

The History of the Academic Study of Religion in Universities, Centers, and Institutes in India¹

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Abstract

India is home to more than 800 million Hindus and has a massive higher education system that is overseen by the University Grants Commission (UGC). Despite this, there are hardly any departments of religion or Hinduism in India, but the UGC, even though it has a secular mission, funds universities with explicit religious affiliations. This article traces the reasons for these paradoxes and discusses the apparent lacuna of religious studies departments by looking at the genealogy of the study of religion in India. It initially looks at the contested terrain of nineteenth-century educational institutions. The work of British missionaries, Orientalists, and government officials form the imperial context to understand Charles Wood's momentous *Despatch* (1854), which, on the one hand, argues for secular institutions but, on the other, tries to accommodate the work of the Orientalists and the missionaries. Wood recommends a system in which government subsidies, secular education, and universities with overt religious profiles become interlocked, but the formal study of religion is bypassed. Finally, I reconsider what the "dearth" of religious studies and the "absence" of Hinduism departments reveal about

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the construction of religion in India itself. The lack of conceptual correspondence between “religion” and “Hinduism” as taught in Western academic contexts does not preclude the formal study of religion in India. Instead, the study of religion is conducted within particularized frameworks germane to the Indic context, using a network of unique institutes. Reflection on these distinctively Indian epistemological frameworks push new ways of thinking about religious education and the construction of religion as an object of study in South Asia.

Keywords

education in India – religious studies – South Asia – Hinduism



The star of *Allah O Akbar* is the guiding star of Jamia. Its eyes are fixed on this star which shows it the path in the darkling world. It reflects the truth that Allah is the greatest and he who bows his head before Him only, discovers the truth Through the Holy Quran, Allah has revealed His Will

— On the university seal of *Jamia Millia Islamia* (National Islamic University), New Delhi, India²

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² Jamia Millia Islamia 2012b.



SARASWATI [i]s the Goddess of Learning, wisdom and knowledge . . . She represents par excellence the ideals of Indian culture, all that is Best in her Philosophy, Religion, Life and Art. She is the Shakti, the propelling energy of Brahma, the Creator and all that has been created.

— On the university seal of *Kāśī Hindū Viśvavidyālaya* (B.H.U.), Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India³



Higher education in India is governed by the University Grants Commission (UGC), a centrally administered body charged with promoting secular education, in line with the preamble to India's Constitution, which asserts that India is a sovereign, *socialist, secular* democratic republic.⁴ Two of the system's

³ Banaras Hindu University 2013b.

⁴ The words "secular" and "socialist" were added to the Preamble in an amendment in 1976 (Madan 2003:63). Notable discussions on what "secular" means in the many Indian contexts

flagship institutes are the National Islamic University (Jamia Millia Islamia, hereafter Jamia), founded in 1920 in what is now New Delhi, and the *Kāśī Hindū Viśvavidyālaya* (also known as Banaras Hindu University, hereafter B.H.U.), founded in 1915–1916 in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. Both Jamia and B.H.U. were standard-bearers of the early twentieth-century drive to modernize education in India and key institutions in the growth of the Indian Independence movement. Known as “Central” Universities in the Indian context, they must offer “secular” curricula in order to be eligible for subsidies and academic accreditation from the UGC. This imperative is handed down from the UGC itself, through its mandate to regulate higher education, uphold academic standards, and provide educational opportunities in line with the classical Nehruvian model of secularism. This declared that there should be “no religious instruction in state educational institutions (Art. 28.1.2.3),” and that “the intention of the Constitution is neither to oppose religion nor to promote a rationalization of culture but merely to maintain the neutrality and impartiality of the state in matters of religion.”⁵

Despite being model “modern” institutions in India, both Jamia and B.H.U. graphically showcase their religious underpinnings in their institutional logos and mottos. Jamia’s mandate is figuratively aligned with the divine grace of Allah, “[t]he star of Allah O Akbar is the guiding star of Jamia,” whereas B.H.U. includes the aim of promoting “the study of the Hindu Shastras [texts] and of Sanskrit literature generally as a means of preserving and popularizing for the benefit of the Hindus in particular” as the first of its four institutional objectives.⁶ The religious antecedents of B.H.U. are further underscored in its Sanskrit-language motto, *विद्यया अमृतं अश्नुते*, “immortality through knowledge” (*vidyayā amṛtam aśnute*).⁷ How is this overtly religious affiliation reconciled with the delivery of secular education? And how does this paradox give insight into the construction of religion in India? To answer these questions, we have to examine the historical sequence of events that made it possible for universities

include Smith 1962; Nandy 1988, 1995; Baird 1991; Larson 1995, 2001; Madan 1997; Bhargava 1998; and Galanter 1999. Nandy’s views on secularism are discussed in detail in Tharamangalam 1995 and Deftereos 2009.

5 Tharamangalam 1995:457. The classical Nehruvian model of secularism further said that “the intention of the Constitution is neither to oppose religion nor to promote a rationalization of culture but merely to maintain the neutrality and impartiality of the state in matters of religion” (Tharamangalam 1995:457). Nehru himself defined a secular state not as one with a clear separation from the church, but as one “which honors all faiths equally and gives them (i.e., their followers) equal opportunities” (Gopal 1980:330–331, quoted in Madan 2003:63).

6 Jamia Millia Islamia 2012b and Banaras Hindu University 2013c.

7 Banaras Hindu University 2011.

such as Jamia and B.H.U. to be recognized as state or central universities and to be funded by the secular government.

Apart from clearly proclaiming their religious affiliations, both Jamia and B.H.U. formally offer courses in the academic, non-confessional study of religion, as distinguished from theological or religious instruction. They actively promote the study of comparative religion, especially “Indian” religion, in connection with philosophy and Indology. What is noteworthy, however, is that they are among the very *few* institutions in India which do offer a formal curriculum in religious studies. Institutions of higher learning in the sub-continent have traditionally not had departments dedicated to the academic study of religion for a number of reasons. Against a pool of more than 42 Central Universities, 183 State Universities (all with affiliated colleges), 130 institutions that are “Deemed” Universities, and over five thousand tertiary institutes offering “secular” education, this appears to be a significant “dearth” of institutions offering critical perspectives on religious studies.⁸

The first — and major — part of this article explores the historical context and circumstances behind the emergence of the modern university system in British India which paradoxically led to (a) institutions with a religious countenance being part of a secular educational system, on the one hand, and (b) to the dearth of religious studies departments, on the other.

Initially, I look at the actions and writings of the major British players which led to the momentous recommendations contained in the *Despatch from the Court of Directors of the East India Company, to the Governor General of India*

8 As of 10 November 2011, the UGC Act (1956) covered 42 Central Universities (University Grants Commission 2013a), 183 State Universities as of 30 June 2012 (University Grants Commission 2013d), and 130 “Deemed” (to be Universities) as of 23 June 2008 (University Grants Commission 2013c). The UGC also lists 6,014 colleges recognized under Section 2(f) and 12(B); from these, 5,449 were eligible for central assistance, including UGC grants (under section 12(B)). See University Grants Commission 2013b.

For an explanation of the classification of universities, see *The University Grants Commission Act, 1956, as modified up to 20 December 1985, and Rules and Regulations under the Act* (2002:6; hereafter UGC Act). Relevant sections include:

“2(f): ‘University’ means a University established or incorporated by or under a Central Act, a Provincial Act or a State Act, and includes any such institution as may, in consultation with the University concerned, be recognised by the Commission in accordance with the regulations made in this behalf under this Act . . .

12(b): allocate and disburse, out of the Fund of the Commission, grants to Universities established or incorporated by or under a Central Act for the maintenance and development of such Universities. . . .” (2002:6, 10).

in Council, (No. 49, dated the 19th July 1854) (hereafter *Despatch*),⁹ authored by Charles Wood. The *Despatch* profoundly shaped the structure and framework of higher education in India, and impacted where and how studies of religion(s) take place in academic settings. I then explore the evident paradox in trying to reconcile the explicitly religious heritage of many of India's most famous institutions of higher learning with the Centre's (that is, the Indian government's) mandate of secularism.

Another major line of inquiry explores the conditions for what appears to constitute a lacuna in Indian academia — despite the fact that India reports more than 800 million of its citizens as “Hindu” — a religious majority of 80.5% — there is not a single academic department of “Hinduism” recognized in India. What can this gap in categorization tell us about the construction of religion in India specifically, and religious education in South Asia more generally? In doing so, I ask what frameworks are used in India to engage critically and intellectually with religious studies topics?¹⁰ I focus here on the academic study of religion (as distinguished from theological and confessional viewpoints), as undertaken in mainstream, UGC-recognized universities and centers of higher learning nationwide. I build upon previous scholarship on this topic, including Carman 1969; Llewellyn 2008a, 2008b; Robinson 2004; Robinson and Sinha 2008, and suggest new perspectives on the apparent “dearth” of “religious studies” and the “absence” of “Hinduism” departments in India.

Two excellent essays — those of Carman (1969) and Llewellyn (2008a) — discuss the twentieth-century educational commissions and the content of their reports as historical factors for the dearth of religion departments in India. Universities in India were modeled after the University of London, which did not have a department of religion.¹¹ Carman emphasizes the “modern”

9 I have retained the original spelling of “Despatch,” the British variant of “dispatch,” throughout this article to match the nineteenth-century usage of the author, Charles Wood.

10 The primary research in this article draws from documents, books, papers, and internet resources, as well as my own insights on the UGC system, in which I have occupied various roles over decades: postgraduate student, visiting lecturer, and external dissertation examiner. My perspectives on Dravidian University and other centers and departments are partially informed by my experiences as an invited lecturer. Some perspectives are informed by serving in the “programme committee” and evaluating paper submissions for conferences such as the Second International Conference on Religions and Cultures in the Indic Civilisation in 2005 and the World Sanskrit Conferences.

11 The University of London (established in 1836 as a non-residential school) was to administer examinations to students of University College and King's College, but “[s]ince the religious affiliations of these schools did not agree, religion or theology was not a subject tested by the University of London. So it could be omitted in the new Indian universities

and “secular” nature of this university, but it is also important to note that the *academic* study of religions was not prevalent in universities then. Religious Studies was done from a confessional or sectarian stance, which did not fit the “secular” nature of the university; thus, the University of London stayed clear of this subject. There was, however, more to this story.

Despite the University of London not wanting to teach religion — which, in this case, would have been theology if one understands the term in the manner suggested by Alles as formulating “religious truth” (Alles 2008:5), it was, nevertheless, closely affiliated with many “denominational” colleges, which were in “close connexion” with the Church of England.¹² This was acknowledged by Charles Wood in his *Despatch*, in which he notes that the University of London granted degrees through close association with religious colleges.

Wood’s negotiation between Orientalists, missionaries, and administrators, as well as his attempt to implement the official British policy of the government’s neutrality in matters of religion, shapes his approach to secularism and religious education. This, to a large measure, helps to account for the institutional “dearth” of religious studies curricula in almost all universities in India — more than one hundred and fifty years since his *Despatch* helped to bring them into existence. It also explains how educational institutions can receive subsidies from a secular, federal agency but maintain religious profiles.

The Imperial and Intellectual Framing of Wood’s *Despatch*

Scholarly discussions in Europe in the nineteenth century on the meaning and scope of “religion,” “world religions,” and theories of religion, along with the activities of Orientalist scholars, missionaries, and British administrators in

as well. And since these universities were non-residential, the government also dodged the issue of the religious formation of the students, which was otherwise a regular feature of college life in the nineteenth century” (Llewellyn 2008a:7–8). See also Llewellyn 2008b and Carman 1969.

- 12 Going beyond the traditional and facile “insider” and “outsider” ideas made in describing theology and the study of religions, Alles makes this useful distinction: “The aim of the study of religions is knowledge about religions. The aim of theology is to formulate religious truth” (2008:5). Expanding on this, he says that he is “using the word ‘theology’ as a metonym. It stands for any religious claim advanced for serious intellectual consideration, regardless of the religious tradition to which the person making the claim belongs, regardless of whether the person identifies herself as religious or only as ‘spiritual,’ and regardless of whether that reflection occurs in the context of a widely recognized religion or a new—or ‘ancient’—practice like neo-shamanism or Wicca” (Alles 2008:11 n. 6).

India, frame the times in which Charles Wood wrote his *Despatch*, and, therefore, the genealogies of how religion gets to be studied in India. Max Müller's philological explorations, his linguistic theory of the origins of myth, and Tylor's evolutionary anthropology are important markers in the West's fascination with the cultures of Asia and Africa. Max Müller, the famous Indologist, also gave the Gifford lectures in 1888, delineating a typology of Natural, Physical, Anthropological, and Psychological Religion. Noting these developments, David Chidester argues that in the second half of the nineteenth century, "comparative religion emerged as an important imperial enterprise at the nexus of science and representation, that promised to extend the global scope of knowledge and power within the British empire" (2003:71). The raw religious materials, he says, were transformed into intellectual processed goods of this new imperial science of comparative religion. Chidester writes that the major players in South Africa were the metropolitan theorists (such as Max Müller and E.B. Tylor), European observers (travelers and missionaries at the "colonized periphery" such as Wilhelm Bleek and Henry Callaway), as well as local experts and indigenous scholars in South Africa who acted as important mediators in the formation of the theory of comparative religion. All of these players functioned as intercultural translators and mediators; and it is the "triple mediation" that "mixed and merged in the formation of imperial comparative religion" (Chidester 2003:72).

The movers among the colonial guard in India — the "Orientalists" (scholars, primarily of languages and Sanskrit texts), the missionaries, and the government/East India Company administrators — worked, of course, with many categories of Indians, notably newly emerging "religious" leaders and traditional scholars in the production of "religion" and "sacred texts." All of them were key players in the creation of universities in India, and all three groups, along with the Indian elite, debated over the language of instruction. The language would be crucial in the transmission of concepts in religious studies.

The Orientalists who worked in India (part of the "observer" category Chidester mentions) included William Jones, who established the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 and whose interest in traditional scholarship in India — including local medicine, botany, metallurgy, and geography — comes through in addresses to the Asiatic Society. In 1785, Jones was already comfortable with the use of the word "Hindu" to refer to the local people and in talking about Hinduism (1824:9). There were several other renowned scholars, including Charles Wilkins, who, with Hindu pundits, translated the *Bhagavad Gita* in 1785, the *Hitopadeśa* in 1787, and a grammar of Sanskrit in 1808; another was Horace Hayman Wilson, who translated several Sanskrit plays and presided over the compilation of the first Sanskrit dictionary. Wilson strongly opposed

the move to make English the primary medium of teaching in India — and lost the battle in 1835.

A key player in arguing the primacy of English as a language of instruction in India, along with Thomas Babington Macaulay, was Alexander Duff (1806–1878), a Church of Scotland missionary and author of *India and India Missions: Including Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism Both in Theory and in Practice*.¹³ In 1813, the Clapham sect evangelists were successful in changing the missionary policy of the East India Company (Seth 2006:28). The floodgates for British conversion activities were opened, and Duff was the first overseas preacher sent by his church to India; indeed, no missionary “was as successful as he in impressing upon government administrators the urgency of moral and religious instruction” (Viswanathan 1989:49).

In Duff’s estimate, the decision on the language of instruction would forever influence the future of religion and education in India. The Orientalists and missionaries, as well as the government officials, apparently favored Sanskrit (Duff 1840:540–542). He reports the debates surrounding the language of instruction: should the instruction be in the vernacular, Sanskrit, or English? After dismissing the utility of the vernacular in contemptuous terms (using Bengali as an example), he says that one was left with a choice between Sanskrit and English for all education. This was of utmost consequence from the viewpoint of the church; Duff argues,

The determination of this choice involved the decision of one of the momentous practical questions connected with the ultimate evangelization of India . . . The question was, Which shall hereafter be established as the *language of learning* in India? Which will prove the most effective instrument of a large, liberal, and enlightened education! — the best primary medium of conveying the literature, science, and Christian theology of Europe . . . The wrong determination of so vital a question, *at the outset*, would have greatly retarded and embarrassed every subsequent movement. It was not, therefore, without earnest prayer to God for counsel and direction, that a decision was attempted. (Duff 1840:541–542)

Duff made his position clear; it is English which will educate people, such that their earlier superstitions will be blown away. He noted “that the resolution was taken after the mature consideration, wholly to repudiate the Sanskrit and other learned languages of India as the best instruments of a superior

13 For a thoughtful assessment of Duff’s larger role in the educational enterprise, see Viswanathan 1989.

education, — and openly and fearlessly to proclaim the English the most effective medium of Indian illumination, — the best and amplest channel for speedily letting in the full stream of European knowledge” (Duff 1840:542).

The language of instruction that Duff endorsed, as well as the work of the Orientalists which Duff acknowledged, are both important in understanding the context of the study of religion in India. The work of the Orientalists — their translations, commentaries, and treatises — was used in the construction of the academic study of Hinduism. Indeed, Wilson’s translation of the *Vishnu Purana* is still the standard version almost two hundred years after it was published. As a missionary, Duff felt eminently qualified to interpret Hinduism to the church hierarchies, as well as to the public. As early as 1840, Duff said there was an *overabundance* of materials on Hinduism:

What is Hinduism? The *existing* materials for furnishing such a reply are more than abundant. Indeed, it is their very superabundance which constitutes the difficulty of generalizing and reducing them to a consecutive form, and within reasonable limits. They are to be found in works translated, in whole or in part, from the Sanskrit language; such as the Institutes of Manu, the Bhagavad Gita, the Ramayan, &c. They are to be found in analysis, reviews, and dissertations scattered in profusion over the ponderous series of “Asiatic Researches”; the transactions of various Asiatic Societies at home and abroad; and the miscellaneous papers inserted in Asiatic Journals and Registers. They are to be found in separate treatises on the history and literature, the philosophy and mythology, of the Hindus. Now, what seemed wanting was a *brief connected summary of leading principles*; — a summary which might open up to the inexperienced, or to such as have no time for ampler investigations, a brief but comprehensive glimpse of the stupendous system of Hinduism; — a summary which might tend to show how the varied parts of so incongruous and multifarious a scheme are made to hang together; — a summary which might enable readers ever afterwards to refer the apparently unconnected and boundless variety of practical details to their proper bearing and position in the great chart of theoretic Brahmanism. Such a summary the Author has endeavored, however imperfectly, to supply. (1840:vii)

Duff has listed the then-accepted primary and secondary sources of Hinduism. But the relationship between the missionaries and the government administrators was complicated at best. Although the official policy of the state was that of non-interference with the local religions, the missionaries had the enthusiastic moral support of the British people, and many of the administrators were

pious Christians. A little known fact is that Thomas Babington Macaulay, author of the notorious *Minute on Indian Education* (1835), which set the course of education on the sub-continent, was the son of Zachary Macaulay (1768–1838) and nephew of Thomas Babington, both ardent members of the Clapham Sect, which had lobbied for missionary activity in the colonies.¹⁴ Charles Wood had both to acknowledge and accommodate the Orientalists and to compromise with the missionaries in delineating the blueprint for India's educational system in his *Despatch*.

Charles Wood and the Educational *Despatch* of 1854

In 1854, Charles Wood recommended to Lord Dalhousie, the then-governor-general of India, that secular education departments should be established in every province. This *Despatch* had enormous consequences in South Asia, for, in short order, the first three “modern” universities in India were established in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1857. The universities' aim was to impart “an exclusively secular” education to the population of India for “its benefit”:

Considerable misapprehension appears to exist as to our views with respect to religious instruction in the Government institutions. Those institutions were founded for the benefit of the whole population of India; and in order to effect their object, it was and is indispensable that the education conveyed in them should be exclusively secular. (*Despatch* 84)

In articulating the qualities of the “secular” required for funding eligibility, Wood categorically stated that theological topics must be excluded from institutions' formally-examined programs, saying that “examinations for degrees in these proposed universities will not include any subjects connected with religious belief” (*Despatch* 28). On the one hand, Wood, in deference to the Orientalists and the pressure they exerted, encouraged the study of Sanskrit and regional languages; but, on the other, he was amply aware that such literature was often “religious.” He therefore advised that

14 Zachary Macaulay was the editor of the *Christian Observer*, the journal of the Clapham Sect evangelists.

[t]he grammar of these languages, and their application to the improvement of the spoken languages of the country, are the points to which the attention of those professors should be mainly directed; and there will be an ample field for their labors unconnected with any instruction in the tenets of the Hindoo or Mahomedan religions. We should refuse to sanction any such teaching, as directly opposed to the principles of religious neutrality to which we have always adhered. (*Despatch 32*)¹⁵

Thus, Wood accommodated the Orientalists' demand for some study of local languages and literatures, but was wary that it would involve the teaching of Hindu or Muslim religious literature that would offend both the missionaries and the administrators. In deference to them, Wood hastily said that he only encouraged the study of the grammar and the improvement of the vernacular languages.

With regard to the religious persuasion of the college administrators, Wood stated that the administration of the affiliated institutions — and hence their control of academic standards — should include a range of interreligious representatives: “the affiliated institutions will be under the management of persons of every variety of religious persuasion” (*Despatch 28*). By this, Wood meant that a university may have several colleges affiliated with it and that these colleges may possibly be run by Christian, Hindu, or Muslim administrations. This proviso theoretically prepared an early (mid-nineteenth century) institutional framework for the modern university administrative system *by allowing colleges belonging to religious traditions to be affiliated with a “secular” university*.

Wood precluded the explicit teaching of “religious belief” in the proposed universities, but allowed that just as the parochial institutions closely connected with the Church of England are affiliated with the University of London, so too can colleges connected with Indian religions be affiliated with the new secular universities. Citing the relationship between the University of London

15 Queen Victoria's proclamation, made on 1 November 1858, four years after Wood's *Despatch* and in the context of the “mutiny,” reaffirmed the neutrality of British rule in matters of religion: “Firmly relying Ourselves on the truth of Christianity, and acknowledging with gratitude the solace of Religion, We disclaim alike the Right and the Desire to impose our Convictions on any of Our Subjects. We declare it to be Our Royal Will and Pleasure that none be in any wise favored, none molested or disquieted by the reason of their Religious Faith or Observances; but that all shall alike enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the Law: and We do strictly charge and enjoin all those who may be in authority under Us, that they abstain from all interference with the Religious Belief or Worship of any of Our Subjects, on pain of Our highest Displeasure” (1858:2). See the *Proclamation by the Queen in Council*.

and a network of Christian colleges as a practical example of how the new universities in India could deliver secular education in concert with existing religious colleges, Wood says:

[V]arious institutions in immediate connexion with the Church of England, the Presbyterian College at Caermarthen, the Roman Catholic College at Oscott, the Wesleyan College at Sheffield, [and] the Baptist College at Bristol . . . are among the institutions from which the London University is empowered to receive certificates for degrees . . . [So too] institutions conducted by all denominations of Christians, Hindoos, Mahommedans, Parsees, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, or any other religious persuasions, may be affiliated to the universities, if they are found to afford the requisite course of study, and can be depended upon for the certificates of conduct which will be required. (*Despatch* 28)

Indeed, this suggestion of incorporating religious colleges into the central system was successfully implemented in India. For example, when Madras University was founded in 1857, it extended affiliation to the CMS College of Kottayam (Church Missionary Society of England), itself founded in 1817 in the princely state of Travancore. The Serampore College, which was to be a “College for the instruction of Asiatic Christian and other Youth in Eastern Literature and European Science,” was founded in 1818 in Serampore (a Danish holding), and the Scottish Church College (established in 1830) became affiliated with the University of Calcutta; the theological wing of the Serampore College, while governed by the University Grants Commission, now remains independent without affiliation to the University of Calcutta.¹⁶

It is clear that the lines between secular and theological instruction here are fuzzy; “secular” is not separation from church matters; it is not *either* “church” *or* “state,” but could be “church” *and* “state” if there is an inclination to add the “church” to a secular curriculum. Wood walked a fine line between the “religious neutrality” of the state university and the pragmatism of co-opting denominational colleges or those with religious connections and making them part of the larger educational network by giving them “grants.” This kept the missionaries who ran colleges happy; at the same time, he tried to pacify the Orientalists’ demand for encouraging Sanskrit and local languages.

16 One of the few colleges founded by Hindus was the Presidency College (formerly known as the “Hindu College”), which was started by Raja Rammohun Roy and his friends in Calcutta in 1817.

Access to scripture and other “religious” materials would be permitted, as long as it did not interfere with a secular, modern education. Wood countered pressure from Christian missionaries and the larger public in England, which said that the setting up of “secular” teaching institutions would be a drain on the imperial exchequer without the benefit of proselytizing, by recommending that “voluntary” discussions or teaching about religion should be allowed but simply ignored by government inspectors:

The Bible is, we understand, placed in the libraries of the colleges and schools and the pupils are able freely to consult it. This is as it should be; and, moreover we have no desire to prevent, or discourage, any explanation which the pupils may, of their own free will, ask from the masters upon the subject of the Christian religion provided that such information be given out of school hours. Such instruction being entirely voluntary on both sides, it is necessary, in order to prevent the slightest suspicion of an intention of our part to make use of the influence of Government for the purpose of proselytism, that no notice shall be taken of it by the inspectors in their periodical visits. (*Despatch 84*)

In short, religious curricula could appear alongside secular curricula at the discretion of the colleges. Yet why should government inspectors charged with upholding “secularism” ignore evidence of religiosity, such as acts of worship, calls to prayer, and other overtly religious practices? Wood did not want to antagonize the Christian missionaries. Instead, he recommended using these religious schools by giving them “grants-in-aid” as long as they also provided secular education. The state should abstain “*from interference*” with theological instruction as well as subsidies to the colleges:

The system of grants-in-aid, which we propose to establish in India will be based on *an entire abstinence from interference with the religious instruction* conveyed in the school assisted. Aid will be given... to all schools which impart a good secular education, provided that they are under adequate local management... In their periodical inspections, *no notice whatsoever should be taken by them [i.e., the inspectors] of religious doctrines which may be taught in any school*; and their duty should be strictly confined to ascertaining whether the secular knowledge conveyed is such as to entitle it to consideration in the distribution of the sum which will be applied to grants-in-aid. (*Despatch 53, 56*; italics added)

While he technically gave this opportunity to religious schools of all faiths, a reality check of the times would indicate that in the era Wood was making the recommendations, there were more Christian educational institutions than Hindu or Muslim institutions that had the capacity of delivering a robust educational curriculum.

This model continues to be highly significant; it is, in part, this model that accounts for the “paradox” of the religiously affiliated Jamia and B.H.U. being part of the “Central” University network in India today. In summary, Wood’s recommendations are of extraordinary significance; long after independence, in secular India, we find these principles still flourishing in practices in institutions of higher learning.

Twentieth-Century Educational Commissions and Recommendations for the Teaching of Religion

Several commissions in the twentieth century argued for the teaching of religion from specific perspectives. Notable among these were the Zakir Hussain Committee (1938), the University Education Commission (1948), The Sri Prakasa Commission (1959), and the Kothari Commission (1964–1966). Llewellyn writes that

the 1938 Zakir Hussain Committee, which worked under the Congress umbrella, [was] inspired by Mohandas Gandhi’s ideals. One of its social study objectives was to “develop mutual respect for the world religions.” And to this was added the explanation that “A course in history, in geography, in civics, and in current events combined with a reverential study of the different religions of the world showing how in essentials they meet in perfect harmony, will help to meet these objectives (quoted in Aggarwal 1993:55). (Llewellyn 2008a:10)

During 1948–1949, the University Education (also known as the Radhakrishnan) Commission declared that the study of religion was not the same as the confessional teaching or propagation of the subject.¹⁷ However, its secularist recommendations were coupled with some unique additions: the commission also encouraged *a few minutes of silent meditation* as well as the study of religious

17 Its impact on secularism in Indian higher education is akin to the 1963 landmark ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, which deemed Bible reading in public schools unconstitutional (see *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963)). The U.S. ruling also allowed for the academic teaching of religion, that is, teaching *about* religion, in public schools and universities.

biographies of figures including Zarathushtra and Buddha. In the second year, students were to study the “universalist” aspects of religion, and in the third, specific problems in the philosophy of religion. Thus, even though the commission did not advocate the propagation of any specific religious tradition, there were pre-determined “spiritual” goals set up that were in alignment with a “universalist” content of religion. There is a ring of “ultimate truth” to the belief in the “universalist” aspects of religion; it becomes, one may argue, an act of theology. And since the Hindu tradition as articulated in many contexts by Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and others is also seen as a “universal” religion, this point is even more striking.

Moreover, the Radhakrishnan Commission recommended that by the second year of study, “selections of a universalist character from the Scriptures of the world should be studied”; it also “advocated this kind of religion of inclusiveness not only because it is good politics but also because it leads to the ultimate Truth, to the ‘all embracing God’” Llewellyn (2008a:11–13). This report also says that “[a] religion worthy of the all embracing God must harmonise all faiths into one universal synthesis” (Llewellyn 2008a:13).

And perhaps this is not surprising coming from Radhakrishnan, a philosopher and former president of India. Joachim Wach, writing about Radhakrishnan and the comparative study of religion, opens his essay thus:

The comparative study of religions has never been merely an academic concern for the great Hindu scholar to whose philosophy this volume is dedicated. He has been existentially interested in such studies since the days of his youth . . . Here are some of the convictions to which the comparative study of religions has led the distinguished Hindu thinker: “It increases our confidence in the universality of God and our respect for the human race.” (Wach 1988:115–116)¹⁸

Later commissions focusing on education advocated the study of religion for various reasons. The Sri Prakasa Report encouraged “the study of Indian religions insofar as they provide support for the moral and spiritual values that must be imparted to students to arrest the decline of discipline and character, the loosening of social relationships, and increased materialism” (Carman 1969:3).

18 Wach cites Radhakrishnan as regarding the expressions of various religions as “tentative adjustments, more or less satisfactory, to the same spiritual reality after which the human spirit feels and by which, in some manner, it is acted upon” (Wach 1988:116).

The educational commissions clearly advocate the study of religion not as part of a rigorous liberal arts or social sciences education — the academic habitats for the study of religion in America and in Europe — but as *instrumental* to the development of moral values, to develop spirituality, and to help get rid of stereotypes. These claims, masked by the language of “universalism,” — itself a claim of truth — become theological positions. Thus, some of these commissions charged with exploring the viability of teaching religion in universities argued that *not* teaching religion led to a lacuna in the development of moral and religious sensibilities in students. They also advocated the teaching of *comparative* religion — an idea reinforced by the model of and through contact with the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University in the 1960s.

Why is Religion Not Studied in Indian Universities?

Even though the various commissions advocate the study of religion for multiple reasons, we can ask why this subject was not introduced into Indian universities when it became part of the curricula in the mid-twentieth century in European and American institutions. Certainly, the Nehruvian paradigm of “secularism” had something to do with it. Another obvious reason is the push by the University Grants Commission (established in 1956) towards science and technology and pouring the meager resources of post-independence India into these disciplines.

Discussing the reasons as to why there is no academic study of religion in India, Pratap Kumar considers several suggestions: that the study of religion is the product of “Western rationality,” that perhaps religion is a “personal matter,” and that the contemporary academic study of religion is a by-product of colonialism (2004:133). After providing counter-arguments for these points, he takes up the issue of “sensitivity” to “matters of a religious nature” (2004:133). He contrasts comments made by Hindu scholars who are of Indian origin on the works of Wendy Doniger, Jeffrey Kripal, or Salman Rushdie with Lars Martin Fosse’s analysis of the Kripal and Rushdie cases and generalizes from these reactions,¹⁹ noting that

[w]hile South Asian scholars tend to pitch from an assumed religious background and are more concerned about hurting religious feelings of communities in which they live, the Western scholarly tendency is to assume the secular nature of a democratic society. Herein lies the

19 Kumar takes Fosse’s remarks as representative of a “Western approach.”

difference. That is to say, the Western scholar is able to distance himself/herself from personal religious background and engage in a secular discourse on religion, South Asian scholars, let alone ordinary people, are seemingly unable to distinguish from the practice of religion and an academic debate on religion. (Kumar 2004:133)

Indeed, the perception of praxis connected to the study of a religion is an important point, and we will return to it later.

Where is Religion Studied in Indian Universities?

Postgraduate education in religious studies, however, is pursued in unique intellectual and academic frameworks in India. In what follows, I detail two trends: first, “Indic” frameworks which have created a variety of organizational structures that do not correspond to the typical departmental divisions of the Western academy; and second, the relationship of universities to a highly flexible and responsive network of affiliated centers (like some universities in England), which permits the study of religion to take place in a variety of religious contexts.

Rowena Robinson’s (2008) comprehensive overview of the major trends in the studies of sociology and anthropology of religion in India maps out work done by scholars in a useful historical framework. After studies that involved “fieldwork and context-centered tradition established in the 1950s in sociology and anthropology,” she says, “the major shift came with the highly influential work of sociologist Louis Dumont and D.F. Pocock” (Robinson and Sinha 2008:129). Simultaneously there were alternative histories largely from “Marxist” perspectives, and eventually by the Subaltern Studies Group in the 1980s. Robinson also makes the insightful point that “as a result of established paradigms, non-Hindu communities have often tended to be viewed in the first instance through the categories employed for the study of Hinduism” (2008:132). Thus, she says, the earlier studies explored notions of caste in Islam and other traditions. Noting a dearth of studies on religious traditions outside of South Asia, she says there have been welcome developments and that new themes connected with conversion (especially to Christianity) are now popular (Robinson and Sinha 2008:133–134).

A few Indian universities do have departments of religion or comparative religion, and some have been recently established. For example, the Dravidian University introduced a Department of Comparative Philosophy and Religion in 2000, and a perusal of the topics of research reveals a focus on literature in South Indian religious traditions and literature (Dravidian University 2010).

The Punjabi University (Patiala), University of Delhi, and Shanti Niketan also have departments where there is a study of religion, and the Punjabi University, at least in the early stages, was in communication with Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions (see Llewellyn 2008a, 2008b).

Jamia has a Centre for the Study of Comparative Religions and Civilizations which closely resembles programs in America. The website for the Centre articulates their mission to encourage an "academic and civic interest in religious and cultural pluralism," which they say is "very much in keeping with the secular traditions of India." They also use interdisciplinary methods:

[W]e try to impart to our students, a Comparative view of the major world-religions using the tools of history, sociology, philosophy and religious studies. Of late, we have also introduced topical and contemporaneous courses such as 'Religion & Ecology' and 'Gender & Religion' etc. Such changes, we trust, will help keep us at par with recent advancements in the field of academic study of religions. (Jamia Millia Islamia 2012a)

Jamia's M.A. program (2008–2009) includes examinations in "Approaches to the Study of Religion," as well as Primal Religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism. Reading lists for this module cover classical figures and offer a "who's who" of late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century writers on religion, with some emphasis on European and American phenomenology of religion (such as William Brede Kristensen, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and Mircea Eliade).²⁰ Yet despite the focus on "comparative" religion, most of the faculty members are experts in Islam and, according to one account, as much as eighty percent of the students are Muslim.²¹ This is similar to Punjabi University, which offers comparative religion with an emphasis on Sikhism.

Yet the departments discussed in this article are not just examples of many more in the country; they are, in fact, a substantial percentage of *all* the departments of religion in India. These large state universities, however, have other kinds of departments that cover religious studies in unique ways. South Asian religions are studied in departments of Ancient Indian Culture, Languages, Philosophy, Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, History, and so on. Furthermore, despite the absence of departments of religion, research is done within departments with highly specific sectarian designations, such as: "Jainism" (Universities of Madras and Mysore; Mohanlal Sukhadia University

20 Jamia Millia Islamia 2012c and 2012d.

21 Llewellyn 2008b:26–27.

in Udaipur, etc.); “Vaishnavism” (University of Madras); “Buddhist Studies” (K.J. Somaiya Centre for Buddhist Studies, which is affiliated with the University of Mumbai and Delhi University); and “Saiva Siddhanta” (University of Madras). As of 2013, departments such as Jainism or Vaishnavism had only one or two permanent faculty in Madras. Some state universities offer programs that engage with their regional religious heritage, such as at the University of Kerala, where there is a department of both Islamic Studies and a Centre for Vedanta Studies, or the University of Karnataka, which offers study in Jainism. S.B. Verma also notes that there has been considerable research in departments of psychology on the praxis of yoga, meditation, and breathing techniques, which were all considered to be part of religious traditions at the time his study was done (1978:175–177). In some institutions, there may not be any formal study of religion but faculty members have been trained in a discipline such as the Anthropology or Sociology of Religion, and therefore do research and publish on various topics.

The study of religion is thus undertaken in several institutions in India, in programs that may resemble comparative religions programs in the United States, as well as those which do not correspond to any found in the Western academy. These unique organizational paradigms — once identified as such — call for a reframing of our understanding of the “dearth” of “religious studies” in India; while not gathered together as one field, “religious studies” is found in a range of academic departments in India, often designated through a preference for specificity.

Apart from these university departments, seminary-style schools also continue to function in relationships with “Central” Universities, such as, for example, at the Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit in Kalady, Kerala, which has a school of Vedic Studies, as well as Departments of Sanskrit, *Nyaya* (Logic), *Sahitya* (Literature), *Vedanta* (Philosophy), *Vastuvidya* (Architecture), and *Ayurveda* (Medicine). However, in a manner similar to some seminaries or sectarian schools in the West, they too do research within their denominational parameters.

An important trend to highlight here is the religious studies research directed by academic advisors in affiliated colleges, centers, and institutes. Much of the work done in these quasi-private institutes and centers involves subject matters that could easily be the research topics of scholars in religion departments in North America. However, unless one is looking for them specifically, these institutes are not immediately visible when we search for venues where the academic study of religion is done in India. These range in size and mission: some are small and may only organize an occasional lecture; others may house specialized libraries or even have a permanent affiliation with an

accredited university, with the capacity to provide academic supervision for doctoral dissertations done by degree-seeking students in the affiliated university. Although this is very different from American universities, the model is actually seen in England; the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, for instance, started with loose connections with and eventually went through degrees of affiliation with Oxford University. It is now “a recognized independent centre of the University of Oxford.”²²

To make this paradigm explicit, and to underscore how fundamental this networked model is to the study of religion in India, I focus on a well-known center in Maharashtra and then turn the spotlight on the University of Mumbai. This university will serve as a key institutional example of this organizational pattern in higher education in India.

(De)“centering” The Study of Religion

The supervision of scholarly doctoral dissertations in India is done not only through universities and affiliated colleges, but also through research institutes and centers. These research institutes and centers are created and organized in a number of ways. Some appear from private educational foundations; others emerge from traditional schools that have a director who wants to modernize. These institutes frequently have academic staff, libraries of varying quality and, very often, a journal. The affiliated staff and faculty have doctoral degrees but not a faculty position in a university or college. Sometimes they are recipients of UGC fellowships. The director or staff writes for federal grants and also supervises academic activities. Many institutes have extraordinary collections of manuscripts in their libraries. Some, like the Academy of Sanskrit Research, Melkote, are actively involved in digitizing their manuscripts.

Some, like the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI), established in Pune in 1915, are internationally known. The institutes frequently get started by a group of enthusiastic students or disciples of renowned scholars. The history of BORI will tell us how such institutes come into being and how they fill the gap. According to the official history, in July 1915, several “persons interested in Orientology” met in Anadashrama, Pune, and decided to start the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in honor of Professor Dr. Sir Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar’s outstanding work in the field of Orientology. A year later, in 1916, the Institute’s first Patron, Shrimant Narayanrao Babasaheb Ghorpade, Chief of Ichalkaranji, donated Rs. 1,000 to get the Working Committee to carry on the work of the Institute in its initial stage, and V.G. Bijapurkar, a former pupil of Professor Bhandarkar, donated Rs. 100 to become a Life Member of the

²² Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies 2014.

Institute. In May 1948, the University of Poona started functioning with its office in the Institute's Guest House and, in March 1949, the Institute obtained recognition as a Constituent Institution of the University of Poona. Lord Willingdon presided over the proceedings when the Institute was officially founded in 1917. Since then, it has been visited by dozens of dignitaries, including Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalai Lama (Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute 2011).

Institutes such as BORI have large research staff and traditional scholars, as well as those with doctoral degrees from accredited universities. Many sponsor short courses, teach Sanskrit to graduate students, organize national and international seminars and conferences, and produce prestigious publications.

The University of Mumbai serves as a good model to illustrate how centers are affiliated to universities. Academic research is conducted both through affiliated colleges and institutes at the University of Mumbai, and there are about 83 such affiliated institutions recognized by this university under section 84. Most of them are in the sciences and medicine and are funded by private institutions as well as state and central funds connected with the University of Mumbai.²³ The roster of these institutions is fairly interesting, and there is considerable diversity in the research done in these centers. Included in this list are the very prestigious and world-renowned Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Colaba and the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Trombay, both in the sciences, in addition to the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India in Mumbai, the Bharatiya Sangeetha Vidyalaya of the Sri Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha, which are all in the visual and performing arts.

Many of the centers connected with the University of Mumbai, in which "guides" supervise topics in religion, are headed by well-known scholars in the fields of Sanskrit or Ancient Indian culture. The Kane Institute took on and supervised, for example, a dissertation on the "Role of Women as Gleaned from Inscriptions" with Professor G.K. Pai (Ancient Indian Culture) as the advisor. Prestigious centers like the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute (founded in 1918) in Mumbai offer semester-long courses on "world religions" (Fall 2010), or workshops on topics like "Orientalism and Aesthetics," which are all taught by academics. These courses have apparently been very successful.²⁴ The K.R. Cama Oriental Institute also hosts academic lectures by scholars from India and from many universities around the world on a variety of topics including religion, but it particularly encourages research in the Zoroastrian tradition.

23 For a list updated to 2011–2012, see University of Mumbai 2013.

24 Mody 2014. See also K.R. Cama Oriental Institute 2013 for details on the World Religions course.

A more recent center for learning, but one which has very quickly become well known, is the Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute (AIRI). Started in honor of P.B. Ananthacharya (1874–1936), a Sri Vaishnava scholar from Kanchipuram, South India, who was also involved in starting the Venkateswara temple in Mumbai, the Institute was funded by the Somanis, an industrialist family. After being housed in a small room in the Venkateswara temple in Fanaswadi, Mumbai, it moved to the Somani School building in Colaba in 1974. In November 1976, the University of Bombay recognized it as a “Post-Graduate Center” and, in a communication dated 15 November 1995, accorded permanent recognition to the institute under section 84 of the Maharashtra Universities Act of 1994.²⁵

Doctoral candidates who register with this institute focus on fields such as History, Philosophy, Religion, Culture, Art, Architecture, Ancient Indian Languages, etc. As of 2004, 36 scholars had received Ph.D.s, 5 in Sanskrit, 15 in Philosophy, and 16 in Ancient Indian Culture, with 15 more working towards a Ph.D. through AIRI. Dissertations successfully completed through this institute for the University of Mumbai include “Evolution of Rituals in Vishnu Temple Utsavas” by Vanamala Parthasarathy, “Influence of Pancaratra Agamas on Visistadvaita Vedanta” by Sudakshina Rangaswamy, and “A Historical and Cultural Study of Magadhan and Mauryan Empires” by Geeta Pande.²⁶ Other scholars did postdoctoral projects funded by the Ministry of Human Resource Development of the Government of India in New Delhi, and the Indian Council for Historical Research, and worked on topics such as “Varaha Images in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat: An Iconographic Study.”

25 The affiliation came about after I started to do research at the Institute’s library regularly and became a student of Dr. K.K.A. Venkatachari, then director of the AIRI. Several scholars, including Professor Katherine Young of McGill, were affiliated with AIRI during 1974–1975 and worked with Dr. Venkatachari. To have clear communications about my work with my formal dissertation advisor, Dr. S.G. Mudgal of Ruparel College at the University of Bombay, and with Dr. Venkatachari, my mentor at AIRI, I introduced them to each other. Dr. Mudgal also met with Professor Young (McGill University) and Professor John Carman (Harvard), when he visited Bombay (Mumbai). With the combined initiatives of Dr. Mudgal and Dr. Venkatachari, this chain of events rapidly led to AIRI being recognized as a “Post-Graduate Center” by the University of Bombay in 1976.

26 I have gone through these and a few other dissertations done through the institutes affiliated with Mumbai University. The information given on the titles of dissertations was published by the AIRI (in a pamphlet with two sheets of paper distributed during the seminar on “Ethics, Religion, Philosophy, and Social Life in Valmiki Ramayana” held 24–25 March 2012. I am grateful to Dr. Vanamala Parthasarathy for making this available to me.

AIRI was active in teaching, conducting several sessions of the “foundation course” in Ancient Culture and, in 2004, started another foundation course on “Yoga: Philosophy and Practice.” AIRI also hosted national and international seminars in subfields of Indology, including “Temple Art and Architecture” (1981); “Symbolism in Temple Art and Architecture” (1982); “Study of Srivaishnavism” (1989); “Medieval and post-Medieval Bhakti movement” (1996 and 1998); “Pilgrimage” (2001); “Saranagati” (2002); and “Sciences in Ancient India” (2004).

Several themes emerge from this discussion. There is no doubt that many of these dissertations can be done in a religion department in Europe, Australia, or the Americas. But there are many differences as well, and the dissertations supervised here are relevant to the institute’s Indological mission. First, it is obvious that the emphasis is on the Hindu traditions. Second, the topics include visual arts and textual study, but, in general, there is not much on performance. Absent, with very few exceptions, are methods which rely on ethnography and interviews. The interest in “lived religion,” which one sees in many religion departments in North America, is absent in work done through the centers in India. One of the few doctoral dissertations I noted which included some contemporary culture was one by Kishore Valicha on the “Impact of Science and Technology on the Archetypes of Themes concerning Human Relations and Personality and their Socio-cultural Significance (with particular reference to Hindi Films),” done through the AIRI. Because the institute focuses on Indology, some areas which are studied in departments of religion in Western countries are not present here: there is almost no folklore, village religion, analysis of contemporary performing arts, or diaspora religion. However, scholars *do* study temple rituals and get information from some of the priests; but beyond that, there is not much emphasis on ethnography.

The approaches in these institutes are primarily historical and textual; many of the students have knowledge of relevant classical languages, and when the knowledge of a particular language is not advanced, the advisors in the institute are able to assist. Students also travel to sites to observe rituals, study coins, sculptures, and artifacts, and consult with scholars in other places, frequently funded by UGC fellowships. The dissertations have a lot of thick description and are densely packed with information. Occasionally, they are polemical in trying to establish the “truth” of a scholarly position, but both the universities and centers affiliated with them do not emphasize theoretical framing or methodological reflection.

And finally, some of the topics studied in Ph.D. dissertations, whether here or in other universities in India, tend to be vast in scope. There is a preference for “large picture,” descriptive, comparative studies which telescope several centuries or several traditions between two covers. Examples of such studies include

“Symbolism in Sacred Architecture” by T.A. Margaret; “Science, Technology and Society (Manu Smriti and the *Republic* of Plato)” by Ankush Sawant; “Hindu, Christian, and Kabbalistic Mysticism with special reference to *Katha, Isa, Mundaka, and Kena* and “The Cloud of Unknowing” by E.M. Abrahams; “A Critical Study of the Economic History of South India” by Nandita Uppal; “The Place and Significance of Repentance and Confession with Special Reference to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — A Comparative and Evaluative Study” by R.M. Kakade; and “Bhagavadgita Teachings and Modern Man (Application in Psychotherapy)” by M.D. Parikh. It is only more recently that there has been a trend towards more focused themes, such as the study of particular texts.

While the academic study of religion burgeoned in Western universities in the early twentieth century, universities in India did not adopt it; instead, there is a limited study of topics connected primarily with “Indology.” With a fuller appreciation of the historical and structural antecedents of the existence of this framework in India, I now turn, in conclusion, to the contested nature of the fields of religion and Hinduism in South Asia to integrate these insights with reflections on “religious studies” in the Western academy.

The Study of Religion, the Study of Hinduism: Constructions, Illusions, and Realities

While the educational commissions recommended the study of comparative religion with ideals of “harmonizing society,” to improve morals, and as part of a universal heritage, I noted that they had little impact. Certainly, there seems to be a demand for studying individual traditions (usually one to which the student belongs); students focus solely on Vaishnavism, Jainism, Buddhism, or Islamic Studies. While most of the dissertations done in these venues or in the Indology and Oriental Studies centers and institutes may be similar to those done in departments of religion in Europe, America, and Australia, there is one area which is *not* seen in Indian scholarship. Conspicuous by its absence in India are courses on method and theory in the study of religion — courses which are generally required of undergraduate majors and are required fare for graduate students in North America. These courses raise the meta-questions on the study of religion, whether it is a field, discipline, or whether it exists at all. In other words, the reflexive nature of our academic inquiry and the theoretical challenge frequently mark capstone courses in departments of religion.

This debated nature of the field leads to the misunderstanding of what an *academic* study of religion and Hinduism involves in terms of method and in content. We find this lack of clarity on what the study of religion means not just in India but also in the Western academy. Since the late twentieth century,

religion in the North American scholarly context has been contested, as one can say whimsically, *twixt* the two Smiths. On the one hand, we have the *parampara*, the lineage of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who famously began his essay that introduced religion in the Encyclopedia Britannica with the line, “There is more to human life than meets the eye” (Smith 1979:498). On the other, we have Jonathan Z. Smith, who provocatively says that we arbitrarily lump some elements taken from our culture as “religion” and that “religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy” (Smith 1982:xi). The intellectual lineages and scholars contest whether religion is *sui generis* or whether it is constructed — whether this field exists at all except in university departments.

While many scholars position themselves between Jonathan Z. Smith and Wilfred Cantwell Smith in the Americas, one could well say that the recommendations of the commissions which advocated the study of religion in India were closer to the *third* Smith — Huston Smith — who popularized the study of the so-called “World Religions,” and in whose writings we see the sense of the universal, perennial religion. The educational commissions in India that we discussed earlier see religion as having a spiritual core and as being universal in nature and are, perhaps, closer to this Smith.

Courses in method and theory in North America move briskly from Marx to Durkheim to Weber to Eliade to Douglas and, like most other areas in the Humanities, may include readings from Derrida, Foucault, and Butler as well. Topics from materiality to spirituality are debated. The multiple disciplines used to study religion enrich the discussions, and most departments do not have a problem enlisting affiliate members from many other departments.

The largely interdisciplinary nature of the study of religions in European and American universities is also its Achilles heel, leading to a variety of misunderstandings, even in academia. Scholars in religion see texts as performance and performance as texts; bodies as texts and texts as bodies. Given the multiple loci of subject matter and the multidisciplinary of the field, there is a general impression that almost anyone can “do” religion. Indeed, some universities do assemble constituent members from multiple departments to form ad-hoc programs in religion, thus threatening the long-term survival of religion departments. The contested nature of the field may deter the creation of new departments in lands and universities which believe that a program on religion can be cobbled together with existing faculty from diverse departments and promoted as “interdisciplinary.”

Given that even faculty and administrators in some American universities are not sometimes clear about why separate departments of religion exist, we

can ask if the contested nature of the academic study of religion and the lack of allied conceptual terms in Indian languages have contributed to not having stand-alone departments in a liberal arts curriculum. Anecdotal stories from Western scholars engaged in academic research in India make this point evocatively. European and North American scholars of religious studies frequently struggle to explain in India what (and more importantly, how) they are studying a topic in the Hindu or Buddhist or Islamic traditions. Caleb Simmons, a scholar who studied the connections between the goddess Chamundi and the Wodeyar dynasty in Mysore from 2012–2014, says,

I was really surprised by what was considered the study of religion vs. history. In my experience in Karnataka universities, the people who said they studied religion were really working on “theology” and were in philosophy (or sometimes Jain Studies) departments. Anyone who studied religion that looked at historical, cultural, social, political etc. influences were either in history or a language studies department (i.e., Kannada Studies). It was really interesting that studying religion seemed to imply that the researcher was a believer. It was assumed so frequently that I would just tell people that I studied History, describe my work, and then say that I studied “*dharmika itihasa*” [the history of dharma or religion, in this context]. Otherwise our conversation would take a turn to my personal devotional beliefs. But by prefacing “*dharmika itihasa*” with my research everyone (even the temple workers) seemed to understand my perspective. (Simmons 2014)

With these qualifications, Simmons’ approach to “religious studies” is made clear to a non-academic Indian audience. Yet this anecdote illustrates how invoking “religion” in the context of one’s studies can go along with the assumption that one professes that religion — both in India and sometimes in North America as well. If “religious studies” begins by framing a religious community in its historical perspective as a legitimate object of study, then it may be more suited to the terms of academic debate in India to use so-called “sectarian” terms that combine Indic terms for religious communities (*sampradaya*) with the totalizing English suffix, “-ism” to create such modern collocations as “Saivism” (*Saiva* + *ism*) and “Vaishnavism” (*Vaisnava* + *ism*). This practice both identifies the specific community in question and objectifies it as suitable for study. Indeed, these terms are frequently used to designate academic departments, rather than departments designed by the study of “Hinduism” — a label which operates at the greatest level of decontextualization in academia.

This leads to reflection on the “constructed” nature of Hinduism: is “Hinduism” one tradition, multiple traditions, or none of the above? Is it even

a “religion”? Since the topic is well-worn in Western academia but less so in India, its most trenchant points bear recalling. Many cultures and languages do not have a single word for the English use of “religion.” S.N. Balagangadhara has persuasively argued that religion is essentially a Western, Christian enterprise, and the template has been forced on other cultures, including India (Balagangadhara 1994). For example, modern neologisms entered the public sphere in Japan and China to express the concept at the turn of the twentieth century (see Meyer’s article in this issue). In India, the word “dharma” is used often to refer to “religion,” but it is an uneasy fit. Many contemporary Hindus are fond of the mantra: “Hinduism is not a religion, it is a way of life.”

Will Sweetman (2005) has challenged the views of Balagangadhara and King (1999), arguing that King highlights two ways in which Western colonization has contributed to the modern construction of “Hinduism:” first, by locating the core of Indian religiosity in certain Sanskrit texts (the textualization of Indian religion), and second, by an implicit, and sometimes explicit, tendency to define Indian religion in terms of a normative paradigm of religion based upon contemporary Western understandings of the Judaeo-Christian traditions (King 1999:101). While both of these factors influenced the later development of the concept of Hinduism, their role in the first emergence of the concept is less significant. For European writers from the sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, the paradigm of religion identified by King had yet to become normative, and we ought not to assume that it constrained their understanding of Hinduism (Sweetman 2005:82–83). Indeed, as we discussed earlier in this essay, in the nineteenth century, formulations of theories of religion had dialectical connections with the discoveries of the religions of India and Africa.

In India, identities may be connected with language, place of origin, sectarian community (Vaishnava, Saiva, Pushti Marg, Swaminarayan), devotional community (follower of a specific guru or teacher), caste, and so on. The category “Hindu” flourishes, but in specific socio-political and legal contexts (apart from political usages, one sees it in signs saying “non-Hindus not allowed into the temple” or when stating identity in the diaspora). Thus, we see departments of Vaishnavism and Saivism, yet basic courses such as “Hinduism 101” are rarely found. However, although there are no departments of Hinduism, there are departments of Jainism and Islam, where there is a *perception* (at least in the eyes of the Hindu majority) that these traditions are germane to “the other,” and thus more self-evidently eligible to be an object of study.

It is in the context of these debates that we find new initiatives on religion in India. For instance, the Oxford Center for Hindu Studies is working with several universities and colleges in India (Lady Sriram College in New Delhi,

the University of Madras, Jadavpur University, etc.) to introduce both undergraduate and graduate curricula in Religious Studies that focus on the study of Hinduism as well as critical theory. While there are several ambitious plans, the initial MOUs with the universities call for staffing these courses with newly minted Oxford graduates when the funding becomes available. We also see many conferences convened by European and American organizations to facilitate networking of scholars from India and other countries. For example, the Indian Association for the Study of Religion became affiliated with the International Association for the History of Religions at the XVIIth Congress in 1995, and has regularly participated in its international events.²⁷

The move towards the category of Indic religions is significant. The terms “dharma traditions” and “Indic traditions and religions” are also used as categories to refer to traditions that are perceived as indigenously Indic, namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Another major initiative was the five-year project of the India Platform at the University of Ghent. Balagangadhara, in his initial opening remarks in 2008, identified three actors in this enterprise on *Rethinking Religion in India: a newly formed Academy of Social Sciences and Humanities (ASHA)*; the Centre for the Study of Local Cultures (CSLC) — both connected with Kuvempu University, a small, rural institution in Karnataka, India — and the Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap (Comparative Science of Cultures).²⁸ The conferences involved Platform modules. In 2008, the theme was debating the question, “Are there native religions in India?” In 2012, the theme was religion and law, and the call for papers included the colonial construction of Hinduism, the caste system and Indian religion, secularism in Europe and India, religious conversion in India, and religious and communal violence.

27 The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi along with the IAHR co-hosted a regional conference on the topic “Religions in the Indic Civilization” at The India International Centre in Delhi from 18–21 December 2003. Some of my colleagues from North American and European universities and I participated in this conference. I gave two refereed papers and delivered an invited plenary address, affording me further opportunity to observe the study of religion in India. As in many other academic conferences one attends, the papers in the 2003 meeting seemed to be framed by a *wide* spectrum of political positions. Robinson, however, specifically makes an observation on one perspective, noting that this event was “significantly supported by Infinity Foundation, which hosted the second conference in 2005 [for which I was not present]. Several speakers and participants at these two conferences openly and clearly espoused Hindu right-wing ideologies” (Robinson and Sinha 2008:132).

28 See Balagangadhara 2008a and 2008b.

Debates on the constructed nature of religion and Hinduism have their space in scholarly arenas; for millions of Indians, however, these categories are experienced as “realities.” The new conferences which are acting as catalysts for the study of religion have not yet made their mark in a country where it sometimes takes decades for changes to occur in some fields. If the study of the humanities in India was encouraged as much as the STEM disciplines, that is, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, the strides in pedagogical innovation and relevance would have been speedy, strong, and strident. But the strong traditional base of scholarship in fields connected with at least elitist religious manifestations, the transnational nature of religious studies, as well as the thriving numbers in this scholarly field of discourse, despite the lack of financial or other incentives, are all encouraging signs which bode well for the study of *topics* in religious studies, and perhaps even the study of religion as a whole over the next decade in India.

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