range of application of the term 'religion' and the emergence of a tradition of study which lies at the roots of the contemporary academic study of religions.⁷ The works studied here must be understood against this background, which shaped them as they shaped it. The first part of this book is concerned with establishing the proper status of 'Hinduism' as a conceptual tool in the modern academic study of religions. The first chapter reviews the conditions for the emergence of the academic study of religions, in particular the categories on which that enterprise depends, and above all the category 'religion' itself. It will be argued that the history of 'religion' reveals both the necessary conditions for the emergence of 'the history of religions'⁸ and the nature of the term itself. Once 'religion' is seen to have had a history, it is apparent that it is part of a way of conceiving the world which is anchored, not in the way in which the world 'really' is, but in the way in which *we choose* to describe that world: 'religion' is a not a natural kind. The debate on the concept of religion ought therefore to be reconfigured. The crucial questions relate not to the supposed real nature of 'religion', but to the usefulness of the term 'religion' in the production of knowledge in the human sciences.

The next chapter will consider the arguments for thinking that the term 'Hinduism' is 'a particularly false conceptualization.'⁹ It will be argued that the arguments for this proposition, and for the further claim that 'none of the so-called religions of Asia is a religion',¹⁰ depend upon a failure to disentangle the concept of religion from its history. What that history demonstrates is the limited usefulness and the inevitably theory-laden status, not only of 'religion', but of *all* generalized terms in the

⁵ For religion see McCutcheon 1997 and Fitzgerald 2000a; for the Orient see Said 1991, and other works which have extended the geographical focus of his analysis. Asad 1993 and Inden 1990 consider both concepts.

⁶ See, for example, King 1999, chapter 5 'The modern myth of Hinduism'.

⁷ J. Samuel Preus's *Explaining Religion*, is an attempt to write a history of this study, and thus to stabilize the concept of it as a 'research tradition that produced a new paradigm for the study of religion.' (Preus 1987: ix).

⁸ This is one way of referring to that part of the division of academic labours which is otherwise referred to as *Religionswissenschaft*, the science of religion, the comparative study of religion, the phenomenology of religion, and religious studies. My reasons for preferring yet another designation ('the academic study of religion' or 'the academic study of religions') will be given below. I take these locutions to refer to the same scholarly endeavour, but also to embody some differing conceptions about the aims and presuppositions of that endeavour.

⁹ Smith 1991: 63.

¹⁰ Staal 1989: 398.

study of religions. Recognition of this in the case of the categories of 'religion' and 'Hinduism' has been hard-won; it would be a retrograde step to abandon these terms for the illusory promise of some concepts which are not implicated in an inevitably partial view of the way the world is. There are no such concepts. Not only is there no reason to abandon the use of 'religion' and 'Hinduism' but, precisely because it ought no longer to be possible to use these concepts without being aware that to do so is to apply a theoretical framework to the world, we should retain them: 'All data-gathering is theoretically inspired. The crucial issue is how aware of their theories data-gatherers are.'¹¹

Many of the arguments against the use of 'Hinduism' refer to the history of the term. In recent scholarship something of a standard history of the origin of the term has emerged.¹² This history has, as E. E. Evans-Pritchard said of E. B. Tylor's account of the origin of the soul, 'the quality of a just-so story like "how the leopard got his spots"'. The ideas of soul and spirit could have arisen in the way Tylor supposed, but there is no evidence that they did.'¹³ Likewise the concept of Hinduism could have arisen in the way in the way it is supposed to have in the standard account of its invention, but there is no evidence that it did. The next five chapters therefore provide a close reading of several major works in which the constitution of Hinduism as an object of study took place. It will be shown that while 'Hinduism' was indeed created rather than discovered, this was not a creation *ex nihilo*.

An important aim of this study will be to introduce synchronic and diachronic nuance into our understanding and evaluation of early European works on Hinduism. The failure to discriminate between the works and purposes of different writers on Indian religions in the recent critique of the 'imagining' of India and its religions, means that much of that critique can be reflexively applied to the account given of these early writers and their works. Baldly put, we must not assume that a seventeenth-century Dutch chaplain, an eighteenth-century French professional scholar, and a nineteenth-century British administrator approached Hinduism with the same interests and purposes. Our understanding of writers who spent different amounts of time in different parts of India, and approached Indian religions with different degrees of seriousness, is not advanced by considering them to be part of a single, homogeneous project to master India. On the contrary the degree to which accounts of Indian religions differed must be taken into account.

¹¹ Lawson and McCauley 1990: 10.

¹² See, for example, the formulations of this history by Heinrich von Stietencron and Richard King, quoted below p.34 and p.154, respectively.

¹³ Evans-Pritchard 1965.

One of the outstanding features of all such accounts in the period under examination is their repeated denial of the adequacy of earlier accounts.

Nor should we accept without question a view of Europe's knowledge of Indian religions that sees only a steady improvement in quality of knowledge disseminated. This process was not the progressive accumulation of knowledge/power that it has been represented to be in both triumphalist late-nineteenth-century accounts and critical late-twentieth-century accounts. C. A. Bayly has argued that there is a significant change in the degree and kind of European knowledge of India around the third decade of the nineteenth century, when the British progressively cut themselves off from the 'affective knowledge' derived from participation in moral communities of belief and marriage, and the 'patrimonial knowledge' which came from having a direct ownership of property in a region, and turned instead to the more routinized, abstract information of statistics and surveys, thus compromising their understanding of Indian society.¹⁴ There is certainly a significant alteration in the tone of *some* European writing on Indian religions from the early part of the nineteenth century, which may have resulted in a cruder portrait of Hinduism than that which was produced earlier. Despite, or perhaps because, of this, the earlier accounts which form the focus of this study have been little treated in recent scholarship.

Another aspect of the Orientalist critique which can be reflexively applied to some accounts of Orientalism, is the denial of agency to Indians implicit in the idea that Europe's knowledge of India was entirely the result of the European imagination.¹⁵ Eugene F. Irschick, in a study of the production of knowledge in south India in the nineteenth century, has argued that in the long term

scientific discourse and the institutions that represent it create a negotiated, heteroglot construction shaped by both the weak and the strong, the colonized and the colonizer, from the present and the past. Thus, it is not possible to find a single, definite origin to these meanings and institutions. They are neither "European" nor "indigenous." We must not essentialize any of the positions held by those involved in the dialogue. Equally important, we must recognize that the voices speaking at any given moment are tied to that specific historic instant.¹⁶

At every point, European knowledge of Indian religions depended on the *active* participation of some Indians in the production of knowledge about their religions. It is therefore important to recover as much as possible of

¹⁴ Bayly 1996.

¹⁵ See, for example, Ronald Inden's statement that 'the formation of Indological discourse made it possible' for 'European scholars, traders, and administrators to appropriate the power of Indians (not only the "masses", but also the "elite") to act for themselves.' Inden 1986: 403.

¹⁶ Irschick 1994: 10.

what is known about the sources with whom European writers collaborated in the creation of 'Hinduism'.

Benson Saler writes that 'because Western folk categories continue to serve anthropology as sources for analytical categories, I recommend that anthropologists learn more about the cultural-historical matrices in which some of those categories were developed and applied. Doing so would expand understanding of their complexities and subtleties. Further, sophistication gained through the exercise of exploring those categories in their Euro-American settings might sharpen the anthropologist's sensitivities and sensibilities for attending to other people's categories.'¹⁷ This book is intended to contribute to that process of learning, and to introduce complexity and subtlety into our understanding of the creation of 'Hinduism', while showing that not everything was invented in the nineteenth century.

¹⁷ Saler 1993: 25–26.