

5-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Vemsani, Lavanya Ph.D. (2013) "Esther Bloch, Marianne Keppens, and Rajaram Hedge. Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 4: No. 2, Article 6.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1148

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol4/iss2/6>

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Esther Bloch, Marianne Keppens, and Rajaram Hedge. *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.

“What’s in a name?” asks an old saying, but the notion that a name is not necessarily synonymous with an identity has not stopped the scholars of India from engaging in lengthy debates regarding the names given to particular peoples or practices. While naming “races” in India and Europe occupied much of the early discourse on Indian ethnic identity, the current discourse centers on the use of the term “Hindu,” an umbrella term meant to identify and group the peoples associated with the indigenous religious and cultural systems of India. The conversation about the use of this term and what the term represents takes up more space in post-colonial studies than any other issue related to India or Indian history, culture, and identity.

The debate about how to classify the religion(s) of India is currently discussed without much agreement among scholars, leading to a rift; there are those who argue that “Hinduism” appropriately identifies an indigenous Indian socio-religious and cultural sphere, and there are those who argue that the purported “Hindu” identity is nothing more than a construct, existing only in the imagination of the West, conveniently but erroneously grouping a wide diversity of beliefs, practices, and traditions into a single, supposed entity. The subject of whether or not the term Hinduism legitimately refers to a religion has raged in Western academia for the last decade and continues to inspire publications. *Rethinking Religion in India* is one such publication that addresses this question.

The book is divided into two parts, with Part I, “Historical and Empirical Arguments,” containing five articles and Part II, “Theoretical Reflections,” containing four articles. The book begins with an introduction by Marianne Keppens and Esther Bloch that addresses the central issues concerning the question of the existence of Hinduism and the understanding of Hinduism as a religion. The authors say that the near non-existence of religious studies programs in Indian academia and the dichotomy that is presented in Indian academia between *Hindutva* (a term roughly meaning “Hindu-ness,” coined in 1923 and currently understood to conceptualize “the way of life of the Indian people and the Indian culture”) and a more secular understanding of Indian identity are both compelling reasons to rethink religion in India (p.1). The editors consider the colonial construct of Hinduism as central to this debate. They raise a number of questions about the nature of religion in India, including, “Do Indian traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism form different kinds of religions?” “Do such „Indian Religions,“ exist at all?” “Did a new religion, namely Hinduism, come into being during the colonial era?” “How could this happen?” Following these questions, the editors proclaim the importance of finding answers to these questions, saying that such answers are essential if one is to understand contemporary issues in India, such as religious conversion and religious conflict. Further, they note that academia has not given due attention to this issue, and they lament the sparse academic works on the subject. As such, the editors strive to bring together the most important voices of the debate in order to establish the notion that Hinduism is indeed a construct.

The first article, by David N. Lorenzen, “Hindus and Others,” includes a discussion of the practice of Buddhism in India, along with the practices of Christianity and Islam, addressing only Hinduism as conceptually problematic—though other contributing authors, like Balagangadhara, submit to the premise that there is no religion in India and that neither Hinduism, nor Buddhism, nor Jainism are religions at all. Lorenzen attempts to analyze three topics in his essay: (1) religion as an academic study in the universities in the West, (2) the construction of the concept

of a Hindu religion or Hinduism, and (3) the influence of medieval Indian religious poets Gorakh, Kabir, and Guru Arjan (p. 25). The first section of his work includes autobiographical reflections describing his inspiration from Mercia Eliade and his gradual drift away from Eliade's history of religions approach. His second section lists the early uses of the word Hindu and Hinduism in the sense of religion from 12th century onwards and concludes by asserting that Hinduism is a religion like any other world religion. In the third section of the paper, the author discusses the works of Gorakh, Kabir, and Guru Arjun and claims that although there is much variety in religious practice, there is still similarity in the practices and religions of these saints. He concludes the paper proposing that religions have a distinct function in society, and he refutes the claim of another author, Fitzgerald, who suggests that there is no meaningful difference between religious and secular institutions.

The second article, "Hindu Religious Identity with Special Reference to the Origin and Significance of the Term Hinduism," by Geoffrey A. Oddie, discusses the emergence and spread of the use of the term Hindu to imply a sort of all-India religious identity and explores the origin and significance of the term Hinduism. He concludes that a sense of religion and Hinduism do exist in India, although, he says, change and continuity can be noted. The third article, "Representing Religion in Colonial India," by John Zavos, discusses the representation of religion in a colonial setting, by the colonialists as well as the colonized. He also discusses the competition between different religions for public space and for representation during the colonial regime. He concludes that "as a facet of modernity, colonial control was particularly influential in creating new public spaces for the articulation of supra-local identities" (p.67). The fourth article, "Colonialism and Religion," by Sharada Sugitharajah, discusses the colonizers' understanding of religion. In this paper, the author presents what she considers to be a "lopsided understanding" of Hinduism and religion of India. She claims that descriptions of Hinduism, as constructed or imagined by colonial administrators or scholars, always include an amount of distortion. This paper also emphasizes that "even without a defining or descriptive term, the religious life or experience of a Hindu will continue to follow its own course".

It is unclear why the next paper, "Women, the Freedom Movement, and Sanskrit," by Laurie L. Patton is included in this book, given its somewhat tangential focus on the role of Sanskrit and the role of women in Indian religion and not on the legitimacy of the term Hindu, per se. Nonetheless, Patton's work is compelling; her analysis of Sanskrit as a language of protest during colonial India and as a religious language for women in post-colonial India illustrates the power of language. This paper brings a uniquely new approach to understanding religion and religious practice in India. She notes that the traditional roles associated with men are gradually shifting to women, which indicates change, although she notes continuity in Hinduism.

Part II begins with the article "Colonialism, Hinduism and the Discourse of Religion," by Richard King. In this paper, King organizes the problems with the use of the term Hinduism into six points: The first point is a discussion on the „the category of „religion,“ colonialism and the spread of Western Worldviews, which attempts to conceptualize the evolution of „religion,“ and „world religions,“ as universal categories as opposed to the secular, noting that colonialism played a major role in its evolution. The second point is „current historical evidence suggests that the concept of „Hinduism,“ developed initially amongst the protestant commentators...., which is of course contradicted by Lorenzen in chapter one of this book. The third point „the category of Hinduism emerged in the colonial encounter and was fundamentally moulded...“ is clear in its focus. Although the author takes note of Lorenzen, and other scholarship on the

existence of „Hinduism“ in precolonial India, he says that their works need be examined closely (p.102). He however adds that indigenous elites also played a major role in the emergence of „Hinduism,“ as a modern category, in addition to the colonial elites (p.103). Point four discusses the „deconstruction of the myth of unity/homogeneity associated with the category of „Hinduism,“ discusses the futility of such notions to understand major religions of the world. Point five discusses „the language of „religion,“ and the „world religions,“ represents the universalization of a narration of world history“. He sees this process “a case study of the cognitive imperialism embedded in mainstream accounts of „the birth of modernity“ (p.106). Point six discusses the civilizational alternatives to the Eurocentric models, and adds that present studies miss this diverse focus. Following his analysis of these points as noted above, King concludes by suggesting that the term Hinduism should be avoided to denote the religion of India prior to the 10th Century C.E. Chapter seven of the book contains Timothy Fitzgerald’s article, “Who Invented Hinduism? Rethinking Religion in India,” which reads as a critical review of David Lorenzen’s earlier paper on the subject by the same title, “Who invented Hinduism?” (Lorenzen, 1999) but offers little new information. Fitzgerald uses extensive excerpts from Lorenzen’s article for his discussion and supplements it with material from yet another conference paper by David Lorenzen titled, “Gentile religion in South India, China and Tibet: studies by three missionaries” (Lorenzen, 2007). Fitzgerald not only postulates that Hinduism is a western construct, but he goes so far as to suggest that the word “religion,” itself, is abstract—and a construct—although other authors of the book, including Lorenzen, take issue with this premise.

Chapter eight contains Balagangadhara’s article, “Orientalism, Post-colonialism and the Construction of Religion,” which seeks to (1) provide details of the post-colonial story of the creation of religion in India, and (2) spell out a clear hypothesis on what religion is. To Balagangadhara, “Hinduism” is a phenomenon constructed by the West and constitutes an “experiential entity only to the West” (“All Roads,” 2013). While the beliefs and practices that constitute the phenomenon referred to as Hinduism do indeed exist, he says, it is the grouping and unifying of these practices into a perceived entity that is problematic. He offers the reader an analogy: If an alien were to arrive on earth and observe grass turning green, milk turning sour, and birds flying, for example, the alien might, in an effort to explain what he observes, claim that such phenomena were evidence of the existence of some unifying force, such as “hipkapi” (a term Balagangadhara has made up to illustrate his example); the alien would then point to all observable phenomena as evidence of the existence of “hipkapi.” This, says Balagangadhara, is what has happened with “Hinduism.” To examine his second point, Balagangadhara defines religion as “*an explanatory intelligible account of both the cosmos and itself*” (p.144), which the practices that purportedly constitute Hinduism do not provide. As such, he asserts, there are no religions in India other than Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (p.138-139). In fact, according to his definition, not only is Hinduism not a religion, but neither is Buddhism or Jainism. He also argues against the previous paper in this volume by Timothy Fitzgerald, who sees religion or religions as concepts developed after 16th century in Europe.

Chapter nine contains an article by Jacob De Roover and Sarah Claerhout, “The Colonial Construction of What?” which discusses the theoretical framework for postcolonial understanding of religion in India. The paper is divided into three sections that ask (1) Is religion a construct? (2) Is Hinduism a construct? and (3) What is constructed in the process of construction? The first section establishes that all religions are constructed, and therefore all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Taoism are

all constructs. This contradicts the claim made by Balagangadhara in the previous chapter that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are religions, while Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism are constructs. However, their next section, “Is Hinduism a Construct?” drifts away from their original thesis and argues in a way that is similar to Balagangadhara that “to Europeans, Hinduism and Buddhism were not only concepts but also something more: they were *experimental entities* that ordered and structured their experience of the *alien cultures* (emphasis mine) they encountered in India (p.170). The third section addresses, „What is constructed?“ and seeks to explain the ambiguities in presenting Hinduism as a construct. In concluding this section, the authors add, “One could consistently take the realist position that Christianity exists „in reality,“ and at the same time deny the existence of Hindu religion, because that religion is a *fictitious entity* (p.171). This section also surveys some of the postcolonial arguments about construction or the lack of religion or Hinduism in India. This section concludes with a question rather than providing any conclusion, asking “why certain Indians as well as Europeans believe that Hinduism exists” (p.172). In the conclusion the authors note that the existing parameters are insufficient to understand religion, and propose to develop new models to understand and rethink religion in India.

Although this book begins with the goal of establishing Hinduism as a colonial construct, as noted by the editors in the introduction, the majority of articles do not support this claim. The first three articles and the seventh article argue that Hinduism existed and were known in India by that name as early as the 10th century C.E., with new representations taking place during colonial period, which precludes the possibility of Hinduism being a colonial construct. The third and fourth articles do not analyze the issue of the term Hinduism but rather focus on the changing practices in modern Hinduism, which supports the claim that Hinduism is a major practice-based religion, regardless of the name. Chapter eight diverts the academic discussion with analogies, and chapter nine not only does not answer any questions, but it concludes with more questions. As such, the overall contribution of this collection of articles to the understanding of the legitimacy and use of the term Hinduism in postcolonial India is limited.

Indeed, however, the issue of name does not seem to be a central issue in India. Some children are not given a name until they are admitted into school, and even after that, they are referred to by numerous names. The child is then called by his or her given name in school and in other official settings but continues to be called by his/her various nicknames in familiar and informal environments. This does in fact cause some confusion but does not do great damage to either the child or those that refer to the child by these many names. In fact, the more popular one is the more names one acquires, which is also true of gods, goddesses, and religions in India. The exercise in this book seems to me to be one such confusion of names rather than any major issue with regard to Hinduism and its practice in India.

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