

OF CAMPHOR AND COCONUTS

Of all the world's religious traditions, none has been more closely scrutinized for its fissures than "Hinduism." Put simply, it is now fashionable to argue that there is no such thing.

Two prominent scholars, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Robert E. Frykenberg, have been instrumental in establishing the idea that it was not just the history of Hinduism that was invented by outsiders but its very identity. It is worth looking at the work of Smith and Frykenberg to see whether the idea of "Hinduism" is as fragile and recent as contemporary scholarship suggests.

Smith, who until recently headed the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University, inspired an influential school of comparative religion. In *The Meaning and the End of Religion* (1962), he attributes the coinage of the term "Hindu" to the consequences of the Muslim invasions of North India beginning in A.D. 1001. Originally, "Hindu" defined not a religion but a geographical attribute of all non-Muslim peoples south and east of the Indus River: that is, in "Hindustan." Smith argues that Hinduism as a distinct religion was a 19th-century construct, as were most other "Eastern" religions or "isms." The single exception was Islam, which named itself, distinguishing itself from Judaism and Christianity, its fellow Abrahamic religions of "the Book." The 19th-century naming of the Eastern "isms" occurred, Smith notes, only when a people's religious life came to be treated as separable from its cultural (social, political, artistic, and scientific) life. As he says, no naming was necessary for the religions of the Incas or the Babylonians because their "religion" formed part of a seamless, nameless, integrated whole in which what was done for "religious" rea-

sons was virtually inseparable from what was done for, say, economic reasons.

Smith argues that this 19th-century naming process followed a "trend toward reification" of religion, in which faith in God was replaced by an allegiance to newly named "things," the religions themselves. Smith finds it important that Hinduism provides no good equivalent to the Western term "religion," but then he fails to note that this is equally true for his concept of "faith." Smith would like to argue, for example, that the *varna* system of social classes is "an expression of faith," but no one else writing on the subject has ever made that argument. More generally, Smith states, "Hinduism" is "not a unity and does not aspire to be." He admits, however, that "classical Hindus were inhibited by no lack of . . . [group] self-consciousness." Such self-consciousness, however, implies some unity after all.

Robert Frykenberg, a historian at the University of Wisconsin, carries these arguments even further. In the anthology *Hinduism Reconsidered* (1989), Frykenberg argues that present-day, so-called Hinduism is quite different from the Indian religious past that it supposedly incorporates. For Frykenberg, the term Hinduism is not so much theologically misleading (as it was in Smith's view) but politically dangerous and intellectually erroneous. Political interests in India have attributed to modern Hinduism the character of a "world religion"—"a character," Frykenberg writes, "which is all too easily swallowed and then certified by naive and uncritical savants of oriental religions in the West." The gauntlet has been thrown down.

There is, indeed, much to be said for Frykenberg's position. The reified, politicized Hinduism he speaks of is a reality. It is different from what preceded it and what

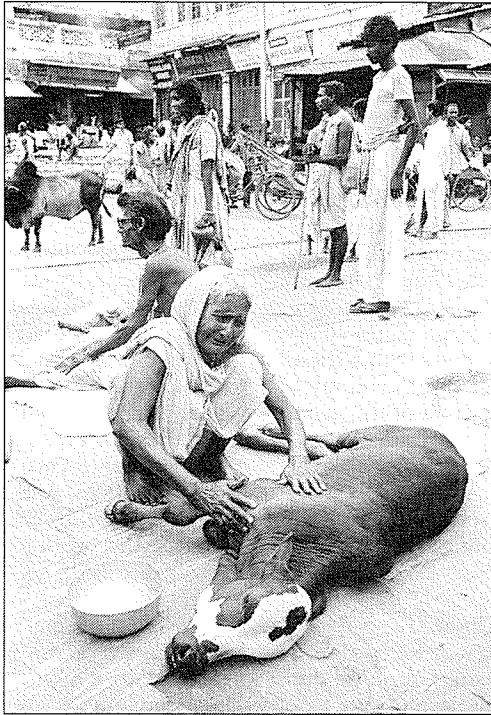
getic ends, for if he could succeed in depicting the Brahmans as playing a primarily social role, not a religious one, he could understand and portray them as candidates for initiation into the higher law of Christ. Though making up less than 10 percent of the population, the Brahmans typically performed all major religious functions, and

religious regulations shaped much of the Brahman's life from diet (usually vegetarian) to social activity (severely restricted contact with lower castes) to profession (no plowing or handling of impure materials like leather). Yet Nobili tended to downplay such religious underpinnings and instead attributed the Brahmans' prominence to

surrounds it in its contemporary milieu. But the fact that many current Hindu movements have strong, and even dangerous, political overtones is not in itself a sufficient reason to toss out the concept of Hinduism.

Although scholars have dissected the idea of a single Hinduism, its image as one of the world's great religions remains popularly accepted. In books on the world's religions, Hinduism is readily defined, indeed much as the earlier Orientalists defined it—as a religion united intellectually by the age-old Vedas, socially by the four classes of castes (*varnas*), and spiritually by the

laws of *dharma/karma* which govern the transmigration of souls. Frykenberg argues that this textbook definition has “been made to encompass everything from the philosophical and the ritual features of the cosmic order in all its highest sophistication to the bloodiest, crudest, meanest, and most savage practices of the most primitive peoples.” Indeed, he laments, “blood sacrifices” and “blood rituals”—such as the offering of goats and bulls—continued after 1817 under the British and are allowed to continue to-



Cows, because they give milk and ask no recompense, are nearly sacred symbols of purity and motherhood. Hindus allow them to roam in temples and even in their homes.

symbolize the offering of one's head to the deities. Likewise, they light camphor to wave before the temple deity as the medium through which their offerings are carried to the gods.

Frykenberg tries to expose the futility of defining a Hindu by asking whether the participation of Muslims or Christians at Hindu temples and festivals “makes them Hindus?” The point, however, is that these events would not even occur if Christians and Muslims were the only people involved. It is the

day under India's present state governments.

Frykenberg, like others, recognizes the impossibility of defining Hinduism by “essentials.” Here Frykenberg disregards a modern scholarly truism: Hinduism has no orthodoxy, but only orthopraxy (correct practice). A Hindu need not define himself by a statement of beliefs or by allegiance to a set of doctrines (as Smith would have it) or even by a response to the government census. What defines a Hindu is his or her practices. Many Hindus, for example, are united by the rituals of coconuts and camphor. Some Hindus break coconuts to

their noble birth and their being the seekers and custodians of the truth.

Second, he attempted, on the basis of what we today might call field work, to undo the preconceptions about India that were inherited from classical times. Since the time of Herodotus India had symbolized life at the edge of the known world—

vast, complex, confused, and fabulous. Nobili tried, by contrast, to find direct analogies between what was familiar to him at home and what he found in Madurai.

Third, Nobili established a double distinction in regard to Brahmans. On the one hand he made the common observation that the Brahmans were the cognoscenti of

practices (including the building and maintaining of the temples) themselves that are Hindu. And we may as well face it, so are the majority of the people who keep such temples and festivals going. If you ask why these people perform the rites the way they do, you will almost invariably hear that they do it because their ancestors did it or because it is custom, not because it fulfills some doctrine or teaching. The meaningful question, then, is not "who is a Hindu?" but "what are the things that Hindus do?"

I recently attended a large multi-village festival for a South Indian deity with a friend of mine, Lee Weissman of the University of Chicago. Lee was asked by one of the young men in the crowd. "Are you Hindu?"

"No," he answered, "I am a Jew."

"Is a Jew a Hindu?"

"Well, they do many similar things."

"Do you break coconuts and light camphor?"

"No," Lee answered.

"Then you're not a Hindu."

Here we have, I think, a rather profound folk definition of Hinduism. One differentiates Hindus by what they do and don't do: They break coconuts and light camphor; they do not light candles or candelabras, or offer lambs or doves.

In *Hinduism Reconsidered*, anthropologist Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi argues that "it is not necessary to abandon the term Hinduism or deny it the status of a religion. What should be abandoned instead is the conviction that all concepts can be defined . . . [with] clear-cut boundaries." She turns helpfully to the philosopher Wittgenstein's notion that certain concepts may be held together by a "family resemblance," by a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing." Such concepts "cannot be defined but only exemplified." Recall our coconuts and camphor as exem-

plifications of Hinduism. Lawrence Babb, in *Redemptive Encounters* (1986), points to a similar family resemblance in what are on the surface highly distinct Hindu religious movements. And he reminds us that "Hindus mean something when they call themselves that, and what they mean goes deeper than mere matters of subcontinental politics or cultural chauvinism."

Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi introduces the idea of "prototypes" in Hinduism, referring to those features that recur most prominently and frequently in the crisscrossed Hindu fabric. Pilgrimage, asceticism, and vegetarianism are good examples that she cites. Sacrifice is clearly another such prototype, despite Frykenberg's disparagement of its bloodier forms. Not all Hindus follow such practices, and they are not unique to Hindus. But they each have a distinctive frequency and prestige, and, I would add, style within the Indian context that marks them as Hindu.

While one can agree with Frykenberg and other scholars who lament some of the misuses to which the name Hinduism has been put, there are good reasons to resist their conclusions. In Hinduism, we are faced with a deep and diverse tradition, one that cannot be expected to rethink the name it wants to call itself, no matter how recent the name may be.

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India, the carriers of its learned and religious traditions. So while Brahmans were primarily a hereditary group, one could also speak of "the Brahmans of the Buddhist or atheist school" and, as we have seen, Italian ones too. On the other hand, Nobili noted the difference between Brahmans who were *gnanis*, "wise men," and

those who were "idolaters" involved in cultic life. Nobili then articulated something like the distinction between center and periphery or high and low that was to become critical for Monier-Williams.

Finally, and most obvious, Nobili's main object of concern was not the religion of the Hindus—as far as I know, he did not