

## The Critique of ‘Hinduism’

It has been argued that while the academic study of religion, and the concept of religion upon which it depends, emerged from a culture which was still shaped by its Christian history, nevertheless the establishment of the modern sense of ‘religion’ was the result of ‘a process of extracting the word from its Christian overtones’.<sup>1</sup> The continuing debate over the definition of religion and the range of applicability of the term is the result of unresolved conflict between a tradition of study that positions itself outside of religion<sup>2</sup> and elements of an older view of religion. The concept – like all abstractions – implies a categorization of phenomena which is imposed upon rather than emergent from them: ‘Religion’ is not a natural kind. It has been suggested that the rejection by some scholars of this claim is evidence that the term, and the discipline for which it serves as the central organising concept, has not yet fully completed the process of disengagement from Christian theological presuppositions described above. Thus Timothy Fitzgerald writes

Religion is really the basis of a modern form of theology, which I will call liberal ecumenical theology, but some attempt has been made to disguise this fact by claiming that religion is a natural and/or a supernatural reality in the nature of things that all human individuals have a capacity for, regardless of their cultural context. This attempt to disguise the theological essence of the category and to present it as though it were a unique human reality irreducible to either theology or sociology suggests that it possesses some ideological function ... that is not fully acknowledged.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bossy 1982: 12.

<sup>2</sup> Though it ought not to be thought that it can position itself outside of history, that is, outside of *any* particular viewpoint.

<sup>3</sup> Fitzgerald 2000a: 4–5. Elsewhere Fitzgerald writes: ‘What I am arguing is that theology and what is at present called religious studies ought to be two logically separate levels of intellectual activity, but that in actual fact the latter is conceptually and institutionally dominated by the former. This domination is disguised because it is embedded in our *a priori* central analytical category, and abandoning that category altogether appears, even to scholars who are themselves critically aware of the legacy of phenomenology, to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.’ (Fitzgerald 1997: 97). In more general terms, others have suggested that the claim that religion is a *sui generis* phenomenon is associated with an approach to the study of religion which tends to assume the truth of religion. So McCutcheon notes that ‘one aspect of the discourse on *sui generis* religion’ is a ‘theoretically undefended preference for sympathetic and descriptive insiders’ accounts’ and that the ‘the dominant yet uncritical and theoretically undefendable conception of

Fitzgerald gives a number of arguments for this claim and for his further proposal that scholars who do not have a theological agenda ought to prefer terms which offer greater analytical precision than 'religion'. One such argument considers several works by religionists and anthropologists on Hinduism in order to show that 'religion' fails to pick out anything that can be analytically separated from other institutionalized aspects of Indian culture, that 'the category religion does not effectively demarcate any institutions located in a putatively non-religious domain such as Indian society', in short that 'Hinduism is not a "religion"'.<sup>4</sup> The claim is significant and is found in the work of several other scholars.<sup>5</sup> While agreeing with much of Fitzgerald's analysis – specifically that religion is not 'in the nature of things' or a reality irreducible by other forms of analysis, and that the study of religion continues to be too much influenced by unacknowledged Christian theological presuppositions – it will be argued here that it is precisely the claim that Hinduism is *not* a religion which reveals lingering Christian and theological influence even in the works of those who explicitly disclaim such influence. Such influence exists on two levels, the first relatively superficial, the other more profound. The first level will be demonstrated in three authors (R. N. Dandekar, Heinrich von Stietencron and S. N. Balagangadhara) who implicitly or explicitly model the concept of religion on Christianity. This model is disclaimed by two further authors (Frits Staal and Fitzgerald) but their arguments against the description of Hinduism as a religion, it will be argued, nevertheless depend upon a Protestant Christian epistemology and thus provide another indication that the academic study of religions has yet to transcend fully its origins in a particular religious tradition.

*'Religion' as implicitly modelled upon Christianity*

In his chapter on Hinduism for the *Handbook for the History of Religions*, a quasi-official document for the International Association for the History of Religions, R. N. Dandekar argues that

Hinduism can hardly be called a religion at all in the popularly understood sense of the term. Unlike most religions, Hinduism does not regard the concept of god

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religion as *sui generis* effectively precludes other more socio-politically and historically sensitive methods and theories' (McCutcheon 1997: 122–123).

<sup>4</sup> Fitzgerald 2000a, chapter 7; see also Fitzgerald 2000b and 1990.

<sup>5</sup> It is so often repeated as virtually to constitute an axiom of research into the religious beliefs and practices of the Hindus. See, in addition to those discussed below, Smith 1987: 34, Hardy 1990: 145, Oberoi 1994: 17, Dalmia and Stietencron 1995: 20, Larson 1995: 31, and Frykenberg 1997: 82.



as being central to it. Hinduism is not a system of theology – it does not make any dogmatic affirmation regarding the nature of god ... Similarly, Hinduism does not venerate any particular person as its sole prophet or as its founder. It does not also recognize any particular book as its absolutely authoritative scripture. Further, Hinduism does not insist on any particular religious practice as being obligatory, nor does it accept any doctrine as its dogma. Hinduism can also not be identified with a specific moral code. Hinduism, as a religion, does not convey any definite or unitary idea. There is no dogma or practice which can be said to be either universal or essential to Hinduism as a whole. Indeed, those who call themselves Hindus may not necessarily have much in common as regards faith or worship. What is essential for one section of the Hindu community may not be necessarily so for another. And, yet, Hinduism has persisted through centuries as a distinct religious entity.<sup>6</sup>

The centrality of the concept of god, the veneration of a particular person as the founder of a religion and the recognition of a particular book as an absolutely authoritative scripture are characteristic of certain religions (Christianity and Islam in particular). Dandekar extrapolates from these characteristics and implicitly defines the 'popularly understood sense of the term' religion as including these three characteristics. Had he explicitly defined 'religion' in this way, it is likely that his definition would have been attacked as being too narrow, and in particular as being too much influenced by particular religions, especially certain forms of Christianity. Nevertheless what Dandekar's comments amount to is the claim that Hinduism is not like Christianity, or perhaps that Hinduism is not the same sort of religion that Christianity is. This claim is unobjectionable, but is nevertheless quite different from the claim that Hinduism is not a religion. Dandekar refers only to the '*popularly* understood sense of the term [religion]' and this allows him to conclude that 'Hinduism has persisted through centuries as a distinct religious entity.' Other writers, including S. N. Balagangadhara – who, significantly, misreads Dandekar as referring to the '*properly* understood sense' of religion<sup>7</sup> – draw more radical conclusions from structurally similar arguments.

One such is Heinrich von Stietencron, who argues that 'Hinduism' refers not to one religion, but rather should be taken 'to denote a socio-cultural unit or civilization which contains a plurality of distinct religions.'<sup>8</sup> The idea that Hinduism is a religion derives, he suggests, from a fundamental misunderstanding of the term 'Hindu', which was originally a Persian term denoting 'Indians in general.'<sup>9</sup> Following the permanent settlement of Muslims in India, Persian authors began to use

<sup>6</sup> Dandekar 1971: 237.

<sup>7</sup> Balagangadhara 1994:15.

<sup>8</sup> Stietencron 1997: 33.

<sup>9</sup> Stietencron 1997: 33.

the term to refer to Indians other than Muslims and identified several different religions among the Hindus. However, Stietencron argues that

when Europeans started to use the term Hindoo, they applied it to the non-Muslim masses of India without those scholarly differentiations. Most people failed to realize that the term 'Hindu' corresponded exactly to their own word 'Indian' which is derived, like the name 'India', from the same Indus river, the *indos* of the Greek. The Hindu, they knew, was distinct from the Muslim, the Jew, the Christian, the Parsee and the Jain who were all present in the Indian coastal area known to western trade. Therefore they took the term 'Hindu' to designate the follower of a particular Indian religion. This was a fundamental misunderstanding of the term. And from Hindu the term 'Hinduism' was derived by way of abstraction, denoting an imagined religion of the vast majority of the population – something that had never existed as a 'religion' (*in the Western sense*) in the consciousness of the Indian people themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Given that, as several writers have recently shown, the modern sense of 'religion' as a reified entity in which other people are involved only began to develop in the West from the sixteenth century, it would hardly be surprising were such a concept not to be present in the consciousness of the Indian people prior to its articulation in the West.<sup>11</sup> Like Dandekar, Stietencron does not make explicit what he means by 'the Western sense' of religion.<sup>12</sup> We can gain some idea of what sense he intends by examining the counts on which Hinduism is said to fail to be a religion.

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<sup>10</sup> Stietencron 1997: 33–34, emphasis added. This brief history of European usage of 'Hindu' or 'Hindoo' and 'Hinduism' is vastly oversimplified and represents Stietencron's attempt to reconstruct what might have happened rather than being based on examination of the relevant texts. A more detailed, but still inadequate, account of the same process is given by Stietencron in two other articles (Stietencron 1988 and 1995), discussed below p.157. John Marshall, in India from 1668 to 1677 knew that 'the name Hindoo' was a primarily geographical, not religious, concept (Marshall 1927: 182) and Stietencron acknowledges that 'the correct derivation (from the river) was current in Europe before 1768' (Stietencron 1997: 50). As will be shown below, accounts of Hinduism by the more scholarly of the early European writers were at least as sophisticated as the earlier Persian accounts with respect to distinguishing groups within Hinduism. The same may not have been true for travellers' tales, but it is hardly appropriate to compare these with the works of the outstanding Persian scholars Stietencron mentions (Abū-l Qāsim, al-Masūdī, al-Idrīsī and Shahrastānī). Lorenzen also notes that Stietencron '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 native Indians.' Lorenzen 1999: 635.

<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that such an understanding of religion could not have developed independently of Western influence, as Michael Pye has shown in his discussion of the eighteenth-century Japanese thinker Tominaga Nakamoto (Pye 1992: 27–28). And indeed there is evidence of a reified understanding of religion in India in some circumstances. See O'Connell 1973, Wagle 1997, Lorenzen 1999, Sharma 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Although he does write that 'the term religion ... can only be applied to *corporately shared coherent systems* of world explanation and values.' (Stietencron 1997: 45, original emphasis).



Hinduism fails to be a religion for Stietenron because: 'There is hardly a single important teaching in "Hinduism" which can be shown to be valid for all Hindus, much less a comprehensive set of teachings.'<sup>13</sup> Here Stietenron perpetuates the idea, which he attributes to Christians, that doctrinal uniformity is the *sine qua non* of a religion: because Hinduism does not insist on doctrinal uniformity, it is not a religion. If this is what Stietenron means by saying that Hinduism 'never existed as a "religion" (in the Western sense)', then what his claim amounts to is that Hinduism is not, or is not like, Christianity. This much is not to be contested.<sup>14</sup> It does not follow that because Hinduism is not like Christianity, it is not a religion, unless religion be defined on an explicitly Christian model. Stietenron in fact comes close to this as an ostensive definition of religion when he argues that 'If we accept Judaism, Christianity and Islam as "religion" ... we cannot avoid concluding that there are a number of different "religions" existing side by side within "Hinduism".'<sup>15</sup> He therefore proposes that we should describe Vedic religion, Advaita Vedānta, Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Śāktism (among others) as independent religions within the socio-cultural unit called Hinduism.<sup>16</sup> He argues that what we call 'Hinduism' 'embraces differences at least as explicitly fundamental as those between Judaism, Christianity and Islam' and that therefore 'we cannot avoid concluding that there are a number of different "religions" existing side by side within "Hinduism".'<sup>17</sup> Once again, the reasons for thinking of Advaita Vedānta, Vaiṣṇavism or Śaivism as independent religions are because they resemble Christianity:

each of these religions possesses its own set of revealed holy scriptures recognized by all its members, each worships the same god as the highest deity, (or reverts to an impersonal Absolute as the highest principle, or recognizes a particular pantheon). Each of the literate Hindu religions has its own clearly identifiable and often immensely extensive theological literature, each knows its great saints, its major reformers, and the founders of sects.<sup>18</sup>

Stietenron admits 'No doubt, some of the Hindu religions are closely related to one another' but insists that, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, 'they are different religions'. That which establishes difference in apparently similar forms of religion is 'the authoritative religious tradition received and perpetuated by a wider community ... Difference between

<sup>13</sup> Stietenron 1997: 36.

<sup>14</sup> Although it is also arguable that, despite some claims to the contrary, historically Christianity itself has not been characterized by doctrinal uniformity.

<sup>15</sup> Stietenron 1997: 41.

<sup>16</sup> An alternative view of these traditions as parts of a polycentric Hinduism has been advanced by Julius Lipner (Lipner 1994 and 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Stietenron 1997: 40–41.

<sup>18</sup> Stietenron 1997: 44.

religions is, therefore, a result of decisive variance in the authoritative traditions or belief systems.<sup>19</sup> Again, we may see here the influence of a Protestant Christian insistence on belief as the final divider of religious communities.

Stietencron's proposal raises three questions of identity and authority: Who constitutes the community which receives and perpetuates authoritative religious tradition? Who decides when variance becomes 'decisive'? Who arbitrates what is and what is not 'authoritative tradition'? The difficulty in answering these questions reveals the arbitrary nature of Stietencron's willingness to describe Vaiṣṇavism, but not Hinduism, as a religion. All Stietencron is able to say is that 'A certain margin of tolerance usually allows for sectarian differentiation in doctrine and practice. Yet there are limits, unseen thresholds. Overstepping them leads to segregation or expulsion and, if there are enough followers, to forming a new religious unit.'<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that it is never appropriate to consider Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Śāktism as separate religions, merely that it is not the case that they, in contrast to Hinduism, 'really' are separate religions. In another article in which he argues for conceiving the several forms of Hinduism as independent religions, Stietencron states that 'None of these Hindu religions – except perhaps for monastic Advaita Vedānta – developed an all-India institutional body invested with the power to pass binding judgments on the correct exegesis of sacred scriptures. Diverging interpretations of religious tradition could not be effectively banned. Authority was never vested in a central organization comparable to the Roman church.'<sup>21</sup> Such a body would presumably be able to rule on what constitutes 'authoritative religious tradition', and what 'decisive variance'. Again, however, Hinduism appears not to be a religion because it lacks something definitive of certain forms of Christianity.

*'Religion' as explicitly modelled upon Christianity*

The claim that Hinduism is not a religion has been argued most vehemently and at greatest length by S. N. Balagangadhara.<sup>22</sup> For Balagangadhara, the 'Hinduism' discussed by European scholars is 'an imaginary entity',<sup>23</sup> a creation of European scholars, as are the other world religions supposed to have emerged from India:

<sup>19</sup> Stietencron 1997: 41–42.

<sup>20</sup> Stietencron 1997: 42.

<sup>21</sup> Stietencron 1995: 71.

<sup>22</sup> See Balagangadhara 1994.

<sup>23</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 116, 298.



The creation of Hinduism antedates that of Buddhism. By this, I do not imply that Hinduism existed in India before Buddhism came into being – this claim, after all, is a standard text-book trivium – but that the Europeans created Buddhism after they had created Hinduism.<sup>24</sup>

Balagangadhara gives several independent arguments and several versions of his thesis. The strongest thesis is that not only is Hinduism not a religion, but that it is impossible that Hinduism could be a religion: 'no matter what the facts are, there could simply be no 'religion' in India'.<sup>25</sup> His argument for this claim depends on his definition of a religion as 'an explanatorily intelligible account of the Cosmos and itself' and he concludes that 'Indian traditions could not possibly be religions because the issue of the origin of the world cannot properly be raised there.'<sup>26</sup> His argument for this strong version of his thesis will be considered briefly below, however, in his other arguments for a weaker version of his thesis, Balagangadhara makes explicit what I have argued is implicit in several other authors who argue that Hinduism is not a religion, and it is therefore this part of his work that will be discussed first.

Balagangadhara expresses the problem thus: 'Consider just what is being asked of us. The Hindus, the American-Indians, and the Greeks have (had) a set of traditions that lack the following: (i) creeds, (ii) beliefs in God; (iii) scriptures; (iv) churches. Despite this, these traditions are not only 'religions', but are also distinguishable from each other as religious traditions.'<sup>27</sup> He argues, however, that precisely these properties are 'what makes Judaism, Christianity and Islam into religions' for if 'we bracket away creeds, beliefs in God and prophets, existence of scriptures and churches from Judaism, Christianity and Islam ... we could not even tell the difference between these traditions, let alone distinguish them from Hinduism or Greek religion or whatever else. We would get an amorphous whole that could not even be called a religion.'<sup>28</sup> Balagangadhara sums up his argument in the following dilemma

Some set of properties are absolutely necessary for some traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) to be religions. But if one accepts this, the threat is that other cultures appear not to have religions at all. For some reason or another, other cultures are said to have religions too. However, the conditions under which other cultures are to have religion are precisely those that make it impossible for the Semitic religions to be religions. That is to say, *if the Semitic religions are what religions are* other cultures do not have religions. If other cultures have religions,

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<sup>24</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 138.

<sup>25</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 394.

<sup>26</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 384, 398.

<sup>27</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 22–3.

<sup>28</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 23–24.

then the Semitic religions are not religions. The inconsistency lies in insisting that both statements are true.<sup>29</sup>

The crucial premise in this argument is the assumption that 'the Semitic religions are what religions are'; that is, rather than merely being examples of religion, they are '*exemplary instances, i. e. prototypical examples* of the category religion'.<sup>30</sup>

Balagangadhara justifies his choice of these religions as exemplary instances by arguing that when 'investigating that which is designated by the term "religion"'<sup>31</sup> we ought to start with cultures and languages where the term already exists because 'to pick out entities as prototypical instances of the term from other cultures and languages where the term "religion" itself does not exist is to take an epistemic decision. That is, one already assumes beforehand that objects from other cultures instantiate the term as well. Such a decision is not justifiable at this stage' i. e. at the start of an investigation into that to which the term "religion" refers.<sup>32</sup> Although the modern concept of religion first gained wide currency in the West, as argued above it emerged against the background of a growing detachment from Christianity rather than as a part of Christianity's uncontested self-description.<sup>33</sup> This important gloss is missing in Balagangadhara's argument. The academic study of the religions is not, in the words of Vivek Dhareshwar (discussing Balagangadhara), 'condemned to be Christian'.<sup>34</sup>

Balagangadhara concedes that applying this argument to Judaism and Islam may generate problems and hence limits his claim of prototypicality to Christianity: 'Whether Judaism and Islam are religions or not, at the least, our term picks out Christianity as one. When we use the category "religion", we minimally refer to Christianity.'<sup>35</sup> If one denies this, and argues that 'Christianity is not an exemplary instance of "religion", then we have no other examples of religion'.<sup>36</sup> Balagangadhara's argument, then, has the following form:

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<sup>29</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 24–5, emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 301, original emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 304.

<sup>32</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 305.

<sup>33</sup> Balagangadhara's second reason for choosing the Semitic religions as prototypical instances of religion is that "Each of the three traditions has described itself as a religion." (305). As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has shown, each has also denied the appropriateness of being so described.

<sup>34</sup> Dhareshwar 1996: 130. In the same volume both Philip Almond (Almond 1996: 140) and David Loy (Loy 1996: 151–152) note that Balagangadhara emphasizes too much the formative influence of Christianity on modern European thought.

<sup>35</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 305.

<sup>36</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 307.



- First premise: Christianity is prototypically what religion is.
- Second premise: Hinduism does not share all (or perhaps any) of the properties of Christianity.
- Conclusion: Hinduism is not a religion

The first premise, as Balagangadhara expresses it, is problematic, or at least ambiguous. However, the argument is only valid if he means something like the set of properties of Christianity is identical with the set of properties of (a) religion. I have argued that this argument is implicit in those authors who argue that Hinduism is not a religion because it lacks a founder, a single authoritative text or some other specified characteristic. The concept of religion invoked in these arguments is plainly too narrow, and too much influenced by Christianity. If such a concept has not already been abandoned by the academic study of religions (and reasons can be given for thinking that the process of doing so has started, even if it is not complete) then it certainly ought to be.<sup>37</sup>

Balagangadhara declares himself *tempted* to say that 'because some properties characteristic of Christianity are absent from traditions elsewhere (like, say, in "Hinduism" or "Buddhism"), the latter cannot possibly be religions.'<sup>38</sup> This position is justified, he writes 'only if one is able to show that the properties of Christianity which one has identified are also the properties of religion.' His first premise must be making a claim like this in order for his argument to be valid. But the section of his book in which this statement appears is entitled '8.3 "Thou shalt resist temptation ..."' and Balagangadhara refrains from saying that the sort of characteristics he has been discussing (creeds, beliefs, scriptures, churches) are the relevant properties of Christianity, i. e. those that make it a religion and the lack of which make Hinduism something other than a religion. He states: 'I am not defining explicitly what the concept "religion" means; I am simply identifying an example, a prototypical example of the category religion'.<sup>39</sup> He has not yet answered the question 'What *makes* Christianity a religion?'.<sup>40</sup> His answer, when it comes, is that 'religion is an explanatorily intelligible account of both the Cosmos

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<sup>37</sup> E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley detect a theological bias in 'The insistence in the study of religion that texts and traditions are critical features of *full-fledged* religions' which, they argue, 'has always served as a strategy for insulating the "great" world religions generally and Christianity in particular from the sort of analyses otherwise reserved for "primitives" – which is to say, all the rest of humanity.' Lawson and McCauley 1990: 6.

<sup>38</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 309.

<sup>39</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 307.

<sup>40</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 317.

and itself'.<sup>41</sup> Because the 'configuration of learning' in Asian cultures is performative, rather than theoretical, such accounts are 'absent from the cultures of Asia'<sup>42</sup> and hence Asia has ritual (performative) but not religious traditions. The argument is formally valid, but we have as little reason to accept Balagangadhara's restriction of religion to explanatorily intelligible accounts of the cosmos (of a type Hinduism allegedly cannot give) as we would to accept a definition of religion as necessarily involving creeds, beliefs, scriptures and churches. While Balagangadhara's definition is explicitly modelled upon Christianity, Philip Almond argues that even what Balagangadhara takes as 'as *essentially* or *prototypically* Christian' – and hence prototypically religious – is in fact 'only one particular manifestation of [Christianity], namely and crudely put, an Enlightenment deistic Christianity'<sup>43</sup> and thus that for most of its history Europe too would have lacked religions. In Balagangadhara's work we see clearly the form of the argument that I have suggested unwarrantedly underlies the claims of other authors that Hinduism is not a religion. Equally clearly we can see that this argument depends on a tendentious concept of religion. Balagangadhara himself acknowledges that 'there is a quasi-universal consensus that the "Western" concept of religion is inadequate'<sup>44</sup> but he fails to see that this in itself is not a reason for thinking that Hinduism is not a religion but rather a reason to work out a better concept of religion.

### *Religion, ritual and the real*

While Frits Staal follows Balagangadhara in emphasizing the importance of ritual in Asian religion and in arguing that 'the idea of religion is essentially a Western concept, inspired by the three monotheistic religions of the West ... not applicable to the phenomena we find in and around the Himalayas',<sup>45</sup> unlike Balagangadhara, he does consider attempts to formulate wider conceptions of religion. Nevertheless in his argument he does at times slip back into a position formally similar to that of Balagangadhara and the other authors discussed above. More significantly he also depends upon an epistemological ideal which is arguably still more profoundly influenced by Protestant Christian thought, and which, it will be argued, is shared by Fitzgerald.

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<sup>41</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 384. His argument for this definition is given in pages 331–334.

<sup>42</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 314.

<sup>43</sup> Almond 1996: 144.

<sup>44</sup> Balagangadhara 1994: 313.

<sup>45</sup> Staal 1982: 39.



Discussing what he calls “‘religion’ in its fullest sense’, Staal writes: ‘Doctrines and beliefs are regarded as religious when they involve belief in a god or gods, in paradise and hell, salvation, and similar religious concepts that are characteristic of the three monotheistic religions of the West.’<sup>46</sup> He makes the point that ‘most of the other ‘religions’ of mankind are deficient in one or another respect when studied within this perspective:

The main reason, however, that Asian traditions do not fit *the Western pattern of religion* is that their emphasis is not on doctrines or beliefs, but on ritual, mysticism or both. In so far as doctrines or beliefs are mentioned at all, they are not primary but added: they are of the nature of secondary interpretations, often rationalizations and generally after-thoughts.<sup>47</sup>

There are certainly counter-examples to Staal’s characterization of Asian traditions. It would be difficult, for example, to describe Rāmānuja’s project as a secondary interpretation, a rationalization or an after-thought.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless Staal asserts that

Hinduism does not merely fail to be a religion; it is not even a meaningful unit of discourse. There is no way to abstract a meaningful unitary notion of Hinduism from the Indian phenomena, unless it is done by exclusion, following the well-worn formula: a Hindu is an Indian who is *not* a Jaina, Buddhist, Parsi, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Animist ... (the list is indefinite). When faced with such data, should we abandon the concept of religion altogether? Basically, there are two possible procedures. We can either start with a rather narrow concept of ‘religion’, based upon the three Western monotheisms, and see to what extent such a concept of religion can be used in Asia. Or else we can try to formulate a wider and more flexible concept, and see just where that leads us.<sup>49</sup>

Staal suggests that the concept of religion to be used in the first procedure ‘would involve such notions as a belief in God, a holy book, and (at least in two cases out of these three) a historic founder.’<sup>50</sup> Because the Asian traditions lack some of these characteristics (Buddhism and Confucianism have ‘a founder, but neither a belief in God nor a holy book’, Taoism a founder and a holy book but no belief in God) Staal concludes that ‘none of the so-called religions of Asia is a religion in this sense ... any notion of religion that is based upon characteristics of the three Western monotheistic religions is inapplicable in Asia.’<sup>51</sup> Conspicuous by its absence in

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<sup>46</sup> Staal 1989: 389. Elsewhere he acknowledges that far from being the ‘its fullest sense’ a concept of religion based upon the three Western monotheisms would be ‘a rather narrow concept of religion’. 1989: 397.

<sup>47</sup> Staal 1989: 389–390, emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> See Lipner 1986.

<sup>49</sup> Staal 1989: 397.

<sup>50</sup> Staal 1989: 398.

<sup>51</sup> Staal 1989: 398.

this analysis is any reference to Sikhism, which we might want say has all three characteristics. Nevertheless, we can admit Staal's point to a degree, which amounts, once again, to the claim that Asian religions are, in some respects, not like the western monotheisms.

Staal's argument relies on equating two subtly different concepts which ought to be distinguished from each other. The first is 'religion in the Western sense' (415, 416), which may be taken to mean what religion is, or what forms it has taken, in the West. Thus, 'religion in the Western sense' may be taken to mean that form of monotheistic belief and practice represented by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The second is 'the Western concept of religion' (419) or 'Western notions of religion' (393) which refers, or ought to refer, to that concept of religion which developed in the West from about the sixteenth century. This concept is not identical to the self-perception of the western monotheisms. It did emerge in the modern west, but it emerged out of criticism of religion, especially of Christianity. Moreover, the concept has continued to develop, and is no longer, or at least ought no longer to be, dominated by a Protestant Christian emphasis on doctrine or belief.<sup>52</sup> Thus the modern academic concept of 'religion', although Western in origin and perhaps also in use, is not identical to the form(s) that religion has taken in the West. The 'Western concept of religion' no longer means only 'religions in the Western sense', still less 'Western religions'. It is clear that Asian religions are in significant respects not 'religions in the Western sense' i. e. not monotheistic traditions which place a certain kind of emphasis on doctrinal conformity. Staal has *not* shown, however, 'the inapplicability of Western notions of religion to the traditions of Asia',<sup>53</sup> i. e. that Asian traditions cannot be understood through a concept of religion which is not modelled on any specific tradition and no longer takes belief to be the all-important feature of religion.

Staal concludes that 'the imposition of the Western concept of religion on the rest of the world illustrates how Western imperialism continues to thrive in the realms of thought'.<sup>54</sup> Ironically, in insisting that Asian traditions are not religions (because they are not religions of the same sort as Christianity and Islam, that is, they are not religions 'in the Western sense'), it is Staal who remains enthralled by *a* Western concept of

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<sup>52</sup> David Chidester lists those who have argued for 'an open, multiple, or polythetic definition of religion.' (Chidester 1996: 259). Brian K. Smith has attempted a definition which takes seriously elements of religion which Asian religions have found to be important. He proposes a definition which does not depend on transcendent referents. Religion, he argues, 'is defined by its rules of discourse, rules that always (by definition) involve the necessary return to an authoritative source or canon to legitimize all present and past creations, perpetuations, and transformations of that tradition.' (Smith 1987: 53).

<sup>53</sup> Staal 1989: 393.

<sup>54</sup> Staal 1989: 419.



religion. Insofar as his argument relies on the slippage between 'religion in the Western sense' and 'the Western concept of religion' it is formally similar to that of Stietencron and Balagangadhara. Staal does however acknowledge that this is a 'rather narrow' concept of religion and suggests that we might 'try to formulate a wider and more flexible concept, and see just where that leads us.'<sup>55</sup> As it has been argued here that this is precisely what in fact has happened during two centuries of academic study of the religions, his argument must be examined for he concludes that this does not enable us to rescue 'religion' as a universal term, and that we ought either to abandon religion or to confine its use to the Western monotheisms.

Staal uses what he calls an "extended-Durkheim" concept of religion, which incorporates the categories of doctrine (belief), ritual, mystical experience and meditation (the latter either as a fourth category or as a subcategory of one or two of the others).<sup>56</sup> Of the categories he states that 'rites [or rituals] are primary because they are almost always independent and can be accounted for on their own terms ... Rites become "religious" when they are provided with a religious interpretation.'<sup>57</sup> Moreover:

Rituals are not merely remarkably persistent *within* so-called religious traditions, where they are provided with constantly changing interpretations; rituals remain the same even across so-called religious boundaries: they are *invariant under religious transformation*. This is demonstrated by the fact that the same rites occur in Vedic, Hindu and Buddhist forms, not only in India but also in China, Japan, Tibet, and Indonesia.<sup>58</sup>

Staal says little about the other categories noting only that 'like the other so-called religions of Asia, Buddhism is characterized by the fact that ritual (in which all monks engage) is more important than mystical experience (which only a few attain), which is in turn more important than belief or doctrine (a matter confined to philosophers, scholarly monks or reserved for Western converts, anthropologists, and tourists).'<sup>59</sup> Thus, for Staal, 'the trio of ritual, meditation and mystical experience are more fundamental than the category of religion itself', ritual being the most important of these three in the Asian traditions. But because 'rituals remain the same even across so-called religious boundaries' they cannot be used to justify our existing taxonomy of religions. 'Only doctrine or

<sup>55</sup> Staal 1989: 397.

<sup>56</sup> Staal 1989: 401.

<sup>57</sup> Staal 1989: 388.

<sup>58</sup> Staal 1989: 401.

<sup>59</sup> Staal 1989: 400. He leaves aside the question of 'whether meditation constitutes a fourth "fundamental category"' noting only that 'Meditation, at any rate, is not gazing upon nothing (except in the limiting case), but is closely related to ritual and mantras.'

belief may be in a position to constitute a religious category *per se*.<sup>60</sup> This lack of correspondence between rituals and beliefs means that if

we adopt the 'extended-Durkheim' concept of religion, which incorporates the categories of doctrine (belief), ritual, mystical experience and meditation ... we have a concept on our hands that has all the characteristics of pathological, if not monstrous growth, tumorous with category blunders. It is worse than a spider with a submarine, a burning bush, an expectation and a human head.

Even in Buddhism, 'the Asian tradition that is in many respects most religion-like, doctrine plays a subordinate role and mystical experience and rites are basic'.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, says Staal

We must conclude that the concept of religion is not a coherent concept and therefore misleading. It does not hang together like a concept should and should either be abandoned or confined to Western traditions.<sup>62</sup>

Attention to ritual, rather than belief, as a defining feature of religion may well produce a taxonomy of religions different from the one we are familiar with, although Staal does not suggest what such a taxonomy based on ritual might look like. Such a taxonomy may be more useful in understanding the history and function of Asian religion,<sup>63</sup> but would be neither more nor less a natural taxonomy – given in the nature of things – than one based upon belief.

Staal's proposal raises the question of how we are to describe the 'Asian traditions that are generally called religions' (405–6) if we abandon the concept of 'religion' or redefine it to refer specifically to doctrine and confine it to Western traditions. Although at one point he refers to Buddhism as 'a ritual-mystical cult' (406), Staal more often relies on other locutions such as 'so-called religions' or 'traditions'. Thus he speaks of 'the so-called religions of Asia' (398, 400) or 'the so-called religions of mankind' (418). Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism and

<sup>60</sup> Staal 1989: 401.

<sup>61</sup> Staal 1989: 414–15. Staal concedes that 'A phenomenon more like religion in the Western sense appears in the later phases of development of several Asian traditions' (415). By this he means the development of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism and of the Bodhi-sattva ideal in Buddhism. Because these phenomena are more like 'religion in the Western sense', he is prepared also to describe them using 'the Western concept of religion'. Thus Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism 'should perhaps be regarded as the first two indigenous religions of India' for with their appearance 'a Hindu is no longer an Indian concerned about what he must do while thinking anything he likes', but becomes, for the first time, 'a believer in God equipped with faith and a holy book.' (415). Buddhists finally have belief 'not in God but in the Buddha' (416) and Buddhism is therefore closer to being a religion although it still lacks a single authoritative text.

<sup>62</sup> Staal 1989: 415.

<sup>63</sup> Although not in every case. As Staal notes, many of the rituals in which Buddhist monks engage are 'independent of Buddhism' (1989: 401) and therefore would not be significant in defining a useful taxonomy.



Buddhism are all referred to as 'Asian traditions' or 'Indian traditions' (390, 406, 410, 414, 415). Staal also refers to 'so-called religious traditions' (401), the 'Asian traditions that are generally called religions' (405–6), 'what is now called a "religious" tradition' (393) and simply 'religious traditions' (387). The difficulty Staal has in escaping some collective term for the phenomena he wishes to discuss is not insignificant, and will be returned to later. Here the point is that 'Western traditions' and 'non-Western traditions' (415) are discussed together in a way that suggests the only difference between them is that Western traditions are concerned with doctrine and are therefore religious while non-Western traditions are not. They seem nevertheless to be treated by Staal as members of a class, comparable with each other. In practice then, Staal replaces 'religion' with 'tradition', which traditions may be religious or not. A concern with doctrine makes a tradition a religious tradition, a concern with ritual does not.

Staal does not seem to be able to avoid defining religion in relation to doctrine or belief – 'Only doctrine or belief may be in a position to constitute a religious category *per se*.'<sup>64</sup> While this lingering influence of Protestant Christian conceptions of religion has been detected in other authors, the fundamentally religious ideal identified by Jonathan Z. Smith as another legacy of Protestantism<sup>65</sup> also underpins Staal's epistemology at a deeper level. Staal argues that study of Buddhism has proceeded upon the unproven assumption that 'Buddhism is a religion, and that there is therefore a certain unity to the subject.' Because 'the concept of religion is not easily applicable to Buddhism ... [t]hat unity is therefore imposed from the outside and *a priori* ... [f]or scholarship to be adequate, it should not be based upon such assumptions. Only if we abandon them are we in a position to discover whether, and to what extent, such a unity may in fact exist.'<sup>66</sup> The idea of such a position, free of all assumptions, from which we can discover whether or not Buddhism is a unified entity is not only, as many Buddhists would surely recognize, illusory but also, as Smith argues, an essentially religious ideal. An indication that Staal thinks such a position is attainable may be gained from the confidence with which he feels able to distinguish 'genuine manifestations' of Buddhism, from other 'representations of Buddhism by Asian Buddhists'.<sup>67</sup> The assumption that ritual is a more fundamental category than religion may lead to the emergence of concepts different from (although comparable to) those we presently use to denote different religions. Nevertheless the impossibility of occupying a position free of

<sup>64</sup> Staal 1989: 401.

<sup>65</sup> See above, p.29.

<sup>66</sup> Staal 1989: 410.

<sup>67</sup> Staal 1989: 402.

all assumptions means that whatever unity such concepts might represent would no more have a definite ontological status than that represented by the terms with which we denote the collections of beliefs and practices which we call religions. The 'unity' of Buddhism does not exist, except in, and for the purposes of, analysis, whether that analysis chooses religion – no longer defined simply as the possession of a god, founder, and text – or ritual as its key.

Staal states that '[t]he unities presumed to cover early and late Buddhism, or Indian, or Chinese, and other forms of Buddhism, are functions of the same unproven assumption'<sup>68</sup> that Buddhism is a religion and thus a unity. Fitzgerald makes a similar point with respect to Ambedkar Buddhists in Maharashtra, Theravāda Buddhists in other parts of South Asia and Japanese Buddhists, arguing that each inhabit 'a significantly different semantic universe' and that the idea that 'these are three different manifestations of one essence' or that 'Buddhism is an entity with an essence that can be described and listed with other such entities, the Religions or the world religions, can be described as an essentialist fallacy'. While 'historical and philosophical links between these different culturally situated institutions' exist

In the Maharashtrian context, it is extremely difficult to separate out some putative Buddhism from the Buddhist (formerly Mahar) caste and thus from the complex ideology of caste institutions. In the Japanese context, it is difficult to conceive of 'Buddhism' as distinct from other indigenous cultural institutions, or from a dominant system of Japanese values in particular.<sup>69</sup>

Fitzgerald makes the same claim in respect of Hinduism. The 'analytical centre of gravity of Hinduism' is fundamentally a conception of ritual order or hierarchy, 'and there is a strong case for claiming that it is coterminous with traditional Indian culture and with the caste system as a peculiarly Indian phenomenon'.<sup>70</sup> Even the more universalistic sectarian Hindu movements remain 'rooted' in this 'ideologically defined context' such that Fitzgerald asks in what sense ISKCON at Bhaktivedanta Manor in southern England is the same religion as ISKCON in California or Bengal: 'It seems to be the same question essentially as "What is Christianity, or any other example of 'a religion', abstracted from a particular sociological context? ... That these are variants of the same reality is a theological claim, made by sociologically specific groups of people. This claim is part of the object of non-theological observation; it should not be one of its basic assumptions'.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Staal 1989: 410.

<sup>69</sup> Fitzgerald 2000a: 26–27.

<sup>70</sup> Fitzgerald 1990: 102.

<sup>71</sup> Fitzgerald 1990: 115.



Fitzgerald suggests that the methodological priority ought then to be the study of 'one or other or all of these institutions in their actual context'<sup>72</sup>:

we first have to understand the totality within which such institutions are established. We might then hazard a series of abstractions for comparative purposes, without making the mistake of attributing these abstractions and the meaning we give to them to anybody but ourselves.<sup>73</sup>

Fitzgerald argues that scholars whose study of Hinduism is guided by the 'essentially theological concept' of a religion as an entity transcending particular social groups, 'cut across the data in the wrong places' with the result that '[v]irtually everything that sociology has revealed about Hinduism is ignored'<sup>74</sup>.

Fitzgerald reports that in his own study of Ambedkar Buddhism he 'found the concept of religion unhelpful and instead ... analyzed it in terms of the concepts ritual, politics and soteriology'.<sup>75</sup> Ritual is here defined by Fitzgerald to be essentially the same 'concept of hierarchical order' he identifies elsewhere as the 'analytical centre of gravity' of Hinduism. While elements of the practice of this ritual order, for example practising untouchability against other untouchable castes or the worship of the Buddha and Ambedkar as though they were Hindu gods, are incompatible with Ambedkar's teaching they are nevertheless 'to some variable degree part of the actual situation and identity of Buddhists'.<sup>76</sup> Ambedkar Buddhists are more clearly demarcated from others who share their ritual practices by their politics, which departs from the traditional legitimation of power mediated by ritual status, and by their soteriology, which though often reinterpreted as 'liberation from inequality and exploitation' has 'an important spiritual or transcendental element as well ... pursued through reading Buddhist texts, practicing meditation, and going on retreats'.<sup>77</sup> These three concepts allow greater analytical clarity, Fitzgerald argues, than religion, which covers and therefore obscures the relations between ritual, politics and soteriology. Religion generates a lack of clarity because it 'does not effectively demarcate any *nonreligious* institutions'.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Fitzgerald 2000a: 27.

<sup>73</sup> Fitzgerald 1990: 108.

<sup>74</sup> Fitzgerald 1990: 111; 2000a: 136.

<sup>75</sup> Fitzgerald 2000a: 121.

<sup>76</sup> Fitzgerald 2000a: 130.

<sup>77</sup> Fitzgerald 2000b: 5.

<sup>78</sup> Fitzgerald 2000b: 1; cf Fitzgerald 2000a: 134–135. Fitzgerald adds 'nor does it clarify the sense in which Buddhists, Christians, Jains, Muslims, or Sikhs constitute separate minorities in India' and explains that because religion is used to cover ritual principles centered on caste and hierarchy which are shared by non-Hindu groups in India it conceals the distinctiveness which analysis of them as different soteriologies would reveal.

The issue is whether or not "religion" does genuinely pick out a distinctive set of institutions that demarcate it from other institutions or whether we need concepts that can pick out finer distinctions that pervade many or most institutions, such as the ritual, the soteriological, and the political.<sup>79</sup>

So much, states Fitzgerald, 'can be, and is, called religion in India that the term picks out nothing distinctive'.<sup>80</sup> For the term to be a useful analytical category it must be possible to state 'what counts as religion and what counts as non-religion'.<sup>81</sup> However, as Fitzgerald states elsewhere, when 'we talk about a religion ... we are not talking about some real type of object'<sup>82</sup> or essence but are rather making an abstraction, usually for the purposes of comparison. He is wrong to suggest that such an abstraction is only useful if it is infallibly able to demarcate the religious from the non-religious.<sup>83</sup> It would only be possible for the concept to allow such precise demarcation, to identify what is religion and what non-religion, if religion were indeed a real object, an essence whose manifestations could be identified.

The claim that religion is such an essence, and that the boundaries between the religious and the non-religious can be drawn with such precision is, as Fitzgerald suggests, a religious or theological claim.<sup>84</sup> In discussing precisely the same issue of caste observances among different groups in India, Roberto Nobili made the claim – crucial for his theological argument – that 'there is a norm by which we can distinguish between social actions and the purely religious'.<sup>85</sup> Such a claim has no place in a non-theological study of religion.<sup>86</sup> Again, as Fitzgerald states when 'we talk about a religion ... we are not talking about some real type of object that is only contingently associated with any empirical social group, and which can be studied in its own right' but are rather 'using an analytical

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<sup>79</sup> Fitzgerald 2000a: 149.

<sup>80</sup> Fitzgerald 2000a: 149.

<sup>81</sup> Fitzgerald 2000a: 153.

<sup>82</sup> Fitzgerald 1990: 109.

<sup>83</sup> Neither can the ritual, political or soteriological always be precisely demarcated from other categories of analysis. Fitzgerald notes that in Maharashtra 'some forms of exchange today are descended from the old balutedari system, which was very much embedded in ritual status' (Fitzgerald 2000a: 122), thus ritual is to some degree confounded with economics. Likewise some elements of what Fitzgerald categorizes as soteriology can surely also be analysed as either ritual or politics.

<sup>84</sup> Fitzgerald argues that this sense of religion as a substantial entity independent of any particular social group is in fact a theological conception, allied to the idea of God, 'who transcends all particular social groups and who offers salvation to all individuals everywhere'. Fitzgerald 1990: 109.

<sup>85</sup> Nobili 1971: 155. See below, p. 60f.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. McCutcheon's contention that 'the category of religion is a conceptual tool and ought not to be confused with an ontological category actually existing in reality' McCutcheon 1997: viii.



category'. He goes on, however, to state that this analytical category 'corresponds to what some religious ideologies proclaim themselves to be'.<sup>87</sup> This is only true if we continue to take a religion to be some kind of substantial entity which exists as a real object somehow transcending particular societies. If instead religion is regarded as *one* of a series of abstractions we might hazard for the purpose of comparison of different societies (without, as Fitzgerald states, making the mistake of attributing the abstraction and the meaning given to it to anyone else), there is no reason to regard 'religion' as a theological category with no place in an avowedly non-theological discipline, *or* to expect the category to be able infallibly to discriminate between religious and non-religious phenomena. To think that because the concept of religion emerged from theological claims about the unity of a religion (or the object of that religion) the concept remains theological is to commit the genetic fallacy. Our usage of it clearly no longer corresponds to what religious ideologies proclaim themselves to be. Fitzgerald argues that if we take the examples of Christianity in Salt Lake City and in Tamil Nadu, the claim 'that these are variants of the same reality is a theological claim, made by sociologically specific groups of people. This claim is part of the object of non-theological observation; it should not be one of its basic assumptions.'<sup>88</sup> It is at least as likely that it would be *denied* on theological grounds, that two versions of Christianity (let alone, say, Christianity and Hinduism in Tamil Nadu) were variants of the same reality, where non-theological scholars of religion would want to assert that these were variants of the same reality, not in the sense of being both manifestations of a single essence, but in the sense that both could be understood better by being considered within a single analytical category. That category *need* not be 'religion' but there is no reason why it should not be.

*'Hinduism' and 'what has come to be called Hinduism'*

Donald S. Lopez suggests 'one of the ways that scholars of Hinduism may be distinguished from experts on other religions at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion is by their overdeveloped pectoral muscles, grown large from tracing quotation marks in the air whenever they have mentioned "Hinduism" over the past ten years.'<sup>89</sup> The gesture has several oral analogues, usually of the form 'what has come to be called Hinduism', or 'what Western scholars have designated by the term Hinduism'. What is signified with such gestures and tics is

<sup>87</sup> Fitzgerald 1990: 109.

<sup>88</sup> Fitzgerald 1990: 115.

<sup>89</sup> Lopez 2000: 832.

nevertheless usually identical with what the term Hinduism has been taken to signify from its earliest use.<sup>90</sup> H. H. Wilson, in an essay first published in 1828, notes that '[t]he 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.'<sup>91</sup> Having drawn attention to the constructed nature of the term, such physical and verbal gestures serve to dissociate the speaker from the processes of selection by which the term's meaning is constituted, while allowing her or him to retain the analytical function for which the term was coined. This procedure threatens to reverse recent advances in our understanding of the proper status of key concepts in the academic study of religion, not only of Hinduism but of religion itself. Dissociating oneself from the inevitable process of selection which underlies our use of this or any other general term (for example, by referring to 'what has come to be called Hinduism') without specifying an alternative basis for selection merely perpetuates the confusion between conceptual and ontological categories.

It is clear that whatever conception of Hinduism (or any other religion) emerges from such a process of selection is the result of decisions that are inevitably influenced by the purposes and pre-conceptions of the analyst. It is not a representation of what Hinduism 'really' is. Nor need it aspire to be a mirror image of Hindu self-perception, not least because any such self-perception (and these would be legion, not just in the case of Hinduism) would be equally dependent on a specific set of purposes and pre-conceptions. The representation of Indian religions which emerged in the works of European writers between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries was the result of just such a decision-making process. The usefulness of such representations will depend upon the extent to which we share their purposes.

What the scholarly vocabulary of religion provides is one out of a number of possible ways of cutting across the available data. Provided we remain self-conscious about our use of such a vocabulary, and refrain from postulating entities where we have only abstractions and representations, there is no reason why such a vocabulary should not continue to be used. This is not to say that this is the only, or even the best, way of making a selection of data. However, as Chidester – having reviewed the history of their production and reproduction as contested terms – writes, 'we might happily abandon *religion* and *religions* as terms of analysis if we were not, as a result of that very history, stuck with them. They

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. Lorenzen's comment 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' (Lorenzen 1999: 631).

<sup>91</sup> Wilson 1846: 1.



adhere to our attempts to think about identity and difference in the world.<sup>92</sup> The recovery of that history in the work of several writers, means that these terms can no longer be used innocently. Precisely because it ought now to be impossible to use concepts such as 'religion' and 'Hinduism' without being aware that in doing so one is applying a theoretical framework to the world, the use of such terms is less likely to result in the unconscious imposition of such a framework than the use of some new coinage, whose theory-laden status may initially be obscured by its novelty. Catherine Bell writes 'That we construct "religion" and "science" [and, one might add, "Hinduism"] is not the main problem; that we forget we have constructed them in our own image – that is a problem.'<sup>93</sup> If so, then not only is there no reason to abandon the use of 'religion', but there is good reason to retain it.

There is therefore no final answer to the question: Is Hinduism a religion or not? 'Hinduism' has no ontological status, it is not an entity. It is rather a tool of analysis. The question ought therefore to be: How far is it profitable to analyse Hinduism as a religion? There can be no doubt that at times Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Śāktism, or ritual, politics and soteriology will be more profitable concepts for analysis. But we should never forget that these also are abstractions, and that they are first of all *our* abstractions (even if they are also shared by Hindus). They may, or may not, pre-exist in the consciousness of those studied, or be taken up later (as was the case with some neo-Hindu groups). The intuitive appropriateness of these abstractions is the result of our pre-conception of religion, which despite its emergence in the modern West ought no longer to be dominated by the idea of Christianity as *the* paradigm of what a religion is. That the modern academic concept of religion emerged in the West does not by itself mean that the concept is inapplicable in other cultures, any more than it means that religion did not exist in the West prior to the articulation of the modern sense of religion.<sup>94</sup>

The idea that some abstractions 'distort' the reality of Hindu religious belief and practice and others do not is an illusion. No view of Hinduism that is not 'distorted' by any concepts whatsoever is available to us. Any abstractions will to some extent colour our view of Hinduism, all will have their specific limitations and allow us to see different truths about Hinduism. Although a primary thesis of Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* was that 'Islam *has* been fundamentally misrepresented in the West' he says that

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<sup>92</sup> Chidester 1996: 259.

<sup>93</sup> Bell 1996: 188.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Ninian Smart's comment on the term 'gamesmanship' cited below, p.165.

the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they *are* representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth', which is itself a representation.<sup>95</sup>

Commenting upon this Brian K. Smith has written: 'This forceful enunciation of the postmodernist predicament would seem to close the door definitively on any subsequent re-envisioning of "the Orient", "India", or "Hinduism" that poses as being "truer" or "more accurate" than prior ones. It would also seem to problematize the grounds on which criticism of other constructions, past or present, can proceed.' He suggests that one 'possible form of evaluation is whether one's study is sufficiently nuanced to allow for the representational capabilities of the others whom one, inevitably, is in the process of representing.'<sup>96</sup> In the remaining chapters it will be argued that several influential early European works on Hinduism were dependent upon, and reflected the representational capabilities of those who were represented,<sup>97</sup> and hence were appropriately nuanced in the sense that Smith suggests our representations ought to be, and certainly more nuanced than recent critiques of such works have allowed. The taxonomy of Indian religions which emerged from such works is therefore a useful taxonomy, although this does not exclude the possibility of other useful taxonomies.

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<sup>95</sup> Said 1991: 272.

<sup>96</sup> Smith 1996b: 366.

<sup>97</sup> Lorenzen argues that the similarity in early 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 ... 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.' (Lorenzen 1999: 646).