Hinduism's Socio-Political Response to Western Hermeneutical Theories of Religion

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I. Despite such a pompous title, the basic argument of my presentation is quite simple and consists of six points: (1) that the Western hermeneutics of the word "religion" is conceptually foreign to India; (2) that its foreignness consists in the double implication of the word "religion" (a) that one may adhere to only one religion at a time or what may be called singular or unilateral religious participation and (b) that religion is separate from and separable from culture; (3) that this foreign concept of religion was institutionalized in India during the colonial period; (4) that the introduction of this foreign concept met with both acceptance and resistance in India; (5) that the tension generated by this dual reaction was foundational for the development of Hindutva ideology, which might not have arisen in a purely Indian context and that therefore (6) the hermeneutical approach of the West to the category of religion, and its application to India, is in a large measure responsible for the appearance of Hindu nationalism, especially as denoted by the word '*Hindutva*'.

Permit me now to proceed to unpack each of the six constituents of the argument in that order.

II. We may begin by asking: what is the western hermeneutics of the word "religion"? Many answers are possible but the one most relevant to the present discussion is the Western understanding that one may only owe allegiance to one religion at a time. Such an understanding of religion holds good for the West in both its modern and pre-modern phases.[2] In the pre-modern phase one could not be a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim at the same time. In the modern period this sense was carried over into the modern secularized understanding of religion.[3] Scholars have indeed wondered if one can ever "escape the vast implicit tautology that the religious is what the West considers religious on the basis of its own religious experience,"[4] namely, that religion implies exclusive adherence to one religion. In the case of

Christianity there is a further point involved, that religion can be separated from culture.[5]

III. This concept of religion, as involving adherence to only one religion, was institutionalized in India through the agency of the British census and subsequently in separate electorates for the Muslims and the Sikhs.[6] The fact that the term could not be applied to India without struggle is illustrative of the thesis of this paper. I mentioned above that the Western concept of religion in India was institutionalized through the agency of the British census. Such a census was introduced on a nationwide basis in 1881, but the problems posed by the application of the Western concept of religion did not fail to crop up even earlier or later. Allow me to illustrate this point in the context of first Hindu-Sikh and then Hindu-Muslim identities.

"In the preliminary Punjab census Sikhs were included as Hindus, but from 1868 onwards they were listed separately. No clear definition was supplied until the 1891 census, when enumerators were instructed to return as Sikhs those who followed the Khalsa order."[7] Hugh McLeod goes on to point out that "by 1911, however, it was realized that the 1891 tests were being generally ignored and it was accordingly decided to enter as a Sikh every person who claimed to be one."[8] It is however what he says next which is crucial for our discussion. He adds: "A new category, that of 'Sikh-Hindu', was also permitted. The same procedure was repeated in 1921, clearly implying that, although administrators are meant to be neat and precise, this particular tangle had proved to be too daunting to unravel."[9]

The issue of who is a Sikh was ultimately resolved legally in 1925, in a way that registers the triumph of the Western concept of religion over the Indic. The Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925, Chapter 1 "defined a Sikh as 'a person who professes the Sikh religion'; adding that the following declaration should be required if any doubt should arise: 'I solemnly affirm that I am a Sikh, that I believe in the Guru Granth Sahib, that I believe in the ten Gurus and *that I have no other religion*'."[10]

One can identify here the precise point at which the Western concept of religion has begun to shape the Indian reality, when the phrase "I have no other religion" is formally made part and parcel of the self-identity of a Sikh.

The situation of a 35,000-strong community of 'Hindu-Muhammadans' in Gujarat from broadly the same period illustrates

the same problem in the context of Hindu-Muslim identity. When the Bombay census superintendent expressed his inability to qualify them as either Hindu or Muslim on account of the community's "inextricable combination of multiple practices," he was "pulled up sharply by his superior, census Commissioner E.A. Gait, who ordered the location of the 'persons' concerned to one or another as best as he could."[11]

IV. The introduction of such an exclusive concept of religion in India produced a mixed reaction. We have seen above how the Sikhs, or a section of the Sikhs, gradually accepted it. It was less problematical in the case of a Hindu-Muslim context because, by and large, Islam shares this view of religion as involving exclusive adherence, although it was challenged in India from time to time. A Brahmin, named variously as Lodhan or Bodhan, was ultimately executed for claiming, during the period of the Delhi Sultanate, that *both* Hinduism and Islam were true. He was given the opportunity to convert to Islam before the sentence was carried out—which highlights the point of exclusive adherence under discussion. By the Mughal period, however, the situation seems to have changed somewhat, leading Dara Shikoh to propose that the Qur'ān may be interpreted in light of the Vedas.

During the period of Muslim rule over India, however, the *Indians themselves* had not yielded to such a definition of a religion the way they did under British rule when some sections, such as the Sikhs, began to accept this as a part of their self-definition. That this concept has left its mark on India is illustrated by its implicit adoption by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1956, when many Dalits converted to Buddhism under his leadership. "The oldest Buddhist monk in India initiated him, and then Ambedkar administered the three refuges, the five vows, and *twenty-four oaths of his own devising* to an assembled multitude that may have numbered half a million people."[12]

These additional oaths involve the repudiation of the gods of Hinduism. The original formula for accepting Buddhism does not contain any such exclusionary statements. That it was not intended to be so is supported by the fact that the Buddha allowed his Jaina converts to continue to patronize Jainism and that *brāhmanahood* (brahmaññam) is seen as one of the highest virtues of a Buddhist monk (*Vin* 3.72).[13]

V. The application of the Western concept of religion under British Raj thus began to promote the growth of exclusive religious identities. Such exclusion, when posited between Hinduism and Islam, created problems in the case of some communities in India but did not, on the whole, generate the same degree of anxiety as its application to other religions of Indian origin, such as Sikhism, for the "Hindu" community at large. This is clear from the numerous references to the Sikhs contained in that foundational work of *Hindutva*, called by the same name, when it appeared in the 1920s.[14] The question the "Hindu" community now faced was: how does it maintain its integrity in the face of the centrifugal tendencies generated by the introduction of the exclusive concept of religion on what it considered its home ground, characterized by multiple examples of religious participation.

The solution which V.D. Savarkar proposed was based on a feature of Hinduism which distinguishes it from Christianity, namely, that, within it, religion and culture are not distinguished as they are in the West. Savarkar proposed a solution based on the claim that Hinduism was *both* a religion and a *culture*. So even if some religions of Indian origin began to consider themselves as *religions* distinct from Hinduism, they could still be seen as sharing the Hindu *cultural* milieu. As the word *Hindiusm* had already acquired the connotation of a religion, he coined the word *Hindutva* to denote this "Hindu" culture shared by the various religions of Indian origin such as Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism, and of course, Hinduism.

In other words, Savarkar was trying to maintain the unity and integrity of the Indic religious tradition, threatened by the application of the exclusive Western concept of *religion* to it, by drawing upon another feature of the use of the word in the West itself—its distinction from *culture*—as a remedy for what he perceived as the problem caused by the introduction of the Western concept of religion in the Indian milieu. This is how the matter may be stated from a Western point of view. From an Indic point of view both western connotations of the word—as setting one religion apart from another, and setting religion apart from culture—were doubtful starters to begin with.

VI. Now we can see how the concept of *Hindu Rashtra*, or a nation which rests on Hindu *cultural* formations, emerges as a counterthrust to the *religious* divisiveness introduced by the Western use of the word religion in the Indian context, when it began to shape the Indian

reality in its own terms. Hindutva thus represents one important dimension of Hinduism's socio-political response to Western hermeneutical theories of religion.

Notes

1. This paper was originally presented at the 2003 American Academy of Religion annual convention in Atlanta, Georgia. AAR's Hinduism Group created a conference panel of four speakers to discuss the topic "Hinduism and Western Hermeneutics: Problems and Possibilities." ARC presents this paper courtesy of Professor Arvind Sharma, a colleague for many years of Professor Wisse in the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University.

2. See Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

3. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

4. Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*, 10.

5. Winston L. King, "Religion", in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (16 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1987) 12:282–86.

6. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 168; W.H. McLeod, infra, 90.

7. W.H. McLeod, *Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 86.

8. Ibid., 87.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., emphasis added.

11. Sumit Sarkar, "Conversion and Politics of the Hindu Right," *Economic and Political Weekly* (June 26, 1999): 1694.

12. Stephen Hay, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 2d ed. (2 vols.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 2:347, emphasis added.

13. K.T.S. Sarao, *Origin and Nature of Ancient Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: R&R, 1999), 116 n. 20.

14. V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (Bombay: Savarkar Sadan, 1969 {1923}) passim.