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Axel Michaels: Hinduism

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1. Theoretical Foundations

IS INDIA DIFFERENT?

Introductory books on Hinduism often begin with a caveat: India is much too complex geographically, ethnically, linguistically, and religiously to allow any definitive statements to be made about it. Everything must be taken with a grain of salt. Millions of gods, a thousand castes, hundreds of languages and dialects. As a matter of fact, Hinduism is not a homogeneous religion at all, but is rather a potpourri of religions, doctrines and attitudes toward life, rites and cults, moral and social norms.¹ For every claim, the reader should be aware “that the opposite could, more or less justifiably, be asserted.”² Thus images chosen to represent Hinduism are similar: an impenetrable jungle, an all-absorbent sponge,³ a net ensnaring everything,⁴ an upside-down banyan tree with countless roots growing from the branches to the earth.

In light of such metaphors, many have agreed with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: “I am by no means averse to what is Indian, but I am afraid of it because it draws my power of imagination into formlessness and deformation.” Goethe wrote this on December 15, 1824, in a letter to August Wilhelm Schlegel, one of the founders of German Indology, thus clearly moving away from his original enthusiasm for India expressed in his famous verse: “Would thou include both Heaven and earth in one designation / All that is needed is done, when I Sakontala⁵ name” (translated by Edgar Alfred Bowring).

But it is not that Hinduism lacks form. What it does lack is a form of religion that we have become accustomed to in monotheism: There is neither *one* founder of the religion nor *one* church nor *one* religious leader. Nor is there *one* holy book or *one* doctrine, *one* religious symbol or *one* holy center. As a result, no one binding religious authority could emerge. Nevertheless, what threatened Goethe’s power of imagination is precisely what fascinates many people today. Belief that stones or trees have souls (animism, pantheism) co-

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exists here with the belief in the highest gods. The monotheistic worship of one God is just as possible as the polytheistic or demonic worship of many gods, demons, and spirits. A god-excluding monism exists alongside dualism, materialism, and agnosticism. Religiosity is performed in ritualistic (Brahmanism, Tantrism), devotional (Bhakti), spiritual-mystical (asceticism, Yoga, meditation) and heroic modes. A strict puritanical ritualism encounters wild, inebriated cults and blood sacrifices. There is a commandment not to harm living creatures, the *ahimsā*, but there are also animal sacrifices and traces of human sacrifice. Nothing seems to be generally accepted, not even the doctrine of Karma, of retribution through reincarnation, which, according to Max Weber, constitutes “perhaps the only dogma of Hinduism.” Yet all these forms of religion are practiced quite peacefully alongside one another. One might almost say that religious postmodernism is realized in India: Anything goes.

What makes it possible for India to endure so many contrasts and contradictions and to absorb so many alien elements? Is it tolerance or ignorance? Is there an implicit form of religion and religiosity here whose extensive peaceful toleration of Otherness can serve as a model for the multicultural and multi-religious problems of the present? Is it a worldview whose boundless claim to pervasiveness forms a countermodel to the delimiting rationality of the West? Can we sing a Hindu hymn in “praise of polytheism” against the malaise of monotheism?⁶ Do we find here a fluid, amorphous, soft, possibly “female”⁷ culture, society, or religion, as opposed to a Western, hard, rigid, “male” culture, society, or religion? Is the Indian a *homo hierarchicus* rather than a *homo aequalis*? Is Indian society a holistic rather than an individualistic culture?

If we raise these issues, we have to fear the subsequent question: Do Indians or Hindus really think, feel, and act differently from other people? Leaping over our own cultural shadows requires walking a tightrope between exalting and taking over another culture and religion, to avoid either establishing the West as a generally valid standard or idealizing other religions.

According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, “understanding” means understanding differently. It can be realized only in oneself, not delegated; it is achieved neither through mindless empathy nor through emotionless thought, neither through esoteric subjectivity nor through exoteric objectivity. On the face of it, great differences between India and the West must be acknowledged, which is one reason why Hinduism usually constitutes the paradigmatic *other* religion in comparative studies of religion: where men are not considered equal, where India is hierarchical, where families, clans, and subcastes are valued higher than the individual, where India is ascetic and world-denying, where alongside proof of worth through work, “proof” of worth through idleness has a higher value in some cases. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—these ideals of the French

Revolution and foundations of Western constitutions and human rights—are not the highest values of society in traditional India. India, it seems, really is different.

I would like to develop the following argument to attempt to understand the cause of such serious differences: There are three large groups of religion that still exist and are practiced today, according to the criteria of antiquity, number of followers, and the characteristics of a high culture (e.g., a written literature, a common language, ruling classes, professional priesthood). These are the Abrahamic-monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Buddhism; and the Hindu religions.⁸ It can hardly be doubted that the Abrahamic religions (especially Christianity and Islam) and Buddhism are the most widespread in world history. East and west of India, many religions have declined or been absorbed by Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. But Hinduism has resisted the other world religions even though it was hard pressed by their missionary or universalist claims. How could that happen? Neither power politics nor geographical factors alone can account for this, since even though Buddhism arose in India itself and was emphatically promoted politically by Emperor Aśoka, it ultimately could not succeed in its homeland. Therefore, there must be some internal criteria that constitute the special “force” and form of the Hindu religions.

The Identificatory Habitus

I refer to the cohesive force that holds the Hindu religions together and makes them resistant to foreign influences as “the Identificatory Habitus,” and I ascribe an outstanding value to it because it is linked in special ways to the descent, the origin of the individual, which is crucial to salvation in India. The Identificatory Habitus, descent, and salvation or immortality are thus key notions of my understanding of the Hindu religions. Unlike Max Weber, in his 1921 study of Hinduism, and Louis Dumont (whose *Homo Hierarchicus* of 1966, despite all criticism, is unsurpassed as a comprehensive socioreligious analysis of India), I do not focus primarily on caste, the individual, or ritual purity, but rather on the extended family as a descent group that has been much more resistant to modern influences than the norms of hierarchy and purity.⁹ By descent, I do not mean only biological or natural origin, but also a fictive descent, based on soteriological identifications or substitutions that have to do with salvation. But, like Dumont, I see traditional Hinduism as a countermodel to the Western world, where the individual has priority, where the self is preferred to the not-self, where freedom *in* the world is more important than liberation *from* the world.

Religions are characterized mainly by the paths of salvation they offer, because this is how they answer the first and last questions: *Where do I come from? Where am I going?* Religion is man's answer to the awareness of his mortality: "Not miracle, but death is belief's 'favorite child,'" said Ernst Bloch in 1964 in a conversation with Theodor W. Adorno.¹⁰ The religious concepts of salvation and the afterlife embody the order whose maintenance is the highest duty of the individual—even at the expense of his own interests or even his life. Orders are justified with reference to service to the holy worlds, which are in other places and at other times, and are inhabited by gods, spirits, and the dead, but not by men. The basic problem is: How can man know about those worlds, when everything he can possibly say about them is grounded in the here and now? Religious concepts have a lasting influence on the conduct of life when they deal with these final questions that are also binding on the community.¹¹ In the Hindu religions, the social order is largely determined by identifications indicating the systems of kinship and community life, originally derived from sacrificial rituals and then transferred to lineage.

In the following chapters I try to elaborate what is meant by the Identificatory Habitus before I finally return to a systematic evaluation of the concept. It is one, but not the only characteristically Indian way of thinking, feeling, and communicating, and is thus encountered by everyone who has dealt with India. Three examples which, at first glance, seem totally unrelated, express this attitude: (1) Every Western visitor to Germany is amazed by the Volkswagen factory in Wolfsburg, but the reaction of an Indian was: "I think that car factories are the same all over the world." (2) The Olympic Games challenge many countries to high athletic achievements; yet, in the hundred-year history of the Olympic movement, India has won only fifteen medals, most of them in field hockey, two each in track and field and tennis, and one in wrestling—and this in a nation of almost a billion inhabitants. Neither poverty nor climate nor the lack of political encouragement of sports can explain this phenomenon, because smaller and poorer countries constitute counterexamples. The explanation that physical activity was low-caste in India and thus regarded negatively is hardly convincing either. An Indian friend asked about this indifference to athletic competition once said: "For us, it doesn't count if someone is the best or not!" (3) A Nepali, asked if he was a Hindu or a Buddhist, answered: "yes!" All these answers may be imagined with a typical Indian gesture: the head slightly bent and softly tilted, the eyelids shut, the mouth smiling.

What do these examples have in common? The first quotation is a paraphrase of the Hindi saying, "All goddesses [or mothers] are one" (the title of a book by Stanley Kurtz, which will be discussed later).¹² The second example

may illustrate that, in India, individual achievement is not valued highly. And the third demonstrates that contrasts and tensions are endured more easily in India than can be accommodated by an analytical mind. Behind all that I see the Identificatory Habitus at work: the establishment of an identity by equating it with something else, a habitus inherent in both the philosophical nondualism of the Vedānta and in the method of substitution in sacrificial rituals or asceticism, with which the caste system “works,” which illuminates the multiplicity of the gods as much as it does the monotheism of India. It is still necessary, however, to prove and substantiate that such a way of grasping and shaping the world prevails in India and to account for why it has been and still is so successful.

“Habitus” is a notion introduced by Max Weber and brought to the fore in recent years by the French sociologist and ethnographer Pierre Bourdieu.¹³ It denotes culturally acquired lifestyles and attitudes, habits and predispositions, as well as conscious, deliberate acts or mythological, theological, or philosophical artifacts and mental productions. *Pace* Bourdieu, I assume that the patterns of behavior of the individual in a society are fixed to a large extent. But the habitus of social activity emerging from these is not innate; rather “it ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.”¹⁴ These cognitive, normative, and aesthetic models constitute the “social sense” people use to orient themselves in a culture. Bourdieu even talks of “the automatic certainty of an instinct” and relates the social sense to physical forms of expression, ways of speaking, or manners.¹⁵ With this concept, he gets away both from voluntaristic notions that claim that the individual in a culture exercises free thought and free will, or that thought and action can be considered isolated from the social context, on the one hand; and from a social-science determinism or materialism that maintain that the collective or (economic) reality determines the individual, on the other. In a certain respect, Pierre Bourdieu takes up Durkheim’s notion of “total social facts” (*fait sociaux totales*), which Durkheim describes as “every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint.”¹⁶

Bourdieu’s notion of habitus proves to be productive precisely in the context of the Hindu religions. In them, collective, family-related habits stubbornly resist all intention to change because they are acquired, learned, and shaped in early childhood, and are part of a “cultural memory” with almost independent processes of memory and tradition, as Jan Assmann has explained.¹⁷ Not that cultural habits are unchallenged, but they are such strong norms that even occasional violations do not alter their widespread acceptance.

“Social sense” (Bourdieu) and “cultural sense” (Assmann) are parts of the shaping of cultural identity. They contribute to the sense of community and the “we” feeling of a culture, which is based on a “stock of common values, experiences, expectations, and interpretations,”¹⁸ but also on rituals, myths, proverbs, or gestures. Identity formation implies drawing boundaries, and this often leads to erecting images of the enemy. Religious identity, for example, uses instruments of faith, initiations, or canonization to facilitate this process. Such walls clearly separate “in” and “out” from one another and exclude the alien element. It is indeed characteristic of the Hindu religions that they almost never erect these walls. Even the Hindu initiation, as I try to show, can be substituted. Since Hindu religions presuppose such an identificatory principle of equality, they are “disturbed” by fewer oppositions and dichotomies. They do not need exclusions, as it were, because the Other is always one’s own. Since they assume a basic unity, separation for them can mean harmony: maintaining a tension that is basically not a tension at all. The other god can remain the other god because he is basically one’s own. From this perspective, the phrase often heard in India—“all the same”—signifies not a lack of conceptual acuity or an exaggerated need for leveling, but rather a code of Hindu religious identity and a basic form of the Identificatory Habitus.

The concept of habitus has the advantage of not reducing the “whole,” on the one hand, while preventing an overemphasis on details, the places, the historical uniqueness, on the other.¹⁹ It thus counters a favorite objection against comprehensive analyses of Hinduism, that they cannot encompass the multiplicity of India because they want to know either too much or too little: too much because they see one single thought prevailing everywhere; too little because, for the sake of particular principles, there is much they overlook.

In general, the method of wanting to structure societies according to principles or laws has fallen into disrepute because of Postmodernism. Principles are considered dogmatic, reductionist, and essentialist. They seem to avoid historical change and are immune to cultural influences. They might seem attractive as cultural metaphors, but those are basically naïve masculine fantasies of omnipotence that attempt to comprehend a world that is incomprehensible because something new is always appearing beyond the aptly described horizon. They admit no anomalies, conflicts, or interests. Postmodern critics object that there can be no bird’s-eye view for understanding how people organize their lives and for censuring them for deviating from the norms of the old legal texts, the Dharmaśāstras. Wanting an overall view is Western, Christian, masculine, and imperialistic. It is considered unseemly to try to cram the multiplicity of reality into a prefabricated (spiritual) harmony, a plan of God, or a law of nature, in which the welfare of the collective (the whole, the

system) is valued more highly than the interest of the individual, where the viewpoint of the other is judged higher than one's own. In relation to India, Louis Dumont and Max Weber provide outstanding examples of such holistic analyses of Indian society, in which people (in this case, Hindus) almost always appear as passive instruments of impersonal structures, but not as agents. Yet, according to the new methodological trend, cultures (and thus people) have no principles, no goals, no secret plans, no (inner) core, only an infinite number of variations. Culture is life and life is disorder.

In the case of India,²⁰ there is something to be said for such formulations. Goethe was not the only one who was struck by the formlessness mentioned earlier. Indeed, Postmodernism looks as if it could have been created for India because it makes no attempt to produce *one* order, construct *one* principle, where—perhaps—there is none. (The difference between this and Western religious Postmodernism is that, in India, people are not subject to any “heretical imperative”—from the title of Peter Berger’s book on religion in pluralistic society²¹—and so do not have to “choose” their religion.)

Not everything in India exhibits this diversity; the country also has a superregional normative, obligatory social order for many classes. That is, in countless texts, Brahmans have written and prescribed social rules. Thus, analyses of India quite often maintain that Brahmanic norms are the rules of this society. But it was not hard to see that Indian society did not “function” according to the will of the Brahmans, that these rules have always been followed only by a few. Nevertheless, several analyses fuel the suspicion that the Brahmans had at least formulated the ideals of Indian society. Such rigid, Brahman-centric approaches are no longer tenable. This concerns an elite culture that did indeed influence the sociocultural sense of social groups by setting norms and creating literature that granted identity. But, as shown primarily by ethnological research, this process ideologically also raised one specific group above the others. In other words, the Brahmans placed themselves “above” and thus affected the other classes of the population “below.” At any rate, the claim that a society or culture must be ordered or centered along the axis of a single dominant religion is misleading not only in relation to India: In the West, too, several religions have coexisted at the same time (currently, e.g., Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, new religions, “secular” religions, and all sorts of esoteric forms of religion). But even if Brahmanic ideas have turned out to be limited as general social norms, there is a sense of social behavior specific to India. To determine what this is requires not only textual research but also field research.

Hence, for some years now, attention has shifted from philological cultural studies to the living streets and squares. As Bourdieu puts it, diversity is no longer epiphenomenal, and thus peripheral, but central. The private has be-

come just as important as the public, sensibility as valuable as sense. Experiencing and participating are methodologically as valuable as reading. The individual is no longer merely the insignificant case study or the illustration of general rules: The subjective is considered objective. The messy, the chaotic, the incidental are to be collected. Context is superior to text. The everyday now counts almost more than Sunday, when there is preaching. The house is all at once an important place, and not only the temple, the palace, or the marketplace. The everyday is no longer considered only as the sphere of life of small chores, but as the counterworld of women, farmers, or artisans.

In this book, however, Indian everyday life is understood not as the world of the lower classes, nor will there be an attempt to rehabilitate underprivileged groups or to display the material culture of kitchen or bedroom, farm or workshop.²² Instead, I would like to establish a theoretical connection between textual and normative ideas and less clearly articulated ways of life. Renouncing such a theoretical fusion of the everyday and the counterworld would mean using truisms or—as Ernest Gellner puts it—“unexamined theories.”²³ But getting lost in the odds and ends of daily life, the details of village studies and philology, or in the decentralization of Postmodernism would ultimately result in confusion and helplessness about what it “all” means.

The insistence that no statement should be made about India as a whole, that the area should be circumscribed historically and regionally, is justified because only such an approach can lead to precise arguments based on the critical evaluation of sources. But regional history and the history of daily life are embedded in the theoretical discourse of historiography, which has its own subject matter, but not its own methodology.²⁴ Hence, despite all necessary concentration on the specific, now and then one must go to “the whole” and build a rickety house with as much room as possible. The house exists as uneasily among the ruins of Modernism as in the fragmentary outlines of Postmodernism. Despite such great restrictions, however, those theories that go beyond their limited subject matter are still fascinating. The village studies of the American anthropologist Gloria Goodwin Raheja or the British anthropologist Jonathan Parry, or the ritual studies of the Dutch Indologist Jan Heesterman, to pick three influential examples, are relevant not only for understanding the villages of Pahansu or Kangra, or the special problems of the Vedic sacrifice. In their details, they also encompass “the whole,” and are therefore pathbreaking. In this sense, all (good) religious study is also, *pace* Hayden White, the philosophy of religion, as Hans G. Kippenberg has noted correctly.²⁵

I have suggested understanding the Identificatory Habitus as part of the social meaning in Hinduism. I am aware that this represents a (Western, male)

construct ordering “the whole,” which cannot be found so easily in India. Therefore, it should be clarified: The Identificatory Habitus expresses *my* working understanding of India in two words, it is the common denominator of *my* concerns with various subjects, but it is not a theory that claims a validity independent of those to whom it is addressed. In its explicit subjectivity, the theory of the Identificatory Habitus cannot be refuted, but it can be rejected. In Kantian terms, it is an æsthetic judgment, not a rational judgment and certainly not a moral judgment. My factual statements can be refuted or proved empirically false, as can the argumentative links I establish. Much can be criticized, perhaps everything; but the theory itself can only be rejected. The theory does not attempt to give an objective total picture or portrayal of Hindu culture and society. That is not possible. Yet it does try to promote a way of looking at India that is not simply fragmentary.

It is strange that classical theories are always attacked and yet manage to endure. Everyone knows that Freud and Marx have proven to be fundamentally wrong, but that has not prevented the success of their theories. Many factual errors have also been pointed out in the theories of Max Weber and Louis Dumont.²⁶ Yet they clearly got “something right.” They introduced a way of seeing that had an impact in part because it says more about the West than about India: in Weber about the emergence of capitalism, in Dumont about hierarchy and individuality. Thus, theories in cultural studies are clearly successful when they reflect their material in the mood of the time in a way that need not have anything to do with the subject matter of the study. Max Weber did not need India for his thesis about the emergence of capitalism from the spirit of Protestantism; he had already developed the thesis and “only” supported it with comparative studies. Thus, theories in cultural studies are often remote from reality. They produce a multiple reality, but they do not reproduce it. And yet, cultural theories are “right” only when they are more than projections or wild fantasies. In reflecting on the present and their own culture, they also have to encompass the Other. Whether they succeed in this, however, is not only a matter of a convincing argument, but also of æsthetics.

In a certain respect, the Identificatory Habitus is only old wine in new bottles. Indian society has repeatedly been defined as holistic, encompassing the opposites, inclusive, integrative, producing similarities—by Max Weber, Louis Dumont, Paul Hacker, Jan Heesterman, McKim Marriott, Sudhir Kakar, Brian K. Smith, and others. They have all emphasized another soul, structure, way of thinking, or code with regard to India. They have all tried to grasp the “essence” of India. The danger of constructing and imagining such a personal India—the main criticism of Ronald Inden²⁷—is certainly not to be denied, nor is the danger of seeing this other India as a deviation from the

West or drawing an overly harmonious image of India: Women or Untouchables see the alleged solidarity of the caste system less harmoniously than Dumont does.²⁸ But anyone who intends to avoid completely the danger of Orientalism, and thus the construction of a counterworld, starts from the premise that cultures exist independent of perspectives on them. Such objectivity is not possible because human relations between fellow men or with gods—which is what cultural analyses are about—can be perceived only when they are based on classifications, institutions, and relations. Such relations do not exist atomistically, but are made and thought out: internally and externally, by the persons affected and by those who describe them. Objectivity consists of (a) not basing conclusions on individual cases, but on making statements that apply to the majority and the average case; (b) getting as close as possible to the conceptual framework of the analyzed contexts so that those who are described can accept it; and (c) allowing change in one's own thinking. For—to cite Gadamer again—understanding means: understanding differently. Hindus are only Hindus when they are different from Christians or Muslims or atheists—whether they're admired or detested. Or, more simply: If someone is a Hindu, he is different; if he is not different, he is no more a Hindu than I am a Christian or a Western atheist. But who is really a Hindu among the Indians? This term is already a test case for the fundamental considerations with which I began.

WHAT IS HINDUISM?

What traditions can be called “Hindu” is controversial both inside and outside India.²⁹ As we have seen, scholars of India often say that one must have an encyclopedic knowledge to be able to bring the variety of Hinduisms into one coherent system. At best, precise statements are possible only with regard to a temporally or regionally circumscribed area. Others lament the lack of a conceptual clarity that also poses a temptation to compare incongruent elements. And some maintain that Hinduism, as a coherent religion, is a Western construct: “Today, without wanting to admit it, we know that Hinduism is nothing but an orchid cultivated by European scholarship. It is much too beautiful to be torn out, but it is a greenhouse plant: It does not exist in nature.”³⁰

Legislators can hardly indulge in such hesitant thoughts. In cases of conflict, they have to know and decide if they are dealing with a Hindu or not. Thus, according to the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, an Indian is a Hindu if he does not belong to another religion.³¹ It was not the Indians who came up with this adroitly evasive definition, but the British. In 1881, for the second ten-year

census, the government official and anthropologist Denzil Ibbetson told how he determined religious affiliation: “Every native who was unable to define his creed, or described it by any other name than that of some recognised religion or of a sect of some such religion, was held to be and classed as a Hindu.”³² This suggests that, until recently, Indians did not call themselves Hindus. In fact, the term *Hindu* is a foreign appellation³³ used initially by the Persians for the population living on the Indus River (linguistically derived from the Sanskrit *sindhu*, meaning river or sea). With the penetration of the Muslims into Sindh (711–712 A.D.), the word came to be used for the non-Muslim population. The Europeans followed this practice. Thus, in about 1830 A.D., the description of a population (all non-Muslims) became the description of a religion, “Hinduism,” but it did not exist as a unity in the consciousness of that population.

Such a viewpoint might also be familiar to Western traditions. Religions do not depend absolutely on the differentiating view of foreign religions. Polemics crave simplification. Until the eighteenth century, for Christians, there were practically only Jews, “Mohammedans,” and the one distorting, offensive descriptive division of Christian and Pagan.³⁴ In 1711, the missionary Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg titled his substantial book on Tamil Hinduism *Malabarisches Heidentum* (Malabar Paganism), and until the late Middle Ages, India stood for one of three parts of the world—along with Europe and Africa. People talked of several Indias; talk of *India Major* and *India Minor* can be traced back to the fourth century; and Columbus, as is well known, wanted to discover the sea route to one of these fabled Indias of antiquity. And at the end of the eighteenth century in France, along with Voltaire’s *Candide* and Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in 1770, Guillaume Ragnay and Denis Diderot published *Histoire Philosophique et Politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, the greatest bestseller, even though the authors hardly wrote about India, but rather presented a critical debate regarding colonialism.

Hinduism and Hindu-ness

Is Hinduism in fact a Western construct, as these examples suggest? First, it should be asked how the Indians themselves have described their religion(s). The answer is baffling: Previously, while most of them mentioned their caste or ethnic group when they were asked about their belief, religious self-consciousness has changed under European influence. Since the early nineteenth century, at least the English-speaking classes see themselves as Hindus. And it was partly for anticolonial motives that they saw themselves as a unity

in order to hold out against the missionary Christians and the Muslims who were allegedly favored by the British.

In present-day India, there are even tendencies to distinguish oneself radically and sometimes by force from the West and from Islam by constructing a Hindu political identity. Spokesmen for that are radical Hindu groups such as the strong *Bharatiya Janata Party* (Indian People's Party, BJP); the *Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangha* (National Volunteer Corps, RSS), founded in 1925 and repeatedly banned, with several million trained paramilitary members; the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (World-Hindu-Council, VHP), which has existed since 1964; and the *Shiv Sena* (Army of Shiva), a tightly organized right-wing affiliate of the BJP.

All these organizations want either to strengthen or revive Hindu-ness (*hindūtvā*).³⁵ The term goes back to the book of that name by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a radical freedom fighter, who was imprisoned by the British in 1910. Savarkar distinguished between a Hindu Empire (*hindūrāṣṭra*), a territorial and political or nationalist definition, and Hindu-ness (*hindūtvā*), a genealogical and national definition: "a Hindu means a person who regards this land of Bharatvarsha (the Indian subcontinent) from the Indus to the Seas, as his Fatherland as well as his Holyland."³⁶ This is a geographical, genealogical, and religious definition with an adroit solution: Sikhs, Jains and Indian (more precisely, South Asian) Buddhists are Hindus, but not Christians, Muslims, or other Buddhists, for whom either Bharatavarsha is neither a fatherland (Westerners and East Asian Buddhists) nor a holy land (Christians and Muslims).

Aside from exceptions and recent developments, Hinduism does not pursue any missionary activity, as per this definition. The widespread fear of foreigners in India and especially of proselytizing religions such as Islam or Christianity is always being stoked by Hindu fundamentalist groups. It is especially lamented that even though there are converted Hindus, conversion to Hinduism is not possible. Because of that and because of the polygamy of the Muslims, a constant attenuation of Hinduism is forecast.

Such a Hinduism is, first of all, understood as a national Hindu-ness: Accordingly, one is a Hindu if one was born in India and behaves like a Hindu, if one does not identify oneself publicly as a Christian or a Muslim. Belief is secondary to behavior. M. S. Gowalkar, who led the *Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangha* from 1940 to 1973, could even speak of "Hindu Muslims." "Hindu by culture, Muslim by religion," adds D. Gold.³⁷ Others speak of "Christian Hindus." Such arguments are directed primarily at political goals: national identity, improvement of power positions, and chances of election. But what Hinduism

is as a religion neither Gowalkar nor other such emphatic Hindu politicians can say.

Even at the second world Hindu conference organized by *Vishva Hindu Parishad* in February 1979 in Allahabad, which was again devoted to the question of definition, representatives of various Hindu groups, castes, or religious trends could not unite on genuine common grounds. Nevertheless, a Six-Point Code for all Hindus was developed: anyone who recites prayers (*sūryapraṇāma* and *prārthana*), reads the Bhagavadgītā, worships a personal chosen deity (*mūrti*, literally: “statue, image of god”), uses the holy syllable *Om*, and plants the Tulasī or Tulsī plant (*Oscium sanctum*, “basil”) may call himself a “Hindu.”³⁸ But this is clearly a superficial definition, and colored by Vaiṣṇavism (because of the Tulsī plant associated with this god).

Religion and Dharma³⁹

The difficulties of defining Hinduism reside in a term analogous to *religion*,⁴⁰ which is often used normatively or strategically in order to defend one’s own belief against others. Thus, the esoteric or the sectarian is denied the title *religion*, religion is separated from magic or superstition, certain kinds of science are disqualified with the designation *religion*. *Religio* in Latin denotes “conscientiousness,” “fear,” and “obedience” toward gods as well. The early Christians in Rome called both their own faith and the pagan cults *religio*; only later was the Christian faith elevated to *vera religio* (true religion), and not until the Enlightenment did *religion* become a generic term for religions. So, when we speak of “religion,” we already have a preconception. This includes a notion of a personal god (which is why there is a continuing controversy about whether early, “godless” Buddhism is a religion) or an idea of the sacred, which is otherworldly and is revealed, manifested, and incarnated in this world. Non-Western languages are not familiar with the term *religio*. In Arabic, *islām* (from the verb *aslama*, to be intact, sacred, hence the participle *Muslim*) is an equivalent for *religion* just as much as the word *dīn* (practice, custom, law);⁴¹ in the Greek *eusebeia* (awe of god), but also *latreia* (service and reward), *therapeia* (worship, service), or *sebas* (sacred fear);⁴² in Old High German *ē* or *ēwa* (divine law, order, hence in New High German, *Ehe*, marriage).

Many Hindus, especially the intellectual upper class, call their religion *sanātana dharma* (eternal Dharma),⁴³ and *dharmā* is also the term that usually appears in comparative treatises on the definition of religion. Dharma, related etymologically to the Latin *firmus* (solid, strong) and *forma* (form, shape), is what holds the world together and supports it, the eternal (*sanātana*) law, the “order in consummation.”⁴⁴ The Dharma applies to humans and animals, but

also to elements; it includes natural and structured order, law and morals in the broadest sense. Dharma is life ritualized according to norms and rules, which ultimately depend less on an internal participation than on proper behavior derived from the Veda. Thus Dharma includes domestic rites and ceremonies, daily and life-cycle “sacraments” (*samskāra*), rites of sin and atonement, the whole area of civil and criminal law, constitutional law and common law, normative and ritual regulations about caste, age, sacrifices, pilgrimages, vows, ritual gifts, and so on. “The ten points of duty are patience, forgiveness, self-control, not stealing, purification, mastery of the sensory powers, wisdom, learning, truth, and lack of anger,” says the *Laws of Manu*, the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, but that is only one of many definitions. The Dharma can be said to be a religion of law without a codified law, whose most frequently cited sources are the Veda, tradition (*smṛti*) and good custom (*sadācāra*, *śiṣṭācāra*, *śīla*).

Even though the Dharma is not always understood theistically, and even though it does not rely on a divine creator, the term comes close to current notions of “religion.” Yet there is one essential difference between it and a monotheistic concept of religion: Dharma is a relative term, always referring to special circumstances. The Righteous (*dharma*) and the Unrighteous (*adharma*) do not go around saying, “Here we are!” Nor do gods, Gandharvas, or ancestors declare, “This is righteous and that is unrighteous,” explains an old legal text.⁴⁵ There are various Dharmas, according to sex, age, and origin. There is talk of regional Dharma (*deśadharmā*), extended family Dharma (*kuladharmā*), personal Dharma (*svadharmā*), the Dharma of women (*strīdharmā*) or the Dharma of animals (*paśudharmā*). A lot of common law appears there, but little natural law and no common morality: “Better a man’s own duty, though ill-done, than another’s duty well-performed.”⁴⁶ The decision about the right Dharma lies with the elders, Brahmans, and scholars, and they judge according to different rules, even though they are to strive for consensus.⁴⁷ Thus, there can be a Dharma of killing for warriors and butchers, of stealing for the castes of thieves, or of adultery for prostitutes,⁴⁸ even though the Brahmans consider only high-ranking social groups capable of adhering to Dharma. The relation between Dharma and salvation is that everyone who acts in accordance with his Dharma may hope for and even count on a better reincarnation, to a certain extent. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel commented correctly on Dharma: “If we say that courage is a virtue, the Hindoo says that courage is a virtue of the Kshatriyas (warriors).”⁴⁹

The relativity of Dharma in Hinduism marks a definite difference between it and Buddhism, as Richard Gombrich emphasized:⁵⁰ “I do not see how one could exaggerate the importance of the Buddha’s ethicisation of the world,

which I regard as a turning point in the history of civilisation.”⁵¹ In fact, Brahman ethics relates to a large extent to the position of birth, that is, to one’s own Dharma. On the other hand, the Buddha, according to Gombrich, ethicizes not only the act, but also the intention. Instead of proper behavior, he demanded proper motivation to a certain extent. But intention can no longer be understood as relative. In Buddhism, an intention is good or bad, whether one is a Brahman or a casteless person. Thus, the relativity of the Dharma is the special feature of Hinduism that should be grasped. It is possible only because the individual social groups tacitly agree that ethics or Dharmas can be mutually exchanged. In other words, the principle of the relativity of the Dharma is higher than a claim to absoluteness. This principle, as will be shown, is expressed as a social sense in patterns of thought as well as in customary forms of behavior.

The Dharma in its relativity explains the versatility of Hinduism, but it does not define it as religion, since it is accepted conceptually only in certain Brahman-influenced circles. The same holds for other concepts that are always cited to define the “religion” of Hinduism. Robert Charles Zaehner’s influential 1962 book, *Hinduism*, begins with the assertion: “*Brahman—dharma—moksha—samsara—karma*: these are the key concepts of classical Hinduism.”⁵² But, in the first section of Mircea Eliade’s equally impressive monograph on Yoga, we read: “Four basic and interdependent concepts, four ‘kinetic ideas,’ bring us directly to the core of Indian spirituality. They are *karma*, *māyā* [illusion], *nirvāṇa* [release], and *yoga*.”⁵³ But those terms are also important for Buddhism and Jainism. Moreover, their selection is limited: *veda* (sacred knowledge) is lacking, as are *bhakti* (devotion), *pūjā* (divine service), *yajña* (sacrifice), and *avatāra* (incarnation.)

Thus, definitions of Hinduism tend to be lengthy and ramified. It cannot be otherwise because—as Heinrich von Stietencron in particular has often shown⁵⁴—in India, we are dealing with various religions that belong to one geographically definable cultural space, influence one another, and sometimes overlap, but that often differ considerably from one another in their founders, holy writings, doctrines, divine worlds, rituals, languages, historical conditions, and supporters. Only when there is a convergence of several of these criteria, however, can a religious community be recognized and a religion defined—regardless of whether one speaks of the development of religions, their individual or social effects, or their nature, or classifies them phenomenologically, symbolically, or theoretically.⁵⁵ In any case, in terms of history and religion, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have more in common with each other than the religions of Indian tribal groups and Brahmanism or the reform Hinduism in the big cities.

Nevertheless, Hinduism is counted as one of the world religions. With more than 663 million followers, it even forms the third largest religious denomination—after Christianity (1.67 billion) and Islam (881 million) and before Buddhism (312 million) and Judaism (18.4 million). But these 1995 estimates are controversial and still rely on the British census method, that is, they count all religions as Hinduism that cannot win acceptance as another acknowledged religion of India. For a long time, it was also common practice to explain traditions based mainly on Brahman Sanskrit texts as the “foundation” of Hinduism, and everything else as deviations or modernizations. Particularly in the early colonial period, religious events that often seemed strange (the marriage of children, the burning of widows) and objects (so-called idols) were explained by Brahmans who were expert in written and oral sources. Thus the impression emerged that the religion of this priestly class was the reference point for all other religions in Southern Asia.

This appears especially in the evaluation of the status of the Veda for definitions of Hinduism.⁵⁶ These texts were first handed down orally, and were later fixed in writing. The Indologist and scholar of religion Brian K. Smith defines it thus: “Hinduism is the religion of those humans who create, perpetuate, and transform traditions with legitimizing reference to the authority of the Veda.”⁵⁷ No doubt, the Veda plays an important role for Brahmans and population groups that employ Brahman priests or live in an area dominated by Brahmans. It is considered a source of revealed truth that is a source of religious merit, and all other sacred knowledge as well as moral behavior (according to *dharmā*) can be derived from it. Finally, the Veda is considered by many non-Brahman classes as exemplary, so that other texts are also called Veda. The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a kind of “textbook of dances,” is named the fifth Veda, even though professionally, in the old texts female dancers (*natī*) are also prostitutes and certainly do not belong to Brahman circles.⁵⁸ Most Indians today merely pay lip service to the Veda and have no regard for the contents of the texts; or else they learn it only symbolically or condensed in the form of the *Gāyatrī* hymns.⁵⁹

The authority of the Veda is also often disputed. Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and other Indian religions owe their identity not least to separation from the Veda and from the Brahmans. Other religious groups, which are not recognized as independent religions, also reject the Veda, even though they worship the gods of the Vedic and Hinduistic pantheon.⁶⁰ A song addressed to *Kṛṣṇa* is thought to bring a hundred times more merit than a Vedic sacrifice. Thus, the authority of the Veda can hardly be called a touchstone of being Hindu, as Brian K. Smith attempts to show.⁶¹ According to his definitions, for example, the saints *Kabīr* and *Rāmānandī* (see table 4) may not be called

Hindu, for they neither acknowledge the Veda nor accept Brahmans as religious authorities.

It is certainly exaggerated to represent Hinduism as a delusion, but there *is* Hinduism as a habitus and a socioreligious system of meaning with differing positions. Thus, it should always be clearly indicated which groups of persons or which trend of the Hindu religion is meant. Of course, Christianity also has more variety than commonality: Early Christianity, ascetic monasticism, Mariolatry, papal and sacramental Catholicism, reformed Protestantism, free-church Christianity, evangelism, liberation theology, feminist theology—all these trends and movements are so distinct that commonalities can hardly be recognized. Nevertheless, they all appeal to *one* founder (Jesus), *one* text (the Bible), *one* name of the religion (Christianity), and *one* symbol (the Cross). For the religions of so-called Hinduism such agreements cannot be determined. In India, one talks of paths (*mārga*), doctrines (*mata, vāda*), philosophies (*darśana*), or traditions (*sampradāya*) that are different, but equal in principle, rather than of one common religion. But most Indians (including Christians) have no problem belonging to or following various “paths” at the same time. Therefore, the individual cults, sects, philosophies, and theistic systems are not different religions—as von Stietencron portrayed them⁶²—but rather cognitive systems or socioreligious institutions of a society that has reached an understanding in principle about the interchangeability and identity of the systems of belief. A “Hindu” can be a Brahman ritualist in the life-cycle ritual, an Advaitin philosophically, a devotionalist (Bhakta) in terms of practice, and a Gaṇeśa-worshipper in his popular religion. “Privately, he can be a tantric worshipper of the gods, and a Śaiva, and Vedic in his social intercourse,” as a well-known poem puts it.⁶³ Or, like many Newar subcastes in Nepal, he can be a Hindu and a Buddhist at the same time.⁶⁴ This regular identification of various forms of belief is the special feature of so-called Hinduism!

Thus, Hinduism can be delineated not so much by its doctrines as by its religious practices and organizations, and this is true from the start: Brahmans who became Buddhists did not change their social status or usually their religious status either.⁶⁵ The primary principle of Indian religiosity is not to be sought in beliefs, doctrines, or rituals, but rather in the socioreligious organization. Thus, if there is a common feature for all of India, it is the caste system. Of course, this is rejected by Reform Hindus or Hindu “sects,” but these groups too are mostly organized according to the same norms: a restriction of the possible candidates for marriage by genealogical criteria and, to a lesser extent, professional restrictions. Even if social groups themselves are not organized as castes, the majority treats them as such. Even tourists form a kind of caste in the system of categories of many Indians: the Mlecchas. Indians can adhere

to various socioreligious systems, but can belong to only one caste or subcaste. Thus, one can normally become a Hindu not as an individual, by conversion, but rather through a process relating to the entire social group.⁶⁶ So, one is Hindu primarily by birth, not by a profession of faith; one can believe anything and yet call himself a Hindu. Even for a Christian or Muslim woman who marries a Hindu, circumventing this rule is possible only with the help of the Identificatory Habitus. American followers of Hare-Krishna sects are barely allowed into previously existing Hindu temples; but in India they may build their own Krishna Temple and call themselves Hindus.

Even on the “dogmatic” side, belonging to a Hindu religious community is linked with traits of birth. This is explained in a text from the second half of the eleventh century, the *Somaśambhūpaddhati*. This Śaiva ritual text includes a conversion ritual (*liṅgoddhāra*), with which one becomes a follower of Śiva and attains salvation. In this ritual, the essential thing is to obliterate the traits (*liṅga*) acquired through previous Karma at birth from followers of non-Śaiva religious traditions or schools, by wiping out all merit accumulated in past births through the consecration (*dikṣā*). The list of non-Śaiva religious traditions includes Buddhists, Jains, followers of the Vedas, Bhagavān or Viṣṇu worshippers, Śāktas, astrologers (Jyotiṣa), Pāśupatas, materialists (Cārvāka), Vedāntins, and followers of other philosophical schools of thought.⁶⁷ As Heinrich von Stietencron has explained,⁶⁸ this list is remarkable in three respects: (1) Buddhism and Jainism are not treated differently from other schools of thought; (2) Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, and other so-called “Hindu” groups do not appear together as *one* community; (3) religious and philosophical schools of thought are not separated.⁶⁹ There are only various paths (more or less related to birth) that lead to salvation.

So, “Hinduism” is nothing more than a collective term for certain religions, religious communities, and socioreligious systems that fulfill the following five criteria: (1) they emerged or spread on the South Asian subcontinent; (2) their social organization is characterized essentially by special rules of descent and marriage (the so-called caste system); (3) Vedic-Brahmanic values, rituals, and myths dominated (originally); (4) a manifestation of Śiva, Viṣṇu, Devī, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, or Gaṇeśa is worshipped as god or divine force, or is at least not explicitly rejected; (5) an Identificatory Habitus prevails, closely connected with a salvation linked to descent, derived from the ancient Indian sacrifice, but which has broken with that to a large extent. I am aware that this is a tepid definition. Yet, definitions do not conclude the work, but constitute a summary and a program. Thus, in what follows, this definition is to be tested against empirical material. Of course, because of this definition, special attention must be directed to the socioreligious and Vedic-Brahmanic aspects.

Hindu Religions and Hindu Religiosity

Examined closely, Hinduism consists of three Hindu religions and four forms of Hindu religiosity, which can occur in all Hindu religions. (For the sake of simplicity, I shall use the term *Hinduism* from now on for the totality of the Hindu religions and their religious forms.) The main criterion for defining the first group is the question of whether membership or affiliation based on socioreligious criteria can be discerned. Only then do I speak of a “Hindu religion,” while the forms of Hindu religiosity include modes of religious activity in the Hindu religions. I call the first two Hindu religions “basis religions”; the third category includes founded religions. By “basis religion,” I mean the fact that from birth on, one out of every nine Indians belongs to at least one, but usually both these Hindu religions, even if he doesn’t practice religion (like most Europeans and North Americans who are born into Christianity but are not observant). Belonging to a religion is seldom a question of choice, and the “imprinting” of a definite religious type happens early in life; Indian scholars were aware of this when they described origin based on birth as an essential feature (*liṅga*) of the school of thought—as shown by the previously discussed Somaśambhūpaddhati texts. On the other hand, membership in one of the founded religions is usually a matter of choice. One belongs to them as an alternative or in addition to the basis religion; only in exceptional cases is one born into them.

1. Hindu Religions

1.1. *Brahmanic-Sanskritic Hinduism*: a polytheistic, ritualistic, priestly religion that has spread over almost all of South Asia, centered on extended family domestic rituals and sacrificial rituals and an appeal to a corpus of Vedic texts as an authority. This religion is the center of nearly all discourse on Hinduism (including the present one) for two reasons: (1) it fulfills many common criteria for the definition of “religion”: “canonical” texts (Veda), a unifying, sometimes holy language (Sanskrit), visible membership (the sacred thread), a common priesthood (Brahmans); and (2) in many regions of India, it is the dominant religion into which the non-Brahman population groups strive to assimilate. Because of its extensive and uniform textual traditions, many common features can still be discerned in domestic rituals (birth, initiation, marriage, death), worship of supreme gods (especially Śiva, Viṣṇu, Devī, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Gaṇeśa, or a manifestation of them) in house and temple, pilgrimages, holidays, vows, food, the holiness of the cow, and others. Yet, none of these elements is exclusive to Brahmanic-Sanskritic Hinduism, since almost

all Hindus, even Brahmans, also belong to another religious community or practice the rituals and holidays of at least one more religion, which is distinctive only because it usually has non-Brahman priests. These are:

1.2. *Folk religions and religions of social communities* (subcastes, castes, tribes); *Hindu folk or tribal religions*:⁷⁰ polytheistic, sometimes animistic religions with an emphasis on the locality, community, caste-inclusive celebrations or forms of worship, and predominantly countless oral texts in the local language. In many cases, these religions have their own priests, most worship only regional deities (in the village or among a subcaste—*kuladevatā*, *grāmadevatā*; e.g., Khandobā, Aiyanār, Piḡāmāi), whose myths of origin are linked with the place of worship, and their own pantheon, which usually also includes spirits or deified heroes. Humans can often be possessed by these gods or spirits. From the perspective of Brahmanic-Sanskritic Hinduism, the forms of worship are considered impure in many cases, and so the folk religion is quite often in tension with Brahmanic Hinduism. In the so-called folk Hinduism,⁷¹ folk forms of Brahmanic-Sanskritic Hinduism are usually combined with aspects of folk religions.

1.3. *Founded religions*: usually ascetic, often anti-Brahmanic, occasionally proselytizing, salvation religions with monastic communities and a basic corpus of texts of the founder. Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism were such founded religions, but they withdrew from the authority of the Veda and the Brahman priests so early and so clearly in terms of organization by shaping their own canon that they were able to mold an identity as separate religions.

Three distinct subgroups can be defined by form of organization and geographical sphere of influence:

(1.3.1) *Sectarian religions*:⁷² for example, Vaiṣṇava sects (Śrīvaiṣṇava, Pāncarātra, Rāmānandī, Nāga, Tyāgī, among others), Śaiva sects (Daśanāmī, Nātha, Pāśupata, Kāpālīka, Aghorī, among others).

(1.3.2) *Syncretically founded religions*: Hindu-Islamic (Sikhism with Udāsīs, Kabīrpanthīs), Hindu-Buddhist (Newar-Buddhism), and Hindu-Christian mixed religions like the (ethical) Neohinduism (Brahmo Samāj, Ārya Samāj, Rāmākṛṣṇa, and Vivekānanda, Śrī Aurobindo, Theosophical Society, and other, or even Hindu-influenced religious forms of Christianity (Dalit theology) and Islam (Kabīr or Indian Sufism partially influenced by Yoga).

(1.3.3) *Founded, proselytizing religions, "Guru-ism"*: religious groups originating in India, but also widespread in the West, founded by charismatic persons (Gurus) with a corpus of esoteric writings of the Gurus predominantly in English: Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Transcendental Meditation, Satya Sai Baba and the Satya Sai Federation, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and

ISKCON, Guru Maharaj Ji and the Divine Light Mission, Rajneesh Chandra Mohan and the Sannyasi movement in Poona, etc.

Dividing Hinduism into three Hindu religions is a categorization found in India itself. It corresponds with the subdivision of ritual practices into Vedic (*vaidika*), village and folk religions (*grāmya*), and sectarian (*āgama* or *tantra*).⁷³ The following religious forms, on the other hand, are oscillating strands of religious activity, but are not religions.

2. Forms of Hindu Religiosity

2.1. *Ritualism*: frequently lavish rituals, usually performed with the assistance of priests. Alongside the Vedic-Brahmanic domestic and sacrificial ritualism, which includes high and low traditional temple ritualism and caste ritualism, forms of Tantrism must also be included.

2.2. *Spiritualism*: intellectualistic, sometimes atheistic salvation doctrines, whose main objective is one's own individual liberation, without necessarily requiring solid religious organizational forms or rituals, but often a guiding spiritual teacher (Guru). This form of religion is characteristic, for example of Advaitavedānta, Kashmir Śaivism, Śaivasiddhānta, Neovedānta, and modern, esoteric Guruism, as well as some sorts of Tantrism.

2.3. *Devotionalism*: usually a pastoral, rapt, often mystical worship of a god (and his female consort) with songs and mythological texts. This form of religion, practiced by nearly all castes and especially by women, does not demand sacrifice, ritualism, or knowledge, so much as heart, poetry, musicality, or dance. Priests are not necessarily required for the encounter with god. This form of religion is found mainly in Bhakti religiosity, Kṛṣṇaism (the sects of Nimbārka, Viṣṇusvāmi, Rādhavallabhī, Mahānubhaus), or the festive celebration of many ceremonies as divine games (*hīlā*, *khela*).

2.4. *Heroism*: a polytheistic form of religiosity rooted in militaristic traditions, with deification upon the death of the hero, special death cults (including widow-burning), and features of martyrdom, rituals of robbery (marriage by abduction), plundering, or war, public celebrations, and a manifestly heroic ethos and code of honor (*vīrya*) whose sources are often the Mahābhārata or Rāmāyaṇa epics. Examples of this are Rāmaism, the religious orders of militant Yogis, or parts of political Hinduism. The deifying worship of Gurus also fits in here when the latter are extolled more for their (alleged) heroism than for their teachings.

Hindu forms of religiosity and Hindu religions do not exist in an unalloyed form. Sometimes the differences are even smaller than the common features.

Thus, both Bhakti religiosity and Tantric ritualism, in their emphasis on a devoted proximity to god, are forms of devotionalism, and thus they grant the aspect of god's grace a similarly large scope; but Tantric ritualism maintains the tension between Śiva and Śakti, which Bhakti devotionalism seeks to resolve.⁷⁴ Or "self-surrender, asceticism" (*tyāga*) is an important criterion of piety in Hindu religions, which is commonly to be found in Tantric ritualism, Bhakti devotionalism, and epic heroism. Consequently, asceticism and piety are in all above-mentioned forms of Hindu religiosity.

These forms of Hindu religiosity were also differentiated within India. Thus the first three forms (2.1–3) are the three classical paths (*mārga*) to salvation acknowledged by Brahmans as equivalent, that is, the path of action and of sacrifice (*karmamārga*), the path of knowledge (*jñānamārga*), and the path of (devotional) participation (*bhaktimārga*); these must be joined by a path of honor and heroism (*vīryamārga*). The concept of "Tantra" is also used in India as a ritualistic form of religiosity within Hinduism and Buddhism, but not as a term for religion. It is typical for the relativity of the paths to salvation of Hindu religions that no one way of salvation has been accepted as strictly obligatory—as, for example, the path of internal purification in Buddhism (Pāli *visuddhimagga*).

The forms of religiosity can also be applied to the social segments of the classes of a Brahmanic social order. Thus, ritualism and spiritualism belong to the world of priests and ascetics, between whom a certain tension exists—as we shall see. In ancient Indian terminology, both forms of religion were ascribed to the realm of the *brahman*, the absolute, embodied by the Brahmans and the priestly aristocracy, the devotionalism of the common people (*viś*) embodied by the businessman (*vaiśya*), and the heroism of the world of political and military rule (*kṣatra*) to the class of the Kṣatriyas.⁷⁵ From the Brahmanic perspective, there is only *one* valid hierarchy:⁷⁶ *brahman*, *kṣatra*, *viś*, after which the status of peasant and slave does not even occur. But the forms of religiosity are not corporate forms of religion. Spiritualism is found among merchants as well (and perhaps even more), just as there is heroism among Brahmans.

With all the love for order and classifying, Indians do not see these boundaries as exclusive. There are few struggles between devotionalists and heroists over the right form of divine worship. They are considered equal in principle. One reason is that, for most Hindus, the highest is an emptiness to be filled, to which there are several exchangeable and basically equal paths; otherwise, it would not be the highest.⁷⁷ This highest, whether God or the absolute, can be stretched or compressed so that it includes everything or everything is contained in it. Thus, for example, the goddess Kālī can be worshipped without

any problem as a frightening goddess with a thrust-out and blood-smeared tongue or as a concerned, gracious mother, or can be adored as a loving consort.⁷⁸

Great and Little Hinduism

Alongside the classifications mentioned above, the division of Hindu religions according to criteria of geographical spread, theistic orientation, forms of tradition, or their historical emergence is possible and meaningful. The distinction, for example, between great and little traditions is customary. “Great (or high) Traditions” are understood as Sanskritic, Brahmanic, largely homogeneous Hinduism that extends over all of South Asia (thus, Hindu Religion 1.1 and parts of 1.3 according to the previous classification); on the other hand, folk religions (1.2) and sects are interpreted as “Little Traditions.” This distinction goes back to two influential social scientists. In 1952, M. N. Srinivas separated “Sanskritic Hinduism” or “All-India and Peninsular Hinduism” from regional and local, village Hinduism; and two years later, Robert Redfield introduced the distinction between “Great” and “Little Traditions.”⁷⁹ Such a distinction is also found in traditional India, where there is a separation between “shastric” (referring to the *śāstra*, the Vedic-Brahmanic doctrine) and “laukik” (referring to *loka*, this world) or between a superordinate Dharma and a local Dharma (*dharmā* and *deśadharmā*, *mārga* and *deśī*).⁸⁰ The disadvantage of such divisions is that very different criteria for classifying “Great” or “Little” traditions are used: caste (high-caste and low-caste Hinduism), language (Sanskrit and folk languages), regional spread (city and village or supra-regionality and regionality), or religion (high religion and popular religion, high gods and local gods). But only the Brahmanic-Sanskritic Hinduism can really claim the title of “Great Tradition,” when it is used to establish common notions of a high culture (standard texts, priesthood, supreme gods, etc.).

Such notions often rely on a more or less veiled nineteenth-century evolutionism, when it was assumed that religions undergo a maturing, which includes purging them of irrationality and demonism. Typologies of religion are seldom free of evolutionary thinking and belief in progress, including Social Darwinist thought, which maintains that the “better” religion drives out the “worse,” or—vice versa—an original “pure” form of religion becomes “impure” through historical development (the theory of decadence). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *Religious History as the Unfolding of Spirit*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *The Education of the Human Race*, and Auguste Comte’s *Introduction to Positive Philosophy* are famous examples of the evolutionist philosophies of history, which find their counterparts in the ethnological theories of Edward B.

Tylor, Hubert Spencer, James George Frazer, and Pater Wilhelm Schmidt. Even Max Weber is not free of evolutionist notions, and assumes that rational economic behavior drives out magic and even religion; or, where this has not been the case, as in India and China, economic development has been impeded.

The currently widespread notion that religion is a preliminary stage to a rational, scientific worldview, with more freedom, is also a form of evolutionism. But these kinds of evaluations are anachronistic, basically lagging behind the Enlightenment and Romanticism. With Johann Gottfried Herder and even more with Friedrich Schleiermacher, it was possible to discover parallels in the history of religions and to emphasize the unique qualities of individual religions and forms of religion. Christianity's claim to absoluteness could become open to dispute. The critique of natural religion (*religio naturalis*), a religion of reason, which forms the basis of all individual religions, also rejected the doctrine of stages of religions and religious forms (yet allowing the emergence of religious studies), even if Herder saw the childhood of mankind realized in India, and thus encouraged the Romantics' sentimental image of India, which is still in evidence today.

Hence, the paradigm of great and little traditions is problematic if it interprets religious parallelism as evolutionism. But superstition does not give way to belief, "magic" to religion, spirits to gods, textless religions to text-based religions. These forms of religion still exist beside one another. The high or great tradition of Sanskritic Hinduism is by no means the older, higher, or purer form of religion. It is just as "demonic," "magical," and textless as the little tradition of popular Hinduism is theistic, religious, and textual. Despite all differences, both levels should not be understood as separate religions, but rather as variants that presuppose and complement one another in a constant process of expansion and dynamism.⁸¹ The extent of the distortion that over-emphasizes the textual aspect may be measured by the notion of an Indian writing a description of Christianity using only biblical exegesis.

Thus, Sanskritic Hinduism and Hindu folk religion are in a constant process of adaptation and demarcation. This elucidates the process of Sanskritization first described by M. N. Srinivas.⁸² Non-Brahman population groups accept the customs of Brahmanic-Sanskritic Hinduism (vegetarianism, cow worship, etc.) in order to attain a higher status. But this process is not one-sided. If a previously non-Hindu divinity acquires a Sanskrit name and is worshipped according to a purely Brahmanic ritual, this can happen from "below," in order to enhance the status of the divinity in question and its circle of worshippers (Sanskritization, Kṣatriyasization, Brahmanization), or from "above," in order to take in a population group and a cult (inclusivism).⁸³ There

are also cultural processes leading to the expansion of the Brahmanic-Sanskritic religion into non-Brahman communities, the parochialization⁸⁴ (communalism), regionalization, popularization, and trivialization of Sanskrit Hinduism, or politicization and Westernization. In all cases, mixtures have taken place whose result can be understood only from the assumption of two base religions (1.1 to 1.2 in the classifications above). It is these cultural processes of social dominance and dynamics that characterize Hinduism more than its doctrines or practices.

The division of Hindu religions by gods (e.g., Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism, Śāktism)⁸⁵ emphasizes theistic forms of worship. *Henotheism* is a controversial term coined by Max Müller (1823–1900), one of the founders of religious studies as an academic discipline and a highly respected Veda scholar of his time. It refers to the preferred worship of a single divinity in a polytheistic context. Aside from the fact that there is hardly any polytheism without henotheism, it is unwarranted to limit henotheist variants only to Śiva, Viṣṇu, and the goddess. In terms of religious dissemination, we can also talk about Kṛṣṇaism, Gaṇeśaism, or Rāmaism. The same is true for the worship of prominent regional gods. It is also questionable whether the simple preference for Śiva in certain sects (e.g., Pāśupatas or Liṅgāyats) and in certain stories of the gods is enough to classify them as a common religious trend, even as Śaivism.

A division of Hindu religions by texts (Vedism, Brahmanism, epic Hinduism) is meaningful only if there is a simultaneous recognition of the danger that the canonic, written portion is usually valued more highly than the unwritten. Therefore, in part, Jainism and Sikhism, with their canonic writings, have been granted the status of separate religions, even though they originally had essentially no more adherents than the sects of the Rāmānandis. Moreover, since the Veda was not fixed in writing for a long time, it may be better to talk of canonic texts instead of writings. The excessive emphasis on text-based religions, a result of the theological and exegetical tradition of Christianity and its respect for philology, can be properly understood only if we have the philosophical systems and traditions of teaching in mind. Yet, the Hindu religions rely as much on written texts as on oral traditions, which have begun to be studied only recently, and on a religious practice that is hardly reflected in texts.

Continuity and Change

Even though the Hindu religions constantly change and intersect in these processes, it is appropriate to combine them into epochs. For even if each occurring religious form has a lasting effect, quite often even to the present,

Hindu religions and Hindu religiosity change with every new period in a way that goes beyond a simple expansion of their pantheon or a shift in ideology. We can speak of a paradigm change that determines every successive epoch by heralding new conceptions of life and the world, new gods, goals of salvation, forms of worship, or priests.

Despite all the invoked continuity, this religious change does not originate only in the whim of the Brahmans, but usually has socioeconomic, historical, political, climatic, or geographic causes. The history of religions, which neglects such changes and concentrates only on the history of ideas, tends to underestimate historical transitions and revivals and to avoid the problem of dating. Indeed, it turns out that, even the comparatively widely accepted divisions of epochs of European history with its tripartite division into ancient, medieval, and modern history, by overestimating the short-lived political and military history of events, cannot appropriately grasp the *long-term* effects of certain social and even everyday religious structures; but creeping changes of religions can be understood and dated historically. What matters in the religious history of India are not only the big events or hard, comparatively well-documented facts (e.g., changes of regimes, landowning, war, and temple building), but also soft, symbolic facts (e.g., symbolic wills and testaments, changes in values, styles). This is the only way that history can be grasped, which does not get much attention because it is overwhelmed or neglected by the great Sanskritic tradition: the history of women, the peripheral and illiterate population, as well as the history of everyday life or non-Brahman norms and notions of value.

Epochs are delineations to sort historical material for a specific purpose. They also encourage us to misjudge developments that are inconvenient to our argument, and are thus also always pre-judgments. Hence, the division of Indian history into ancient, medieval, and modern is a projection of the European scheme onto Indian circumstances,⁸⁶ which underestimates other, equally significant caesuras, such as the rise of Buddhism or the influence of Islam. For this reason alone, periodizations should not be rigid. But they do not exist without a reason: The influences of Muslim or British hegemony in India are unmistakable and mark momentous cleavages, even in terms of religion.

Yet, even politically and economically decisive events, such as the decline of the Mughal empire or the distinctive influence of Islam in North and South India, do not always entail serious and sweeping religious change. Instead, in times of crisis, religious structures hold their own. Therefore, subtle periodizations of historians are useful only in a limited way for the specific periodizations in religious history discussed here.

The history of religions must try to link religious changes to historically significant events, even if reliable dating is hardly possible for large periods in the history of India. Text datings are uncertain because information about authors is lacking or is legendary. Inscriptions—with the exception of the Aśokan inscriptions—are only moderately productive for the history of religions. And for Hinduism, until the Gupta time, there are few archaeological or art historical objects, and even if these become more extensive, the relation between objects and texts is extremely problematic to establish. Moreover, the problems of dating in Hindu folk religions are nearly insoluble because there is no periodization for them. Finally, even ironclad changes in the history of religions appear tentative because of the great distances and regional power constellations. For example, Bhakti devotionalism emerged in the sixth to seventh centuries in the south, but appears in the north only with a “delay” of a few centuries. Or: in Nepal, burning widows was legally forbidden only in 1927, a century later than in India.

It is no accident that the fundamentally ahistorical history of mentalities has fallen into disrepute in European historiography. But, for India, the thesis of a long-term, almost unchangeable Hinduism is still maintained.⁸⁷ In most cases, change is always seen as coming from outside: from the Indo-Aryans, Muslims, British, tourists. As frequently asserted, without any solid proof, the culture of the Indus valley perished not from internal causes, but because it could not withstand a supposed superiority of tribes speaking an Indo-Aryan dialect. The racist undercurrent in this theory of the superiority of the Aryans (*ārya*) originates in the nineteenth century. But this immigration thesis can explain neither the great socio-ritual and material differences between the cultures in the west (Indus valley) and the Ganges plain nor the continuing existence of the Dravidian language remnants in the north.⁸⁸ It is conceivable that instead of these, an indigenous, Dravidian culture in the north did not fall victim to an assumed genocide, but rather assimilated the language and culture of the immigrant tribes by a slow process of acculturation and infiltration that has not yet been studied.⁸⁹ Nor was Buddhism driven out of the land of its emergence, even if in many places it was dealt a deathblow by Muslim conquerors.

Such a perspective can be partially traced back to the uncritical acceptance of the Brahmanic thesis of a holistic society and an eternal, always renewed sociocosmic order, which is without beginning and without end (*anādi*).⁹⁰ The Identificatory Habitus understands history mainly as repetition and extension of what is always the same and is thus interested less in breaks and epochal boundaries; it mitigates the “fear of history,” as Mircea Eliade⁹¹ has called the ephemerality of events.

Thus, there is continuity in India over long but not unbroken periods. The following quotation could be contemporary, but it comes from the Persian traveler in India al-Bīrūnī (973–1048): “They call them *mleccha*, i.e., impure, and forbid having any connection with them, be it by intermarriage or any other kind of relationship, or by sitting, eating, and drinking with them, because thereby, they think, they would be polluted. They consider as impure anything which touches the fire and the water of a foreigner; and no household can exist without these two elements.”⁹² This shows how the criterion of purity with regard to conjugality and commensality is preserved throughout the epochs. The same is true of asceticism or the cyclical understanding of time and nature. Vedic elements, for example, are also preserved in the life-cycle rites of passage. Nevertheless, the differences between Hinduism and the Vedic religion are greater than their common features. It is even more meaningless to state that, since prehistoric times, goddesses, Śiva, the phallus, or the tree were objects of cult worship in India,⁹³ when the only source for the assumed tree worship is the image of a man kneeling before a tree on an Indus valley seal.⁹⁴

It is just as problematic to see change as evolutionary. Between *brāhman* as the highest principle and the god Brahman (usually, the nominative form *Brahmā* is used), there is a linguistic relationship and a historical sequence, but when Gustav Mensching talks of the “development from a first stage of material related power to the immaterial, purely spiritual absolute being,”⁹⁵ he grants a higher rank to the spiritual, which superseded the earlier, more primitive forms of religion. This shows the evolutionism and theological rationalism of the nineteenth century mentioned above, which devalues the religious experience vis-à-vis knowledge (of God). We still read that the Brāhmaṇa texts reflect a magical image of the world, which was superseded by the allegedly philosophical perspective of the Upaniṣads, as if there were not still a “magical” image of the world alongside a “philosophical” one in India. History, even the history of religions, has no destination. Only the people who want to see history in a specific way have destinations.