

**MANY GODS, MANY PATHS:  
HINDUISM AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY**

Wendy Doniger, University of Chicago  
Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor  
of the History of Religions

**Tolerance and Intolerance in Hinduism<sup>1</sup>**

Non-Hindu ideas about Hindu tolerance are closely tied up with non-Hindu ideas about Hindu pluralism: if they can tolerate all those gods (the argument goes), with all those heads and all those arms, if they can entertain all those different concepts of divinity, they must be able to tolerate the different concepts of divinity expressed in different religions. Should not many heads have many minds?

What, then, are we to make of a statement like this?

The spirit of broad catholicism, generosity, toleration, truth, sacrifice and love for all life, which characterizes the average Hindu mind not wholly vitiated by Western influence, bears eloquent testimony to the greatness of Hindu culture. . . . The non-Hindu peoples in Hindustan . . . must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ungratefulness towards this land . . . but must . . . stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen's rights.<sup>2</sup>

This argument—that, since Hindus are, as is well-known, the most tolerant people in the world, they deserve to have the land of India to themselves, and therefore the (less tolerant) Muslims should be disenfranchised—was made in 1939 by Madhav Sadhashiva Golwalkar, a leader of the RSS, or Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (“National Association of Volunteers”), a Hindu nationalist association. Many Hindus still regard Golwalkar as a hero, and the RSS is still active in Indian politics.

So is the paradox embodied in Golwalkar's statement: some Hindus who pride themselves on their religious tolerance still use the same oxymoronic phrases to justify their intolerance. In 1966, the Indian Supreme Court was called upon to define Hinduism because the Satsangis claimed that their temples did not fall under the jurisdiction of certain legislation affecting Hindu temples. They argued that they were not Hindus, in part because they did not worship any of the traditional Hindu gods; they worshipped their founder, Swaminarayan (1780-1830), who had declared that he was the Supreme God. The Court ruled against them, citing various European definitions of Hinduism including Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's (the belief "that truth was many-sided and different views contained different aspects of truth which no one could fully express. This knowledge inevitably bred a spirit of tolerance and willingness to understand and appreciate the opponent's point of view") and B. G. Tilak's (" . . . recognition of the fact that the means to salvation are diverse; and realization of the truth that the number of gods to be worshipped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of Hindu religion").<sup>3</sup> Now, the Satsangis brought their case to the Court in order to challenge the 1948 Bombay Harijan Temple Entry Act, which guaranteed Harijans (also called Untouchables or Dalits) access to every Hindu temple. What irony there is in the fact that the legal ruling that defined Hinduism by its tolerance and inclusivism was actually inspired by the desire of the plaintiffs to exclude certain Hindus from their temples. Moreover, when another case brought to the Indian Supreme Court in 1996 charged twelve members of nationalist parties, including the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party or "Party of the People of India"), with violating a law against promoting enmity on grounds of religion, race, community or language, the judge ruled in their favor, arguing that their

concept of Hindutva (“Hindu-ness,” a territorial and racial conception of Hinduism) was a “way of life” (here quoting another part of the Satsangi definition of Hinduism) and so “could not be equated with ‘narrow fundamentalist Hindu religious bigotry.’ ” That is, Hinduism might be a religion, and bigoted, but Hindutva was just a way of life, and hence not bigoted.

The members of the RSS and the BJP are often loosely referred to as Fundamentalists. Whatever “Fundamentalism” implies (and there is much debate about this), it tends to include pejorative implications of intolerance—both within the Fundamentalists’ own tradition (a kind of orthodoxy, or conservatism, narrowing the tradition and curtailing deviation and diversity) and toward other peoples’ traditions (bigotry toward or hatred of other traditions that disagree with them, such as science, to take a case at random). Hindu Fundamentalists, like Fundamentalists in general, accept and defend only one narrow piece of the diverse tradition. Often, Fundamentalists selectively appropriate the tradition to hearken back to a golden age that is understood to have been lost; in India, this is the age of the Veda. Increasingly, the Veda is also associated with ethnicity and nationalism; in India these forces are crystallized in the concept of Hindutva. Of course, inevitably, any worshiper, or any scholar for that matter, will focus on a small fraction of a great religious tradition, but most of us will acknowledge that there are things we do not know or, perhaps, things we know and do not like about aspects of a tradition, and let it go at that. But Fundamentalists want to destroy or deny all of the tradition outside of their narrow swath. In the recent past, they have threatened, sometimes with death, the authors of books that do not present the view of Hinduism they endorse, and they have tried to introduce into school textbooks, both in

India and in the state of California, statements about Hinduism for which there is no scholarly support whatsoever. In this, as in much else, their agendas resemble those of Christian and Muslim Fundamentalists.

Originally a Christian phenomenon, Fundamentalism colonized other religions, too; the term was applied to Hinduism as early as 1957: “Fundamentalism in religion and the Hinduization of the national historical myth were made possible [in India]. . .by the historical and religious work of Europeans.”<sup>4</sup> In many ways, Hindu Fundamentalism, while protesting that it is a reaction against European pressures (Golwalkar’s “not wholly vitiated by Western influence”) simultaneously apes Protestant evangelical strategies, with its emphasis on the priority of personal experience (conversion and re-affiliation) justifying a new definition of “Hindu” which has to do with an experience of Hindu-ness (“if you do not meditate, you cannot understand the Upanishads,” as a Hindu in the audience recently said to me after I had given a public lecture).

The Oxford English Dictionary cites “Liberalism and Modernism” as the opposites of “Fundamentalism,” but I would emphasize tolerance and diversity as its functional opposites. Certainly, Hindu tolerance was dealt a terrible blow when the Babri mosque in Ayodhya was torn down in 1992 as a result of a dispute: the argument turned on whether Mir Baqi, a general of the Mughal emperor Babur (1483–1530), had built his mosque at Ayodhya over a temple commemorating the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. Although there was no evidence to confirm either the existence of the temple or even the identification of the modern town of Ayodhya with its legendary predecessor, it was in fact a widespread custom to build religious structures on the grounds where previous religious structures had stood—mosques over temples (or Buddhist stupas), and temples

over mosques (or Buddhist stupas). During the 1980s, as the Hindu Right rose slowly to power, Hindu organizations began holding rallies at the site, campaigning for the rebuilding of the temple. Finally, during the 1992 rally, leaders of the BJP whipped a crowd of 200,000 militants into a frenzy. Shouting “Death to the Muslims!” the mob attacked the Babri mosque with sledgehammers. As William Dalrymple recently put it, “One after another, as if they were symbols of India’s traditions of tolerance, democracy, and secularism, the three domes were smashed to rubble.”<sup>5</sup>

But surely something remains of the ancient tradition of tolerance.<sup>6</sup> Many forms of Hinduism are alive and well and living both in India and throughout the world, some of them known only to scholars, others known only to a few devotees—and, of course, these two groups often overlap. There are many sorts of Hindus, most of whom justify Golwalkar’s boast of generosity and tolerance, the tolerance that Radhakrishnan rightly identified as an essential part of Hinduism, but these Hindus do not make sensationalist headlines like the others. Being, myself, a member of the Thumper school of moral criticism,<sup>7</sup> I’d like to talk about the Hindus who represent precisely what we want and need in the fight against Hindu Fundamentalism. I would like to draw attention to the tolerant half of Golwalkar’s paradox, to remind non-Hindu readers of just a few of the many diverse and open-minded aspects of Hinduism, both in history and today, which the Fundamentalists deny. In particular, I will argue that one important aspect of tolerance, namely, pluralism or diversity, is so deeply ingrained in Hinduism that it may yet carry the day.

## **Intellectual Pluralism and Social Pluralism**

Tolerance and intolerance exist at different times and places in every religion, and we must look to historical factors to explain these changes. The degree of Hindu tolerance for other religions has varied dramatically in different social and economic circumstances. Tolerance does not result merely from a set of intellectual ideas; intolerance arises not only when people have bad ideas about other people but also when they don't have enough to eat (as Berthold Brecht put it, "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Morale"; and, as Marc Blitzstein translated it, "First feed the face, and then talk right and wrong"). Thus, you cannot entirely explain intolerance by an idea, nor simply by the context of particular historical factors; you need to take them both into account. The present essay tells only one half (the conceptual half) of the story, but it is an essential half, and a beginning.

We might begin by distinguishing between two significantly different sorts of pluralism, intellectual and social, each of which comes in two varieties. Intellectual pluralism on the first level regards the world, or the deity, or truth itself, as plural; this may or may not lead to intellectual pluralism of the second order, which regards as valid plural ways of being human. In both varieties, a pluralism of ideas exists within a single social group that regards all of these ideas, some of which might seem contradictory to us, as valid—though not necessarily equally valid. Social pluralism, which is what is more often meant by people who speak nowadays of pluralism, can designate either the fact of the existence of many religions in our world today or our reaction to that fact. In this latter sense, pluralism is an attempt to harmonize different religious beliefs in a spirit of tolerance and mutual appreciation, in the hope of reducing the kinds of fanaticism that

lead to everything from bigotry to holy wars. Pluralism is not a useful word until difference is a problem, and then it becomes a way in which people come to terms with otherness and come to treat others.<sup>8</sup>

India has known pluralisms of both sorts. Intellectually, the Sanskrit texts tackle the problem of ontology from several different (plural) angles, branching off from an ancient and still on-going argument about the way the world *is*, about whether it is basically uniform or basically multiform. As for social pluralism, Hindus and Buddhists in the early period shared ideas so freely that it is impossible to say whether some of the central tenets of each faith came from one or the other (just as Picasso and Braque worked so closely together at first that they sometimes signed one another's paintings). So, too, the great poet and saint Kabir, who self-consciously rejected both Hinduism and Islam, nevertheless built his own religious world out of what he would have regarded as the ruins of the religions that we call Hinduism and Islam. Many of the great Sufi saints also drew deeply from the wells of both traditions, and many Hindus continue to worship at the tombs of Sufi pirs. Building a shrine on the site where a shrine of another tradition used to stand is thus both a metaphor of appreciation and an act of appropriation in India.

We might further distinguish a third sort of pluralism, eclectic pluralism, a kind of cognitive dissonance in which one person holds several different beliefs more or less simultaneously, drawing upon one on one occasion, another on another. More emotional than purely intellectual pluralism, eclectic pluralism might be regarded as a kind of mediating category between the mental constructs of intellectual pluralism and the physical reality of social pluralism incarnate in real people. It internalizes a kind of "tool-box" approach characteristic of Hinduism.<sup>9</sup> Multiple myths co-exist peacefully,

sometimes in one open mind and sometimes in a group of people whose minds may be, individually, relatively closed. In either form, this approach supports religious diversity, and we do have good examples of the co-existence of many contradictory ideas in one mind, throughout Indian history. A pivotal example of such eclectic pluralism within the religion can be found in a text that is central to Hindu religious law, the *Laws of Manu*, which argues, within a single chapter, passionately against and then firmly for the eating of meat.<sup>10</sup> Eclectic pluralism between religions is more cautious, but it does allow an individual—such as a Hindu who worships at a Sufi shrine—to embrace one tradition in such a way as to make possible, if not full engagement with other faiths, at least full appreciation and even admiration of their wisdom and beauty.<sup>11</sup>

All three sorts of pluralism—intellectual, social, and eclectic—are interconnected in any number of (plural) ways. We might ask if the intellectual pluralism of Hinduism has led to the sort of social pluralism that is often the basis of religious tolerance. I will argue that ancient Hindu intellectual pluralism has not, in the past, led to ancient Hindu social tolerance, but that it might do so in the future, and that Hindu traditions are a valuable source of insights into eclectic pluralism.

### **Hindu Intellectual Pluralism**

Traditional Hinduism was, from the start, plural in several senses. Intellectually, it recognized a pantheon of many gods. Pluralism begins with the *Rig Veda*, sometime around 1500 B.C.E., and it begins with polytheism, but polytheism of a peculiarly monistic hue, monistic in viewing the very substance of the universe as divine and in viewing that substance and that divinity as unitary. In this view, though pluralism does in fact arise out of the original monism, pluralism has a secondary, illusory status in

comparison with the enduring, real status of the underlying monism. Thus, one Vedic hymn will praise a god as the supreme god (though not the only god), but another hymn will use exactly the same words to praise another god. F. Max Müller aptly named this phenomenon “henotheism” or “kathenotheism,” the worship of one (supreme) god at a time. Vedic kathenotheism made possible a kind of non-hierarchical pantheon; the attitude to each god was hierarchical, but the various competing monisms cancelled one another out, so that the total picture was one of equality: each of several was the best. This is, I think, a good example of eclectic pluralism, since one worshiper would know, and use, several different hymns to different gods.

Moreover, there is no one, single theory of creation in the *Rig Veda*, nor in Hinduism as a whole; there are a number of different, more or less compatible theories, which no one ever tried to fit systematically into a canonical doctrine. Indeed, one of the Vedic hymns explicitly lays out an open-ended attitude to the first things. This short, linguistically straightforward hymn, known from its first word as the “Nasadiya” or “There was not” hymn, is the most enigmatic cosmogonic hymn of the *Rig Veda* (10.129).<sup>12</sup> It begins: “There was neither non-existence nor existence then . . . There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor or of day. . . . Who really knows? . . . The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?” The hymn ends with a question about the very nature, perhaps the very existence, of god: “Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know.” There is a charming humility in this hymn, an open-mindedness that reminds me of Unitarianism or the

Ethical Culture covens of my secular youth. The last line—“or perhaps he does not know”—seems almost to mock the rhetoric of more typical hymns in the very text in which it occurs, the *Rig Veda*, lines like the penultimate one here: “—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows.” The hymn asks, “Who really knows?” a question about the very nature, perhaps the very existence, of god. This admission of ignorance becomes even more powerful in the *via negativa* of the Upanishads, philosophical commentaries on the Veda, from perhaps 800 B.C.E., which, when asked to describe ultimate reality [*brahman*], can only reply, “Neti, neti”—“not like this, not like that.”

The “Who?” question pops up in another cosmogonic hymn of the *Rig Veda* (10.121), in which each stanza ends with the questioning refrain, “Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?” The hymn begins: “He by whom the awesome sky and the Earth were made firm, by whom the dome of the sky was propped up, and the sun, who measured out the middle realm of space—“who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?”<sup>13</sup> And so forth. Later Hindu tradition was troubled by this open-ended refrain and invented a god whose name was the interrogative pronoun, *ka* (cognate with the Latin *quis*, French *qui*), Who. One text explained it: the creator asked the sky god, Indra, “Who am I?” to which Indra replied, “Just who you just said” (i.e., “I am Who”), and that is how the creator got the name of Who.<sup>14</sup> So, too, one Vedic ceremony: when the ritual subject goes to heaven and comes back again, he must say, on his return, “I am just who I am”<sup>15</sup> (it is interesting to compare this with the more confident Jewish and Christian concepts of the Great I Am). Read back into the Vedic hymn, as it was in the Vedic commentaries,<sup>16</sup> this resulted in an affirmative statement

(“Indeed, Who *is* the god whom we should honor with the oblation”) that closed down some of those openings through which fresh theological air had flowed.<sup>17</sup>

Monism, however passive, often conceals a submerged form of intellectual imperialism, and the qualified polytheism of the *Rig Veda* was soon challenged by a more blatant monistic tendency in the Upanishads. Yet (intellectual) monism is not an unlikely basis for (social) religious tolerance; the Upanishads are peopled by open-minded kings who invite holy men of various schools and persuasions to debate religious questions at royal gatherings. Monism becomes even more compatible with pluralism if we view it, as the Hindus would, as one factor in a cyclical series: the original unity posited by monism is ultimately both preceded and followed by another era of pluralism, since time is circular. The vague monism of the Vedas was sharpened by the more systematized Vedantic monism of the Upanishads, in which the sense of the unity of ultimate reality (*brahman*) with the souls of all embodied creatures (*atman*) would tend to make some people see the unity of all peoples; the *Bhagavad Gita* makes this argument many centuries later (6.29-30).<sup>18</sup> Such a belief would have social consequences for some people, though not necessarily for the rank and file.<sup>19</sup> Certainly a monistic religion is likely to be more tolerant than a monotheistic religion. As David Tracy has remarked, one of the chief dangers in monotheism is an exclusivism that can (though it need not) lead to intolerance by falsely suggesting that the one-ness of God requires totality thinking.<sup>20</sup> A polytheistic religion, by this argument, might be expected to be more tolerant of the worship of other gods than a monotheistic religion would be. A monistic religion, characterized by infinity thinking rather than totality thinking, stands in the middle, more

tolerant than monotheism but less tolerant than polytheism. The Hindu evidence supports this correlation.

### **Hindu Social Pluralism**

Post-Vedic Hindu cosmogonies<sup>21</sup> already set out the various Hindu groups in a particular hierarchical order: like the pigs in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, all ontological categories are equal, but some are more equal than others. This brings us to social pluralism. Socially, Hinduism maintained the pluralist and relativist caste system, with separate, different *dharmas* for each social group and individual *dharmas* for each person (*sva-dharmas*). And although the three goals of life (*purusharthas*) or strands of the triple path (*trivarga*)—*kama* (pleasure), *artha* (profit), and *dharma*—are often said to be separate but equal, even the textbooks of erotic love and politics generally rank *dharma* above the other two goals.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, when Release (*moksha*) is introduced as the fourth goal, there is complete hierarchy: *moksha* is often said to be far superior to the other goals, indeed, to be in an entirely different class from the other goals.

And even within the pluralistic, non-monistic texts, the rococo lists were ultimately made hierarchical: not only are the categories different, but each is definitely better than another. We can see the ways in which Hinduism deals with these hierarchies in the multilevel triads and quartets based upon the social paradigm of the four *varnas* or classes of society; hierarchy also explains the importance of the priest in cosmogonies, and the essential role played by the social classes in defining nature. The social or, more precisely, socio-religious element—the priest, the sacrificer, the human being in a particular class or stage of life—recurs in Hindu cosmogonies as a defining factor in the basic framework of the cosmos. The implications of this priestly presence seriously

restrict the apparently fluid pluralism that seems to pervade Hindu cosmogonies, and these intellectual formulations have social repercussions: those at the top often enforce their positions in dramatically intolerant ways.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, even Vedantic monism is more hierarchical than egalitarian; the Vedantic vision transcends the political world but leaves it intact.

Yet there are moments when individuals speak out for a dramatic inclusion of those whom the caste system would exclude. In the great Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata* (c. 300 B.C.E. to 300 C.E.), the wise and just king Yudhishtira is accompanied by a stray dog as he alone walks into heaven. The king of the gods bars his way, since caste law regards dogs, who are after all scavengers, as unclean, the animal equivalent of Dalits (the people who have been variously referred to in the past as Untouchables, Scheduled Castes, and Harijans). Yudhishtira refuses to enter unless the dog comes in too, and he is praised for this; the dog turns out to be a disguised form of the god Dharma, *dharma* incarnate (and incidentally Yudhishtira's father) (*Mahabharata* 17). The incarnation itself is astounding, the equivalent of the God of the Hebrew Bible taking the form of a pig. But the king's willingness to include the dog among those "who are devoted to one," as he puts it, is equally astounding and quite wonderful.

### **Conclusion: Monism, Hierarchy, and Intolerance**

What do we learn from the ancient texts of this monistic/pluralistic Hinduism? We learn that the two basic sorts of pluralism, intellectual and social, are *not* connected in the way that might seem most obvious, and has indeed seemed obvious to many Orientalists and non-Hindu theologians. That is, ancient Hindu intellectual pluralism does not lead to ancient Hindu social tolerance.<sup>24</sup> One reason for this may simply be that

ancient Hindu pluralism did not ultimately carry the field. As we have seen, intellectual pluralism was successfully challenged and supplanted by two different sorts of non-pluralism that determined the course of subsequent Hindu thinking: the monism of the Vedanta and the hierarchy of caste Hinduism. Yet both hierarchical pluralism and monism continued (and continue) to exist in India cheek by jowl in uneasy symbiosis.

The pluralistic world, the world of Vedic ritual, was primarily orthoprax, not orthodox.<sup>25</sup> That is, it did not insist on doctrine (*doxis*) as long as ritual and social behavior (*praxis*) satisfied the standards of the particular group (usually a small caste group). It was intellectually pluralistic in that, in a manner still reminiscent of the *Rig Veda's* kathenotheism, each sect acknowledged the existence of gods other than their god(s), suitable for others to worship, but whom they did not care to worship themselves. On the other hand, when it came to social pluralism, there was a further split: the orthoprax world saw all social roles as equally valid—from the God's eye view—and the world of action as cumulatively pluralistic, exemplifying a desirable plenitude. This plenitude extends, ultimately, to a proposed solution to the problem of evil: disease and murder must exist, to make the universe complete. But it gave the *individual* no choice at all in his or her social role, no pluralism of action, though the hierarchy of values assigned to different roles might well have inspired the wish to make such choices. For, though all social roles were equal (in the eyes of God), some were more equal than others (in the eyes of men and women).

By contrast, the monistic world, the world of philosophy, was primarily orthodox. That is, renunciant sects (including Buddhism and Jainism), monistic both socially and intellectually, were far less doctrinaire about the behavior of the layperson (though

certainly more strict about the behavior of the monk, which was in many ways far more important to the sect as a whole) than orthoprax Hinduism was; but they were far more doctrinaire about belief. Logically, Hindu universalism should have led polytheistic Hindus to the belief that there was no point in trying to convert anyone else to Hinduism, yet this was not always the case. Vedic, orthoprax Hindus certainly made no efforts to convert anyone to Hinduism, arguing that you had to be born a Hindu to be a Hindu. But Vedantic Hindus lapsed back into the shadows of orthodoxy and argued that *their* particular brand of monism was more monistic than thou. Such Vedantins did indeed proselytize. And although proselytizing is not in itself necessarily intolerant, it does close the open-ended door of pluralism. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) took a famous Vedic line about the multiplicity of the gods (“The wise speak of what is One in many ways”),<sup>26</sup> made it refer not to a divine force but to an enlightenment force (“Truth is one; sages speak of it variously”),<sup>27</sup> and added (with Golwalkarian echoes): “India is the only country where there never has been a religious persecution.” Alas, would that this were so.

Eventually, the monistic view turned itself inside out to generate yet another sort of tolerance: it argued not only that all physical and immaterial things were one, but that all *religions* were also one, that Muslims and Christians really worshipped the same god that Hindus worshipped, but just called him Allah or Christ. This led to interesting misunderstandings when Christian missionaries fired their canons across the bows of South Asians. The Mughal Emperor Akbar, for instance, the descendant of the Babur who built the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, was a true pluralist; born a Muslim but with a Hindu wife, he entertained a veritable circus of holy men at his multi-religious salons,

much as the Upanishadic kings did in much earlier times, though of course with different religious options. He flirted with Christianity to such a degree that the missionaries congratulated themselves that he was on the brink of converting—until they realized that he still continued to worship at mosques (and, indeed, Hindu temples). On that occasion, as on many others, Muslim and Hindu pluralism ran up against Christian intolerance.

Puranic Hinduism (which remains alive and well today in India) is a strange mixture of these two currents which join but never merge, like streams of oil and water. Ritually, Puranic Hindus are Vedic, orthoprax. The fanatics among them are highly intolerant of people (such as Muslims and women) who *act* wrongly, who do not respect the bounds of the caste system. Philosophically, some of the orthoprax remain heterodox, and view with disdainful tolerance the divergent views of other religions. Others, however, are philosophically Vedantic, orthodox, and correspondingly intolerant of deviant doctrines. This gives them yet another reason, exacerbating their orthoprax reasons, to try to convert non-Hindus—or, in the case of Golwalkar and his followers, to disenfranchise them and, in the case of the present-day Hindutva faction, to deny the existence, or the validity, of many aspects of their own tradition.

The sort of pluralism that has prevailed in Hinduism is thus more of a multiplicity, often a belligerent multiplicity, than the mellow universalism that it has often claimed to be. But we can learn from India's long and complex history of pluralism not just some of the pitfalls to avoid—some of the mistakes that we need not repeat—but successes that we can emulate. We can follow in the paths of individuals like the Upanishadic kings or Yudhishtira or Akbar or Kabir or Gandhi, or indeed most rank-and-file Hindus, who embodied a truly tolerant individual pluralism. We can also take

heart from movements within Hinduism that rejected both hierarchy and violence, of which the most obviously significant is the *bhakti* movement that included women and Dalits within its ranks, rejected violent sacrifice, and advocated a theology of love. Yet here, too, we must curb our optimism by noting that it was in the name of *bhakti* (devotion) to the god Ram that the militant Hindus tore down the Babri mosque.

We learn from the history of Hinduism that would-be pluralists must realize and avoid two dangers, that they walk a razor's edge between denying diversity and hierarchizing it. As for the first danger, the Hindu example suggests that, for those who hope to enhance diversity and celebrate plenitude and to create a world where difference is a value, the hypothesis of an original unity from which all religions derive may not be as useful as the hypothesis of an original and essential pluralism. The Hindu example shows us the perils of universalism and warns us that monism may not be the solution that it at first appears to be. Granted, the universalistic hypothesis makes dialogue possible: it shows that all religions share some of the same problems. But we must take the harder but ultimately more rewarding path of going on to acknowledge that various religions offer rather different solutions to the basic human problems, and indeed, that they also recognize different problems.

When we consider the second danger that threatens pluralism, the danger of hierarchization, it is evident that although the rigid social system of ancient Hinduism does make possible a kind of pluralism in which various religions are acceptably different, as are men and women, Brahmins and Dalits, with complementary talents and weaknesses, it renders the "other" separate but unequal. And this hierarchical

modification of the pluralistic paradigm renders that social system intolerant in the eyes of most modern political philosophies, and certainly all liberal political policies.

More broadly speaking, you cannot have intellectual pluralism at all without some sort of hierarchy. Any time that we speak, and state our own views to someone else, someone “other,” we imply that we believe that what we are saying is better than the alternatives, and in that sense all statements of religious belief are attempts at conversion. To the extent that conversion argues, again, that one religion is better than the other, it is just the flip side of bigotry. And conversion can lead to new forms of fanaticism, often fueled by self-revulsion projected against the abandoned religion, the rejected self. But the leap from making a (necessarily hierarchical) statement to insisting that the person to whom we make it renounce his or her opposing views (let alone the further leap to threatening death or other punishment if our view is not accepted) is the leap from tolerance to intolerance. Look before you leap, is what I long to call out; look at the past, and imagine the future. For a compassionate understanding of the twisted relationship between pluralism and tolerance throughout Indian history is, I think, one rather faint ray of hope in the dark storm of religious intolerance.

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of this article appeared as “Do Many Heads Necessarily Have Many Minds? Tracking the Sources of Hindu Tolerance and Intolerance,” in *Parabola* 30:4 (Winter 2005): 10-19.

<sup>2</sup> M. S. Golwalkar, *We, Our Nationhood Defined* (Nagpur, India: Bharat Prakashan, 1939), 48-49 [2d ed. 1947, 55-56].

<sup>3</sup> Ronojoy Sen, “Legalizing Religion: The Indian Supreme Court and the Homogenization of the Nation” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2005), 6-38.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Binder, “Pakistan and Modern Islamic-Nationalist Theory: Part I,” *Middle East Journal* 11:4 (1957): 382-96, here 391.

<sup>5</sup> William Dalrymple, “India: The War Over History,” *The New York Review of Books*, 7 April 2005, 65. For a discussion of the consequences that the rise of Hindu nationalism has had upon scholarship on Hinduism, see my forthcoming essay, “Historical Scholarship and the Study of Hinduism,” in *India: Implementing Pluralism and Democracy*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Wendy Doniger.

<sup>6</sup> I will not concern myself in this essay with the other two domes, representing the more modern traditions of democracy and secularism.

<sup>7</sup> In the Disney film *Bambi* (1942), the mother of Thumper the rabbit asked him on several occasions, “Thumper, what did your father say?” and Thumper replied, “If you can’t say something good about a person, don’t say anything at all.”

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of mythological attitudes to this otherness, see Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Other Peoples’ Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), especially 15-21; and Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Sheryl Daniel, “The Tool Box Approach of the Tamil to the Issues of Moral Responsibility and Human Destiny,” in *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, ed. Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 27-63.

<sup>10</sup> *The Laws of Manu: A New Translation of the Manavadharmasastra*, trans. Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1991), 5.26-56.

<sup>11</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty, *Other Peoples’ Myths*, final chapter.

<sup>12</sup> See the full translation in *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*, trans. and annotated Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 25-6.

<sup>13</sup> *Rig Veda* (with the commentary of Sayana), 6 vols., (London: Oxford University Press, 1890-92) 10.121; see O’Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 26-28.

<sup>14</sup> *Aitareya Brahmamāna* (with the commentary of Sayana), (Calcutta: M. N. Sarkar, 1895) 3.21.

<sup>15</sup> *Shatapatha Brahmamāna* (Benares: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1964), 1.1.1.6: *idam aham ya evaasmi so ‘smi*.

<sup>16</sup> Sayana’s commentary on *Rig Veda*, 1.121.

<sup>17</sup> It is also somewhat reminiscent of the famous Abbott and Costello routine, “Who’s on first?”

<sup>18</sup> I am using the terms “Vedanta” and “Vedantic” here to designate the strain of Indian philosophy that begins with the Upanishads, climaxes with the great commentaries of Shankara and Ramanuja, and survives in the thought of Vedantins such as Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. By Vedic I mean not merely the Vedas but the entirely strain of Hinduism that endorses Vedic sacrifice and the worship of a pantheon of gods, as it is carried on to this day in Hindu temples and households.

<sup>19</sup> Compare Nu 11:25-29 and Mk 9:38-48 (KJV), which contrast the exclusivist view of Joshua (“My lord Moses, forbid them”) with the inclusivist view of Moses (“Would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets”) and the exclusivist view of John (“We forbid him, because he followeth not us”) with the inclusivist view of Jesus (“Forbid him not”).

<sup>20</sup> David Tracy, paper presented at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, 11 January 1993.

<sup>21</sup> Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, “Ethical and Non-Ethical Implications of the Separation of Heaven and Earth in Indian Mythology,” in *Cosmogony and Ethical Order: New Studies in Comparative Ethics*, ed. Frank Reynolds and Robin Lovin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 177-198.

<sup>22</sup> See Friedrich Wilhelm, “The Concept of Dharma in Artha and Kama Literature,” in *The Concept of Duty in South Asia*, ed. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty and J. Duncan M. Derrett (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1978), 66-79.

<sup>23</sup> See Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Varna System and the Origins of Caste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), for texts and arguments substantiating the social basis of Indian classificatory systems.

<sup>24</sup> See Frits Staal, “Über die Idee der Toleranz in Hinduism,” in *Kairos: Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft und Theologie* (1959): 215-218.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Rig Veda* 1.164.46; see O’Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 80. *ekam sad vipra bahu vadanti*. The context is clearly theistic rather than philosophical: “They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, and it is the heavenly bird that flies. The wise speak of what is One in many ways; they call it Agni, Yama, Matarishvan.”

<sup>27</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama 1971-73), 348.