

DANAM CONFERENCE 2008

SESSION THW

Theme: **The 'H-Word': Non-Indian Practitioners and the Question of Hindu Identity**

Organizer: Jeffery D. Long, Elizabethtown College

Presiding: Christopher K. Chapple, Loyola Marymount University

Panelists: Lola Williamson, Millsaps University, Pankaj Jain, North Carolina State University, Pravrajika Vrajaprana, Vedanta Society, Jeffery D. Long, Elizabethtown College, and Suzanne Newcombe, London School of Economics and Political Science

Respondent: Rita D. Sherma, ITBB & Taksha Institute

PANEL PROPOSAL

This panel will explore the question of why many people who are not from a South Asian ethnic background who engage in what could broadly be called 'Hindu-based' religious practices do not identify themselves as 'Hindu.' While Western adherents of Buddhism have no problem self-identifying as 'Buddhist' and converts to Islam readily identify themselves as 'Muslim,' for Western adherents of Hindu-based religious traditions, self-identifying as 'Hindu' is a much more ambivalent and contested designation. Why do so many practitioners of, for example, TM or Siddha Yoga, or members of ISKCON or the Vedanta Society, refrain from identifying themselves as Hindu?

The first panelist will contrast the attitudes towards self-identification as "Hindu" between two groups: The first group consisted of thirty non-Indian American followers of three different Hindu-style global movements. The second group consisted of thirty first-generation immigrants to America from India. The differences between the two groups can provide important insights regarding the values and cultural parameters that underlie differences in self-identification and group-affiliation.

The second panelist, will distinguish between the complex of meanings and expectations associated with the word "Hindu" as opposed to the indigenous, organic, and interwoven nature of the religious culture associated with the word "Dharma." These are not merely semantic differences. The paper argues that they reflect directly and indirectly on ecological sustainability and the ground realities of environmental consciousness.

The third panelist will argue that Western reticence over identifying as Hindu is the result of a subliminal Orientalism still in place that identifies Hinduism with religious immaturity in contrast to the mature monotheistic Abrahamic creeds and non-theistic Buddhism.

The fourth panelist will connect the Western avoidance of self-identifying as Hindu with three distinct issues: first, the tendency of Western spiritual liberals to self-identify as "spiritual" but not "religious"; second, the construction of the category of "Hinduism" in terms that conflict with the self-understanding of some (particularly Vaishnava) sampradayas, and third, the desire to avoid affiliating with Hindu nationalism. The paper will argue for the provisional utility of the term 'Hindu,' despite these three trends.

The fifth panelist will argue that it remains useful to categorize many groups based in Indian religiosity as part of a Hindu tradition, not only for historical reasons, but also for the clarity of understanding the soteriologies underlying of some contemporary movements which do not necessarily self-describe as 'Hindu'.

Finally, the respondent will raise critical questions to provoke further discussion among the panelists and the audience.

ABSTRACTS

Lola Williamson, Millsaps University

When is a Hindu Not a Hindu? Why Followers of Three Hindu-Inspired Movements Do Not Identify as Hindu.

This paper will compare the answers that she received to questions about values, beliefs, lifestyles, and religious/spiritual practices from two groups of people. The first group consisted of thirty non-Indian American followers of three different Hindu-style global movements. The second group consisted of thirty first-generation immigrants to America from India. Of the first group, none identified themselves as Hindu; of the second group, all identified themselves as Hindu, including a Jain and a Sikh. This is true even though members of the first group were fervent practitioners of meditation, chanting, and rituals of Hindu origin, even if altered somewhat for a western context. Of the immigrant group, only one practiced meditation. Slightly more than half performed simple rituals in their home and attended rituals and celebrations at a Hindu Temple. Many had no particular beliefs or practices that would be associated with Hinduism. They identified themselves as Hindu because they were “born Hindu” and because they shared common values and lifestyles. The non-Indian practitioners, on the other hand, stressed spiritual “techniques” that anyone could perform, making the practices universal and thus in opposition to a particular religion, whether Hindu or any other. Interestingly, unlike the Jain and Sikh immigrants who identified themselves with an overarching Hindu family, non-Indian participants of a Hindu-type global movement identified only with their own groups. This is because they felt that fidelity to their guru was important, and thus to read the literature or attend a program sponsored by another guru was wrong. Each group had also created its own jargon that further insulated it from the broader Hinduism, let alone the universal parameter they elsewhere professed.

Pankaj Jain, North Carolina State University

‘The H-Word and the D-Word’: Hinduism and Dharma

This paper distinguishes the H-word Hinduism from the D-word *dharmā*. He argues that urbanized, modernized Hinduism which is often included as a World Religion is represented by neo-Hindu groups starting with the Ramakrishna Mission that originated in the last couple of centuries and later spread globally. Most of these groups include environmentalism with other social charity work in their overall programs and agenda. Thus religion, ecology, and ethics emerge as separate categories in these organizations. On the other hand, the traditional, comparatively much less modernized Indian groups do not see religion, ecology, and ethics as separate entities. In line with the etymological definition of *dharmā*, their *duty*, *virtue*, *ecological order* and *spiritual* aspects of their lives are all intertwined. *Dharma* in its various definitions and meanings includes duty, virtue, ecological order, and spiritual aspects of lives. On the other hand, if market forces invade on their traditional way of life, huge areas of forest get destroyed as noticed by Freeman in Kerala and Vasan and Kumar in Uttaranchal.

Alternatively, in some cases such as the Chipko movement of Uttaranchal, villagers succeeded in responding and stopping this assault based on their prior history of mobilization and resistance against similar forces in colonial times as noted by Guha. Thus, my ecological perspective to research different Indian groups have helped differentiate two versions of Indic Traditions as they are lived and practiced by millions of Indian in India and the diaspora. Some scholars have criticized the "H-Word" version of Indic Traditions because in their view, this is a reductionist and a poor imitation of Abrahmic religions. On the other hand, urban Indians commonly criticize the traditional Indian practices of practicing rituals and reject them as mere superstitions. Pankaj

argues that the diversity of Indic Traditions allows both kinds in its vast and now globalized evolving forms. Neo-Hindu organizations such as Ramakrishna Mission, Arya Samaj, and Brahma Samaj had also evolved after British encounter in 18th and 19th century in quite different ways from traditional rural Indian way of ritualistic practices. All these three had criticized the traditional ritualistic way of Indian spirituality and instead adopted more rationalized form of organized "Hinduism" largely as a reaction to Western modernity, as noticed by Halbfass. In the same way, today's urbanized Indian organizations are merely responding to globalization in their own ways.

Pravrajika Vrajaprana, Vedanta Society

“Sorting It Out: Hindu Culture/Hindu Religion/ Hindu Identity or True Confessions of a (basically White) Hindu Nun”

This paper will suggest that Western reticence over identifying as Hindu is the result of a subliminal Orientalism still in place that identifies Hinduism with religious immaturity in contrast to the mature monotheistic Abrahamic creeds and non-theistic Buddhism. In the 19th century, Hegel created an ascending taxonomy of revealed religious truth, an ordering system which was enthusiastically taken up by the early Orientalists. In this system, which in many ways has remained buried in the Western psyche—the highest manifestation of religion was its most rational manifestation, which was, naturally, Protestant Christianity. This religious apex was high up the evolutionary ladder from—starting from the bottom of the heap—Zoroastrianism and Hinduism, followed by Buddhism, Islam and Judaism, finally culminating in the highest revealed truth of Christianity. Protestant Christianity was the clearest revelation as well as the most rational and scientific of all religions. In many ways, Hinduism—with its many gods, priests and rituals—seemed an exotic counterpart of the Catholic tradition that Protestants had long fought and reviled. The denigration of the Hindu tradition as immature at best, evil at worst, worked wonderfully well with a British foreign policy that asserted that the (primarily Hindu) Indians were too immature to be capable of running their own nation.

Jeffery D. Long, Elizabethtown College

Hindu–To Be or Not To Be: Three Possible Reasons for Aversion to the Term ‘Hindu’ among Western Practitioners

This paper will connect the Western avoidance of self-identifying as Hindu with three distinct issues: the broader Western trend of avoiding any religious self-identification in preference for a self-identification as ‘spiritual,’ the tendency of the category of ‘Hinduism’ to be constructed in ways that are incompatible with the self-understanding of specific sampradayas—in particular, Vaishnava sampradayas—and the concern to avoid identifying with Hindu nationalism. In regard to the first trend, this panelist will argue that identifying oneself as ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’ stems from a sense of religious self-identification of any kind as overly limiting. Practitioners who share this sensibility often see themselves as in rebellion against religious institutions that they take to be oppressive, while seeing their Hindu-based practice as non-sectarian. In regard to the second tendency, the category of ‘Hinduism’ has often been constructed in a way that privileges Advaitic perspectives. Intensely theistic lineages, therefore, such as the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, therefore distinguish themselves from Hinduism. Finally, the term ‘Hindu’ has come to be identified by many with militant Hindu nationalism, with which they do not wish to identify themselves. This panelist, much like the second, will argue for the provisional utility of the term ‘Hindu,’ despite these three trends.

Suzanne Newcombe, London School of Economics and Political Science
Identification with Hinduism and the Politics of a Plural World

You have heard how those who make practices historically based in the Hindu tradition a central part of their lives but are not ethnically Indian do not often describe themselves as Hindu. I hope to provide more information on this theme from a slightly different perspective. Although 'Hinduism' is a term best with problems which this audience will be all too familiar, I will argue there are practical reasons why it should not be abandoned as a first reference for understanding an important element of contemporary religious groups with origins in Indian religiosity promoting their practices and beliefs globally. It remains useful to categorize many groups based in Indian religiosity as part of a Hindu tradition, not only for historical reasons, but also for the clarity of understanding the soteriologies underlying of come contemporary movements which do not necessarily self-describe as 'Hindu'. The fact that the H-word is so problematic a self-description might reveal more about the relevant social/political ideals and anxieties without impacting on the validity of the term as one of family resemblance.