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JEWISH THEOLOGY  
AND  
WORLD RELIGIONS



*Edited by*

ALON GOSHEN-GOTTSTEIN

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Oxford · Portland, Oregon

**The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization**

2012

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[www.littman.co.uk](http://www.littman.co.uk)

*Published in the United States and Canada by*  
*The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization*  
c/o ISBS, 920 NE 58th Avenue, Suite 300  
Portland, Oregon 97213-3786

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*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloging-in-publication data*

*Jewish theology and world religions / edited by Alon Gosben-Gottstein and Eugene Korn.  
p. cm. — (The Littman library of Jewish civilization)*

*Includes bibliographical references and index.*

*1. Judaism—Relations. 2. Religions. 3. Theology. 4. Judaism—Doctrines.*

*I. Gosben-Gottstein, Alon. II. Korn, Eugene, 1947–*

*BM534.J49 2012 296.3'9-dc23*

2011031222

ISBN 978-1-906764-09-8

*Publishing co-ordinator: Janet Moth*

*Production: John Saunders*

*Design: Pete Russell, Faringdon, Oxon.*

*Copy-editing: Mark Newby*

*Index: Christine Headley*

*Typeset by John Saunders Design & Production, Eastbourne*

*Printed in Great Britain on acid-free paper by*

*T.J. International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall.*

*Encountering Hinduism*  
Thinking Through *Avodah Zarah*

ALON GOSHEN-GOTTSTEIN

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INTRODUCTION

PART of what makes a Jewish theology of world religions a vital contemporary concern is that in the past few decades Judaism has come into contact with religions with which it previously had no significant dealings. These religions pose new challenges. Judaism has only recently encountered Hinduism in an organized way and on a large scale. Tens of thousands of Jewish, particularly Israeli, youths have encountered it. Commercial and political relations have created many opportunities for the two faiths to meet, and a formal dialogue between Jewish and Hindu religious leadership now takes place. Despite all this, there has been little reflection on the meaning of the present encounter with Hinduism, the challenges and opportunities this encounter provides, and what it might have to teach us for a Jewish theology of religions. The issues are as broad as they are complex and will require the efforts of many thinkers over an extended period of time. I am currently working on a monograph devoted to these issues, tentatively titled *Beyond Idolatry: The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism*, but have no illusions that I will resolve or reach finality on any of the issues raised by Judaism's encounter with Hinduism. At this point, perhaps all we can achieve is raising the questions, developing a better grasp of their complexity, and moving from simplistic notions to more complex, even if more confusing, understandings of Hinduism. Even if some answers emerge already now, we are at an initial stage of learning within this encounter. It suffices for the time being to understand the challenges of the moment and the tasks that lie ahead.

I wish to share in this chapter some of the insights that are elaborated with greater detail and complexity in the forthcoming monograph. Limitations of space force me to concentrate primarily on one issue of the many raised by the encounter. It seems to me that Hindu worship, offered to many beings, all of whom are recognized as representing god and hence divine, is the most pressing issue for most Jewish observers of Hinduism. In other words, Hinduism is

considered *avodah zarah*—illegitimate alien worship, equivalent to idolatry. Because this perception is so common, dealing with it seems both the most urgent, and the most appropriate, way to begin the engagement with Hinduism.<sup>1</sup> As the issue of Hindu worship cannot be divorced from other aspects of Hindu religious life, or from Jewish perceptions of those aspects, I will briefly touch upon several other dimensions of Hinduism that provide a spiritual and religious context for a discussion of *avodah zarah*.

### ON JUDAISM(S) AND HINDUISM(S)

No religion is a monolith, but some are more so than others. This is probably a fair way to sum up the following discussion and it touches on the fundamental assumptions of this chapter. When we speak of Judaism's encounter with Hinduism, we assume a meeting of two entities that should be described and related to in roughly the same terms and categories, along the lines of a meeting between two individuals. The reality, however, is that religions are far more complex.<sup>2</sup> They include different religious, ideological, and practical ways of expressing a broad tradition. Under certain circumstances the different expressions of a religion may recognize one another and be recognized as belonging to the same religion; at other times, even this may be questioned. This issue is relevant both for Judaism and for Hinduism, but particularly for the latter. In the case of Judaism, the complexity of defining Judaism and recognizing its different manifestations as expressions of a single religious system have led Jacob Neusner and scholars who follow his lead to speak of 'Judaisms' in the plural, rather than the singular. Still, for purposes of the present discussion we may identify Judaism in a way that includes its diversity within a broader unifying framework: the rabbinic tradition encoded and expressed in the halakhic tradition that grows out of the Talmud and its commentaries. This tradition includes also the various superstructures that give meaning to the halakhic way of life, including Jewish philosophy, kabbalah, and their various offshoots. While this Judaism has much diversity, its various components have come to recognize themselves as part of a whole. From this sense of a whole one may explore what it means to engage another religious tradition like Hinduism.

Turning to Hinduism, we discover the term 'Hinduism' is problematic in far more complex ways than the term 'Judaism', leading some scholars of religion to speak of both religious traditions in the plural, 'Hinduisms' and 'Judaisms'. If we are to speak of Judaism's engagement with Hinduism, we

<sup>1</sup> A discussion of Hinduism in terms of *avodah zarah* provides an opportunity to re-examine how we think of *avodah zarah* in general and the theological assumptions that inform our religious views. Constructive thinking on *avodah zarah* in the light of Hinduism will be left for *Beyond Idolatry*.

<sup>2</sup> On this issue, see Stanisław Krajewski in Chapter 5, above.

must know what this Hinduism is, who speaks for it, and who represents it. These remain debated issues within Hindu scholarly and religious communities. The difficulties in providing unequivocal answers to these questions touch the heart of the concerns of this chapter, making its conclusions and suggestions in some way tentative, dependent on the resolution of what 'Hinduism' is and how we represent it.

There are several difficulties with defining 'Hinduism'. We lack a historical tradition that conceptualized the religion or religions of India in these terms. Hence 'Hinduism' is a very young category and is in part indebted to the emergence of the modern study of religion. While the category did draw on earlier forms of constructing the identity of a religious community, specifically in contrast with the religious identity of the Muslim community, we do not have any classical Hindu category that corresponds to the Western religious '-ism' of 'Hinduism'. Properly speaking, Hinduism could be described as a loose federation of religious traditions. These religious traditions can be quite disparate or they can share features making them recognizable to each other as species of the same genus. The variety pertains not only to the deities worshipped (an obvious consequence of polytheistic practice, as distinguished from belief), but also to the philosophical understanding of the religion, the chain of tradition and authority, the form of ritual practice and observance, the understanding of the goals of the religion, and more. Both theologically and ritually the range of legitimate divergence is great. In terms of practice it exceeds the range of legitimate divergence of practice within Judaism, probably even if Jewish heterodox groups and sects are included. Philosophically and theologically the divergence is at least as large as that characterizing the differences between Jewish philosophy and kabbalah. For thousands of years, complementary and partially overlapping Hindu religious traditions have been living alongside one another in a basic mode of tolerance and acceptance, notwithstanding inter-group tensions that might erupt from time to time.

Like all religions, Hinduism has been changing for centuries in response to its encounter with external forces. Under colonial rule, changes took place in Indian religious life, either through legislation or through the challenges and opportunities presented by British culture and Christianity. Internal reform has led to various religious movements and new forms of Hindu identity. Various religious teachers over the past 150 years have helped shape the religious imagination of what Hinduism is both in India itself and in the West, creating greater convergence between different understandings of Hinduism. Other external forces have also greatly influenced a growing sense of a unified religious identity. Communications and media have played a great role in spreading religious knowledge and creating a common sense of ownership of many Hindu traditions and practices. This movement has been greatly aided

also by migration and the emergence of a powerful Hindu diaspora. Increasingly, when we think of 'Hinduism', we no longer think exclusively of the Indian subcontinent, but of the global context and the presence of Hindus in most parts of the world. The Hindu diaspora plays an important role in the shaping of Hindu identity and will continue to do. Hindus from different localities, practising different forms of Hinduism, believing in different deities, following different customs, and having diverse understandings of Hinduism itself are forced to share one common temple, one community, limited resources, and common challenges in a new environment. Diaspora Hinduism is not simply a replica of Hinduism as practised on the subcontinent. It functions, rather, as a means of synthesizing multiple traditions, preferring some over others and constructing some sense of a common Hindu identity. This new identity is then projected back to the homeland through the ongoing two-way communication of ideas and practices. Diaspora Hinduism, one of the loci of Judaism's encounter with Hinduism, is thus a force in shaping Hindu identity and the concomitant understanding of what Hinduism is, how it functions, and what challenges it presents to Judaism. To take one example relevant to the present discussion, Vasudha Narayanan points to the fact that in the diaspora Hindus are challenged to explain what the idols they worship are and how they are understood. She notes that temple literature in the United States of America presents Hindu deities in ways that conflict with traditional practice but that make Hinduism more palatable to the Western audience. Idols are, accordingly, presented as merely symbolic.<sup>3</sup> We are facing new articulations of core issues that have a profound bearing on Judaism's encounter with Hinduism. It is not enough to dismiss certain voices as apologetic, for today's apologetics are tomorrow's faith, especially when it comes to a religious tradition that is as pliable and changes as easily as Hinduism does. Diaspora thus presents us with new possibilities and opportunities for understanding Hinduism, even as it continues to serve a unifying function for Hinduism's self-understanding.

One of the realities associated with the emergence of a unified Hindu understanding of religion is the rise of a view of Hinduism from the perspective of a particular philosophical vantage point, sometimes called 'New Hinduism'. The coming of Hindu teachers to the West (specifically America) since the visit of Swami Vivekananda in the late nineteenth century has done much to shape what 'Hinduism' is for both Hindus and non-Hindus. The voice of this movement is primarily the voice of one school of Indian philosophy, the non-dualistic philosophical school known as Advaita Vedanta. Followers of this school see it as the ultimate form of Hindu philosophy, incorporating all others. It is a

<sup>3</sup> See Vasudha Narayanan, 'Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 68 (2000), 767.

monistic world-view that recognizes the unity of all being and sees all diversity, in life as well as in the divine and its worship, as secondary phenomena and removed from the ultimate reality, to be accounted for philosophically. The figurehead of this line of teaching is the eighth-century teacher Sankara, who for many now functions as the authoritative and ultimate voice of Hinduism. It seems fair to suggest that the present-day representation of Sankara's philosophy and how it has come to speak for increasingly larger portions of Hinduism is a new phenomenon that would not have been witnessed several hundred years ago. Nevertheless, it is an important part of what Hinduism has become, particularly because it is increasingly presented as the proper understanding of Hinduism.

Vedantins are in a doubly advantageous position. Their world-view is all-inclusive and accounts for all forms of religious practice, including the lower, less philosophically informed practices of Hinduism such as the various smaller, local manifestations. Vedanta need not consider Hinduism as we see it as the final or perfect form of Hinduism. It considers Hinduism in the ideal, accommodates lower and imperfect forms of its religious life, and offers a narrative to bridge the two—the continuing chain of teachers who seek to elevate humanity to greater spiritual heights through correct teaching. It is thus a total world-view that integrates various expressions of Hinduism. Vedantins enjoy the additional advantage of having a voice, representation, and recognition. Most of the major religious teachers of India are indebted to a vedantic understanding and appeal to it, even if they are not philosophically inclined themselves. Thus, Advaita Vedanta has more of a voice in contemporary Hinduism than any other stream. While a Jewish view of Hinduism and an attempt to understand whether Hindu worship is indeed *avodab zarab* cannot rely completely on a vedantic viewpoint, we must recognize that this is a dominant and to a large extent representative voice within Hinduism, and for this reason it informs the few Jewish attempts to engage with Hinduism. The complexity of Hinduism is captured by the recognition that Vedanta provides a representative voice that nevertheless cannot speak for all Hindu traditions.

#### ENCOUNTERING HINDUISM: HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

Several early modern rabbinic tracts offer the following apologetic as a foreword: 'all references to *avodab zarab* in the following treatise do not refer to the people among whom we live (Christians), but to people of distant lands, such as India'. The need to both neutralize references to Christians as *avodab zarab* and to maintain the relevance of the category has on occasion led to the identification of Indian religion with *avodab zarab*. Such an identification was

possible precisely because India is a distant land, known from tales and imagination, rather than from the reality of day-to-day encounter and living in proximity. India has been the subject of hearsay, projection, and imagination for centuries, even millennia. Attitudes to Hinduism have thus taken shape and continue to be informed by the unique circumstances of reference to a religion that is decidedly other, strange, and distant, foreign in the most basic sense of the foreign worship that constitutes *avodab zarab*, and we must reckon with this fundamental fact when we consider Jewish attitudes to Hinduism. All previous instances of dealing with the religion of the other and the consequent proclamation of the worship of that religion as *avodab zarab* have been the result of life experience in cultures with which Jews have come into close contact. Hinduism and other Eastern religions are different in that they have not been part of the Jewish historical encounter. Jewish understanding of Hinduism is consequently subject to rash judgements and the application of criteria that are important for Jews, but that are understood differently and in various ways in Hindu writings and by Hindus themselves. The concern for the worship of images and the facile declaration of Hinduism as *avodab zarab* are natural consequences of the sudden exposure to new and strange forms of religious life.

It is important to remember that despite the seeming novelty of the contemporary Jewish encounter with Hinduism, the two religions actually have a history that may be two millennia old.<sup>4</sup> In light of this, what would be more natural than to turn to that history in search of precedents for a Jewish view of Hinduism, and in particular of how Jews living among Hindus viewed Hindu gods and their worship? I have been unable to establish any references in literature written by Indian Jews to Hinduism as *avodab zarab*. In part this may be due to the fact that Indian Jewry was not a centre of rabbinic literary activity. Nevertheless, such silence is still striking. Moreover it is heightened by indications of a different attitude, one that either does not consider the religion of India to be *avodab zarab* or at least does not consider it to be a major concern in defining attitudes and relations with Hindus. Walter Fischel posed the question to twentieth-century Indian Jews and reported that the prevailing attitude was recognition of multiple spiritual paths, which allowed for the religious and spiritual validity of Hinduism.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary Indian Jews offer similar answers, even though their replies reflect a secularized cosmopolitan

<sup>4</sup> See Nathan Katz, 'The State of the Art of Hindu-Jewish Dialogue', in R. Chakravarti, B. Sinha, and S. Weil (eds.), *Indo-Judaic Studies in the Twenty-First Century: A View from the Margin* (New York, 2007), 113–26.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Fischel, 'The Contribution of the Cochin Jews to South Indian and Jewish Civilization', in S. S. Koder et al. (eds.), *Commemoration Volume: Cochin Synagogue Quarter-Centenary Celebrations* (Cochin, 1971), 60; see also Nathan Katz and Ellen Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India* (Columbia, SC, 1993), 249.



understanding that already bears the imprint of such Indian spiritual giants as Ramana Maharshi and others.<sup>6</sup> Still, the impression is consistent: rather than highlighting the idolatry, strangeness, and otherness of the religion of their Hindu neighbours, Indian Jews seem to have reciprocated the acceptance and tolerance they enjoyed. If correct, this is very significant. It suggests that different cultures and different historical contexts tend to highlight different aspects of the encounter between religions. What seems to us to be of vital concern is only one of several options of how the relationship may be constructed. As such, it is both culturally and historically contingent. This relativizing perspective also emerges from an examination of medieval perceptions of India.

Indian Jewry did not live in complete isolation, and throughout the centuries various travellers visited India. Perhaps the earliest relevant records come from the Cairo genizah, where we find notes of Jewish merchants who wrote from India or who had visited India. S. D. Goitein, who published these records, comments on their silence regarding the religion of the people of India. The tone of the writers is warm and they refer to the Hindus as brothers, but say nothing of their different religion. Surely the Jews must have realized how different the religious landscape was. Why, then, is this difference not expressed in their writings?<sup>7</sup> One answer might be that we simply do not have all the relevant materials in our possession. But there may be another answer. The lack of interest of these Jewish merchants may reflect the lack of interest of the Indian Jewish community in these issues. It may, in theory, also reflect their successful resolution. If Jews viewed Hinduism similarly to how Hindus understood their own faith, then they would have viewed Hindus as monotheists who worship different representations of one God. The level of tension in relation to Hindus would obviously be lower than if they were concerned about polytheism as forbidden idolatrous worship.

#### CONTEMPORARY HINDU–JEWISH ENCOUNTERS: THE QUEST FOR SPIRITUALITY

Commerce and day-to-day coexistence defined the earlier stages of historical encounter. While also served by commercial and diplomatic concerns, our present-day encounter is also driven by a particular contemporary concern—the quest for spirituality. Jews from all over the world turn to India, its teachers, and its traditions as part of their ongoing quest for spiritual meaning and lifestyles. American Jewry's turn to India from the 1960s onwards has become

<sup>6</sup> See Joan Roland, 'Religious Observances of Bene Israel: Persistence and Refashioning of Tradition', *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, 3 (2000), 41–2.

<sup>7</sup> See S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* (Berkeley, Calif., 1971), ii. 277.

a flood of travellers from Israel.<sup>8</sup> This is true not only for secular Jews and Israelis, but also for an increasing number of religious youth and their educators, who seek to complement and deepen their religious experience of Judaism by drawing on practices and teachings found in Hinduism.<sup>9</sup> There are various models for reconciling the turn to India with faithfulness to Jewish identity and practice. One model plays with questions and answers. Questions are posed from a Hindu context and answers are provided from within Judaism.<sup>10</sup> In some sense such a model and the turn to Indian spirituality generally may be taken as a sign of crisis. Of course, crisis contains opportunity and holds within it the promise of growth. While this type of spiritual encounter may be driven by the desire for growth, this desire is nevertheless fed by crisis in Jewish spiritual reality. Talk of 'spirituality' veils what can be considered the greatest aspect of Jewish spiritual crisis: that most of Judaism is unable to talk of God or to provide a conscious relationship with him. Different people would see Judaism's present crisis differently. While some see it in terms of identity and others in terms of continuity, still others conceive of it in terms of either learning or practice. In the present context, I would like to argue that Judaism's deepest crisis concerns God. Judaism is a religion that centres around God, but that to a large extent has lost touch with the living God.<sup>11</sup> God has not lost touch with Judaism, nor have the people of Israel lost their faith in God. But Judaism has lost, to a significant extent, the awareness of God at its centre and the ability to structure the entire life of the religious community, let alone the people of Israel, around access to divine presence and its grounding in the community's life. This loss has deep historical roots, and may itself be an expression of the destruction of the Temple, the loss of prophecy, and a long history of exile. This loss is, to my mind, included in what kabbalists speak of when they refer to the exile of the Shekhinah.

Jews are both a faithful people and a people of faith. But their religious life is presently constructed so that other religious values occupy places of primary importance, often eclipsing God's centrality within the religious system. One commonly attributes to Zoharic literature the maxim that the Torah, Israel, and God are one.<sup>12</sup> In one way this could express the unity of all values within

<sup>8</sup> See Daria Maoz, 'Every Age and its Backpack: On the Different Groups Traveling to India' (Heb.), in Elhanan Nir and Rubin Mass (eds.), *From India to Here* [Mehodu ve'ad kan] (Jerusalem, 2006), 107–25.

<sup>9</sup> A representative collection of essays that reflect this trend is *From India to Here*.

<sup>10</sup> Elhanan Nir, 'Where is the Time of Non-Movement? On Hasidism, East and West, and Something about the Israeli Present' (Heb.), in Nir and Mass (eds.), *From India to Here*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Some of these ideas are articulated in Alon Goshen-Gottstein, 'When Will I See the Face of God?' (Heb.), *Akdamos*, 9 (2000), 119–30.

<sup>12</sup> The maxim itself seems to have been coined by Moses Hayim Luzzatto (1707–46) (see Isaiah Tishby, 'God, the Torah and Israel are One: The Source of the Saying in Ramhal's Commentary on the Idra Rabba' (Heb.), *Kiryat Sefer*, 50 (1975), 480–92).

the divine beautifully. Yet the union of these values with the divine may also lead to their becoming the primary foci of religious attention and devotion at the expense of God as the ultimate point of the spiritual quest. To a large extent this is precisely what has happened.

The exile of God, his hiding, the difficulty in finding or accessing him—however we conceptualize it—seems to me to be the heart of the Jewish spiritual crisis. And it is only when we are able to confront the fact that we are in crisis that we may consider what the turn to Indian spirituality seeks to heal. It is not only that Jews find a spirituality in India that addresses a deep hunger in their souls; rather, India makes available a directness of approach to God that is often lacking in Judaism. This direct approach to God may be the hallmark of India's spiritual life and why it is so attractive to Jews.

When Jews conceive of the goals of the religious life, few of us think of communion or relationship with God, let alone consider it the only thing worth desiring. We seek happiness, family life, the well-being of our group, a life of values, learning, and overall flourishing. God plays a meaningful part in this package of ideals, but for very few is God actually the central focus of their quest. Here India provides so many opportunities for an alternative testimony that it has come to represent for many that very alternative. Indeed, the goal of the spiritual life as stated by so many spiritual teachers of the Hindu tradition says it all: 'God realization'. Perhaps not all know what God realization means. Perhaps very few attain it. But it is a central governing ideal that informs the lives of thousands, if not millions, of spiritual seekers. Hinduism, as encountered through various teachers and religious groups, presents God at the centre and a systematic path to reach knowledge and awareness of God.

One of the most common practices of Hindus of different traditions is *japa*, the repetition of God's name. The quest to keep God's name a constant reality keeps God very much at the centre of one's awareness. Even more significantly, the theological structure of Hinduism makes God more readily available than do the Abrahamic faiths. Fundamental to the Hindu approach is the recognition that God is omnipresent and all-pervading. This view allows one to recognize God in all and to find him everywhere. Most forms of Judaism think of God in transcendent terms, even if they employ a religious language that speaks of God in personal terms. Even those Jewish traditions that portray God in pantheistic or panentheistic terms do not turn that insight into the governing approach to divinity, readily available for worship and contact. Thinking of God in terms of his omnipresence, as all-pervading in all forms of life, orients religious thought and practice in such a way that highlights God's accessibility. In terms of spirituality, this more than any other may be the one element that defines Hindu spirituality compared with Jewish spirituality. I contend that the centrality of God and God realization is what draws Jewish

seekers to Hinduism. Thus God realization lies at the heart of the Jewish encounter with Hinduism.

I conclude this section by sharing the testimony of an Israeli writer speaking of the impressions of her first visit to India. Rivka Miriam is observant and active in Torah study and various literary and religious forums. Her knowledge of Torah allows her to relate to her experience in India in terms taken from classical Jewish texts. Her testimony confirms the suggestion I have just made and points to what might be the source of India and Hinduism's appeal for Israelis and Jews:

And now to divinity. Meeting its expressions in India brought about a transformation in me. We Jews employ the common expression 'there is no place that is devoid of Him'. In India I discovered a world where indeed so it is. I discovered a world in which there is no one who does not believe. I discovered a world where one sees divinity in every tree and in every stone. But also in every deed and in every matter. The entire world is full of his glory.

Seeing divinity in India brought about a transformation in me. Indeed, there I saw a place full of faith. Another, different, way to believe, a path that may have been uprooted from us when, as the Talmud tells, the evil inclination for idol worship was uprooted. And perhaps together with that uprooting a part of faith as such was also uprooted.<sup>13</sup>

Faith is the all-pervading reality, a faith in the all-pervading Divinity. One sees God everywhere. This gives life to what are otherwise mere texts, words, and ideas found in Jewish sources. Miriam paraphrases Isaiah 6: 3 in light of the *musaf* Kedushah text that proclaims the entire world is full of divine glory.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, she appeals to a kabbalistic source to affirm that there is no place devoid of the divine presence.<sup>15</sup> The religious reality of India makes sense in light of kabbalistic language and insight. Miriam experiences India as a place full of faith and that faith is transformative. She struggles with the relationship between this faith and idolatry, and our own complex loss/gain upon removal of the inclination to worship idols based upon a story narrated in the Talmud.<sup>16</sup> Idolatry enters the overall assessment of the Indian religious reality; indeed, it is the flip side of the all-pervasiveness of faith in India. Faith draws; idolatry repels.

<sup>13</sup> Rivka Miriam, 'I Was a Prism for Light' (Heb.), in Nir and Mass (eds.), *From India to Here*, 41-2, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Not only the earth, as in Isaiah. Christian liturgy achieves the same by adding the heaven to the earth, filled by God's glory.

<sup>15</sup> *Tikunei zohar*, Tikun 57 (91b); Tikun 70 (122b). This statement is often juxtaposed with the previous paraphrase of Isaiah in hasidic literature (see Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, *No'am elimelekh*, 'Terumah', s.v. *vezebu dirshu*; Moses Hayim Ephraim of Sudytkow, *Degel mahaneh efrayim*, 'Beshalah', s.v. *vayomeru*).

<sup>16</sup> Rivka Miriam, 'I Was a Prism for Light' (Heb.), 45, alluding to BT *San.* 64a.

## HINDU SAINTS — TESTIMONY AND CHALLENGE

Hindu spirituality is not encountered in the abstract. To a large extent, Jewish seekers encounter it through the teachings and person of Hindu teachers and saints: gurus.<sup>17</sup> One of the first challenges that faces serious and open-minded Jews who engage with Hinduism is the fact that some people, even if only a few, have attained extraordinary spiritual heights through Hinduism, or, more broadly, within the spiritual context of Indian religious life. How we view Hinduism will vary greatly depending on whether one is or is not able to acknowledge this. My own thoughts have been formed by my impressions of some Hindu religious figures. For me, their sanctity and spiritual achievement are beyond question, and hence an important point of departure for theological reflection upon other religions generally, and Hinduism in particular. The challenge of accounting for another religious tradition changes radically the moment one admits that great spiritual heights, perhaps even greater than those seen in one's immediate vicinity or even within Judaism as practised today, have been or are realized in the lives of individuals of another tradition. It may take only one such person to transform one's theological views or change one's spiritual horizons to include others. Even granting that for every true teacher there are a hundred others who fail to reach such heights and that for every guru who is a model there are many fallen, this does not change the fundamental theological challenge. It only makes the question of discernment more urgent and calls us to cultivate spiritual tools for recognizing true from false spirituality. Those tools would have to be applied in relation to our own great teachers and would not be a means of distinguishing one religion from another, but distinguishing the higher from the lower and the authentic from the inauthentic forms of spiritual life as these are manifest in all religions. The same kind of intellectual honesty that calls us to apply criteria to help us discern and recognize true spiritual teachers also calls us (certainly it has led me) to recognize the authentic spiritual lives of saints outside Judaism and, in the present context, within the spiritual framework of the religious life of India.

Saints are appreciated in the broader religious world-view within which they operate. In the case of Hinduism this has implications for the recognition of the divinity manifest in the spiritual teacher. Nuances vary, but the core issue—and herein lies the challenge from a Jewish perspective—is the Hindu view of the teacher as divine. There are different ways of understanding this approach.

<sup>17</sup> See the reflections on the consequences of meeting Indian gurus in Nir, 'Where is the Time of Non-Movement?' Significantly, Nir uses classical rabbinic terminology, referring to them as *tsadikim*. The choice of terminology will determine the attitude to the spiritual phenomenon under discussion. Referring to aspects of Hindu religious life in the same terms in which Jewish spiritual virtuosi are considered assumes they are of a kind, can be compared, and that one can learn from the Hindu species of the same genus.

On one level, it is a matter of respect, etiquette, and propriety. The guru is approached *as if* he were God. The ‘as if’ approach is, of course, reminiscent of various midrashic statements that inculcate a religious attitude by means of ‘as if’ statements, which narrow the divide between the human and the divine.<sup>18</sup> However, in the Indian context the recognition of the divinity of the teacher is more far-reaching than a rhetorical device or the inculcation of a respectful attitude. In many senses, the teacher is, or can be, seen as divinity proper. While being absolute and transcendent, divinity is also understood as capable of incarnating itself. The teacher, as mediator of divine life and teaching and as model of spiritual perfection, is often considered as an incarnation of the divine. Needless to say, this attitude is at odds with classical Judaism’s fundamental objection to the idea of the divinization of humans. Whether this fundamental difference can be bridged will be discussed below, but for now it is enough to recognize that Hindu saints are an important site for a Hindu–Jewish conversation about the divine and how it is approached.

#### THE WISDOM OF INDIA: ANCIENT IMAGES AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Encounters of cultures happen in rich and complex ways. They can also be conceived of in various and changing ways. Encounters of cultures can never be reduced to a single dimension. Any attempt to frame the encounter, to highlight what another culture is or represents, to focus upon the challenges and problems of the encounter of cultures, already reflects a conceptual agenda. The choice of how cultures are juxtaposed and how their point of encounter and ensuing challenges are presented already betrays a certain understanding of what is important to a given culture. The changes in how one culture imagines another, how it portrays it, and what it deems important in the meeting provide an important lens through which the two cultures and their interactions can be studied. Because cultures are complex, we may expect different and changing conceptions of what they mean to each other to emerge over time. This has important consequences for Judaism’s encounter with Hinduism. If, for many contemporary Jewish observers, the Hindu worship of idols is the defining feature of Hindu religion and is considered to be the most interesting and significant dimension of a Jewish appreciation of Hinduism, this has not always been the case. Earlier periods captured India through another lens, almost completely ignoring the worship of images. That lens was the lens of wisdom.

Recognition of India and its religious tradition as a repository of wisdom is the most persistent view of India in Jewish literature, and it is about as old as

<sup>18</sup> The rabbinic terms are *ke’ilu* and *kiveyakbol*. On the latter, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford, 2003), app. 2.

rabbinic Judaism itself. Regardless of how well previous generations knew the religion of India and whether that knowledge was direct or mediated, wisdom was a recognized way to engage with Hinduism. Many Hindus will feel comfortable with a description of their tradition in terms of wisdom, and they would probably even consent to distinguish it from the concept of revelation as used by the Abrahamic faiths. Wisdom is thus an important dimension for mutual understanding that is by now a fundamental aspect of the Jewish tradition's view of India and its religion. Even within contemporary discourse, which often makes the worship of idols a primary dimension of a Jewish view of Hinduism, wisdom remains an important aspect of the encounter. It provides a way for both partners to understand themselves, their uniqueness, and the meaning of their encounter. Recognizing this dimension allows us to balance other perspectives, and to reflect upon the enduring challenges of the Hindu–Jewish encounter for Judaism's growth and development.

One example of a positive evaluation of India and its sages is found in the writings of Menasseh ben Israel. He recognized the value of Indian wisdom and saw it as part of the Abrahamic heritage. He relied on the narrative in Genesis 25:6, which describes Abraham giving gifts to the children of his concubines and then sending them to the East.<sup>19</sup> Menasseh ben Israel provided the theoretical foundations for one of the most interesting attempts to relate Hinduism and Judaism, that of Matityahu Glazerson, who authored a book entitled *From Hinduism to Judaism*.<sup>20</sup> Glazerson approached Hinduism in an open and positive way. In fact, his is probably the most favourable treatment of Hinduism by any Jewish author. This is made possible through the twofold strategy of concentrating on Hinduism as wisdom, rather than worship or religion, and approaching that wisdom as our own in the inclusivist mode developed by Menasseh ben Israel. The book's logic runs as follows: Hinduism teaches . . . ; we also find this in Judaism. The basic premise is that Hindu teaching is valid. Glazerson wants to demonstrate that there is no need to turn to Hinduism in order to obtain that wisdom because it is fully available in Judaism as well. Hinduism emerges as valid and meaningful for non-Jews. In Glazerson's scheme, Jews are endowed with a special soul and therefore can only find their spiritual fulfilment through the observance of the *mitsvot* and by following Judaism. Hinduism is thus a valid path of wisdom, but an inadequate one for Jews. Glazerson never uses the word religion in this context, nor does he address the problems associated with *avodah zarah*, and his work is proof of the possibility of appreciating Hinduism as a wisdom tradition while putting aside all issues related to *avodah zarah*.

<sup>19</sup> *Nishmat hayim*, pt. 4, ch. 21; see Richard Marks, 'Abraham, the Easterners and India: Jewish Interpretations of Genesis 25:6', *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, 3 (2000), 49–71.

<sup>20</sup> Matityahu Glazerson, *From Hinduism to Judaism* (Jerusalem, 1984).



The problem with Glazerson's logic becomes obvious when presented in this way. What makes Judaism appropriate for Jews is that it is more than a set of wisdom teachings and practices; it is religion in the full sense. Hinduism is never acknowledged as such. The comparison is made in a partial way and ends up working in Judaism's favour. That Glazerson's argument is partial should not lead us to minimize his achievements. Glazerson was able to highlight what is positive in Hinduism while bracketing all that most rabbinic figures find problematic, namely *avodah zarah*. Constructing this argument and developing it as extensively as he did is thus an important strategy that must be respected.

### CONFRONTING THE WORSHIP OF IDOLS: DEFINING THE CHALLENGE

It should by now be apparent that there are multiple perspectives from which to conceptualize the Jewish–Hindu encounter. In different ages we note different paradigms that govern either the image of India and its religion or the actual contact of Jews with Hinduism. Each of these captured a different facet of the complex web of possible and actual relationships between the two religions. The present discussion focuses on what is considered today by some the most crucial aspect of dealing with Hinduism and certainly the thorniest and most complex issue from the perspective of traditional Judaism. Highlighting this dimension implicitly establishes what is important in the Hindu religion in Jewish eyes, how the encounter is envisioned, and how Hinduism is judged. For reasons that we may no longer be able to trace, the issue of worshipping idols has become the defining issue, and for many Jews that is all that they see in Hinduism and is the sole basis for assessing Hinduism.

The Jewish view of other religions as *avodah zarah* was not formed as a response to Hinduism. Contemporary approaches to Hinduism that make this the primary lens are carrying over attitudes that are thousands of years old and that were formed in relation to other religions. Objection to foreign worship helped establish Jewish identity in the biblical and rabbinic periods, in relation to the various gods of surrounding cultures, and for the past two millennia has been an important element in Jewish consideration of Christianity and even of Islam. The battle against *avodah zarah* is a fundamental feature of Jewish identity and thus an important safeguard for its protection.

*Avodah zarah's* ready application to Hinduism stems from several considerations. The first, as suggested, is simply the carryover of age-old attitudes to the encounter with a new religious phenomenon. A second is the predominance of the worship of idols, images, *murtis*, in the Indian religious context.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Images are problematic in and of themselves. But they also suggest the multiple divinities worshipped through the various images, thereby making the view of God wholly incompatible



To the extent that *avodah zarah* is really a struggle against the worship of idols, it seems that India is a good case in point. This leads to the third point, namely that there has been little serious study of Hinduism as a religious system. Almost no effort has been made to understand it on its own terms, as a counterpoint to the application of the ready-made categories through which Jews assess other religions. This may or may not change the halakhic consequences associated with the claim that another religion is *avodah zarah*, but at the very least it contextualizes and nuances such claims. Hinduism provides a wonderful opportunity to re-engage with the subject of *avodah zarah* and to examine how we apply it. Precisely the fact that this is a new encounter unencumbered by attitudes that are thousands of years old, and by the painful history that did much to reinforce such attitudes, allows us to make the encounter with Hinduism more than an occasion to assess that religion and its potential meaning to Judaism. It provides an opportunity to think through in fresh ways the categories that have furnished our attitudes to other religions and that are consequently applied, at times carelessly, to a Jewish view of Hinduism.<sup>22</sup>

*Avodah zarah* involves interrelated aspects, the identity of the god under discussion as another god, and the inappropriate worship of God, through idols and images. That these two distinct issues can be used indiscriminately within one conceptual rubric tells us something important about the category of *avodah zarah* and how it has been defined and sustained. Applications of *avodah zarah* for thousands of years make the implicit assumption that wrong worship—in particular worship through forms and images—suggests another, different god. Because historically these two issues have been closely related, their conflation persists, even in face of the theoretical possibility that the same God is worshipped through other means. The challenge at hand is to examine the facile leap from foreign worship to foreign god. The religion of India confronts us precisely with the challenge of separating ritual from philosophy and theology and posing the question of how one knows, other than by means of ritual, that the God worshipped by two religions is the same God. If we can advance in our thinking on this issue, we may not only help deepen our understanding of Hinduism, but also deepen our reflection upon the fundamental category of *avodah zarah*.

But raising the question of the relationship between worship and philosophy leads us to an even more complicated fundamental consideration: ‘Who speaks

with that of Judaism. The issues overlap, at times to the point of confusion. The present discussion collapses both issues into the problem of the image. A fuller exposition of *avodah zarah* must deal with each of the issues on its own terms, as well as with their interrelatedness.

<sup>22</sup> The discussion in *Beyond Idolatry* examines many of our assumptions concerning how *avodah zarah* functions as a category and how the encounter with Hinduism invites us to reconsider our application of the category.

for the religion?’ Who holds the key to the proper interpretation of Hinduism, and whose voice should we take into account as we seek to understand Hinduism in relation to the Jewish concern with *avodah zarah*? This is a fundamental question of any Jewish theology of other religions, one completely ignored by the leap from the use of images in worship to the declaration of another religion as *avodah zarah*. If we reflect upon the relationship between ritual and philosophy, then we might consider the philosophers, the teachers of religion, as those who hold the key to the meaning and correct interpretation of the religion. The other extreme would be to consider the ‘man in the temple’, the common person who worships or on whose behalf worship is performed, as the authoritative voice inasmuch as he or she holds the key to the intention and hence to the theological understanding that drives a particular action. A median position might be the local authority, perhaps the local temple priest, who would offer the appropriate explanation of the ritual performed and the correct understanding of the deity worshipped. Finally, perhaps the meaning of the religion is best found in the writings of great figures of the past, regardless of contemporary understanding?

The multiplicity of interpretative perspectives is confusing and highlights a serious problem with understanding Hinduism. Conflicting evidence can be brought in an attempt to assess the religious understanding of the ‘man in the temple’, evidence that moreover changes from one form of Hinduism to another, both in terms of schools of thought and practice and in terms of the geographical presence of Hinduism in different countries. We are thus left with the question: ‘Who speaks for Hinduism?’

Upon further reflection, we might be led to the conclusion that it is impossible to pass judgement on an entire religion, let alone one so diffusely defined and constructed as Hinduism. It may be that in the final analysis we must resort to answering the question on a person-by-person basis, in terms of the individual believer, or at least in terms of an individual school of thought and practice. In that case, one man’s idolatry would be another’s true religion. While this seems paradoxical, it highlights the difficult choices we are forced to make as we undertake an understanding of Hindu faith and worship from a Jewish perspective. The present discussion continues to explore ‘Hinduism’ constructed broadly from a Jewish perspective, along lines developed by rabbinic authorities in relation to other religions, primarily Christianity. The possibility of abandoning such a broad and generalizing viewpoint in favour of more particular assessment of individual and group forms of Hinduism is examined in my *Beyond Idolatry*.

Following these introductory considerations concerning how Hinduism may be understood, I turn to the most public and widely advertised instance of Jewish encounter with Hinduism, which occurred during the twenty-first century and had a global impact, making international headlines. This

encounter illustrates just how much present-day engagement with Hinduism is a major contemporary reality that cannot be sidestepped. It also illustrates the problems associated with learning about another religion and calls us to examine how we go about doing so.

In 2004 the court of Jerusalem's Rabbi Yosef Elyashiv issued a halakhic ruling concerning the permissibility of wearing wigs (*sheitels*) made of human hair offered in Hindu temples as part of the devotions of Hindu believers. The halakhic background of the discussion is that a Jew may not benefit in any way from an offering of *avodah zarah*. He (or she) must burn it. Accordingly, if female devotees offer their hair in Hindu temples, the hair may not be used by Jewish women. The question that arose in 2004 was 'Was the offering of hair by Hindu devotees an offering of *avodah zarah* that should be forbidden to Jewish women?' The natural thing was to study the matter first hand, and so a prominent London rabbi, Aaron Dunner, was sent to India as Rabbi Elyashiv's emissary to study the matter personally. The emissary did not go to the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University for a course on Hinduism. He made his way to Tirupati, one of India's most celebrated temples, and returned home after 48 hours, so we are told, with his mission accomplished. He was able to provide the needed information based upon which Rabbi Elyashiv could rule that wigs that originated in Hindu temples could not be worn by Jewish Orthodox women. According to reports that followed the visit, Rabbi Dunner engaged locals in an enquiry about the nature of their ritual act. When they responded that they were offering their hair to the deity, he concluded that this was an offering to an idol, and hence should be forbidden for use. Rabbi Elyashiv's ruling followed suit.

Let us begin by noting the unexamined assumption of the entire rabbinic discussion. No one ever stopped to ask the question of whether this worship was indeed *avodah zarah*, what the status of Hinduism in this respect is, and how the worship in the Tirupati temple under examination conforms or does not conform with a broader view of Judaism on Hinduism as a religion.<sup>23</sup> There did not seem to be a need, even for those who sought to permit the wigs, to ask that most fundamental question.<sup>24</sup> At the time, I went through the voluminous

<sup>23</sup> The methodological flaws, even from the viewpoint of halakhic discourse, in how rabbis went about, or rather did not go about, discerning the nature of Hindu religion are explored in Daniel Sperber, 'How Not to Make Halakhic Rulings', *Conversations: The Journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals*, 5 (Sept. 2009), 1–11, available at <<http://www.jewishideas.org/articles/how-not-make-halakhic-rulings>>.

<sup>24</sup> Joshua Flug's conclusion is telling. He speaks of the value of this controversy as an opportunity to explore issues that are rarely of practical relevance, such as offering to an idol and the statistical principle of *kavua*. Nothing is said of the opportunity to explore what *avodah zarah* is ('A Review of the Recent *Sheitel* Controversy', *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, 49 (2005), 5–33, esp. 33).

responsa literature that the situation generated. I was struck by the fact that not a single halakhic decisor felt the need to raise the question of whether Hinduism, or the worship in Hindu temples, should be considered *avodah zarah*. There seems to me only one possible explanation for this. The power of images and their worship is so great and their impact upon Jewish memory and imagination so complete, that it leaves no room for querying this fundamental assumption of the discussion. The power of the immediate vision is so great as to determine unequivocally that the specific form of Hindu worship under discussion ought to be considered *avodah zarah*.

The challenge of distinguishing between the visible form of worship and the theological superstructure can only be articulated on the basis of a more thorough knowledge of a religion. One must be aware of the deep Jewish antagonism to *avodah zarah* and of how easily this resorts to the power of the visual as a first step in applying a more critical methodology to the Jewish study of Hinduism. The exclusive appeal to worship while ignoring philosophical understandings of the religion is the root problem. It points to a weakness in the classical Jewish approach and reminds us of how difficult it is to achieve a balanced understanding of Hindu religious life. Even if we concede there is value in sending a rabbinic emissary, who should he have spoken to? The priests who receive gifts for the deity?<sup>25</sup> The heads of various spiritual schools and dynasties who honour the site and frequent it on regular pilgrimages? If the latter, the meaning of Hinduism might be found outside the temple, among a narrow section of its users. One further relevant possibility is that the temple at Tirupati was dedicated, actually rededicated, by one of India's greatest philosophers, Ramanuja in the eleventh century, who is said to have consecrated the temple and established its ritual practices. In a situation in which the meaning of an action is unclear, it would make sense to turn to the institution's founder and learn his intentions. Ramanuja was a proponent of a school of Vedanta called modified non-dualism. At stake in the differences between the different

<sup>25</sup> The question of who holds the key to interpreting a religion is actually one of the issues that arose in the context of the *sheitel* controversy. Whether one relied on priests, worshippers, or barbers would have different halakhic consequences and even accounts for the reversal of earlier rulings, resulting in the 2004 prohibition of *sheitels* (see Flug, 'A Review of the Recent *Sheitel* Controversy', 19, 22). Note, however, that Hindus were only asked about the meaning of their action, not their view of God, which is the focus of my own discussion. Benjamin Fleming exposes the problematic nature of the responses offered by Hindus questioned by rabbinic emissaries. Their answers contradict Hindu self-understanding, creating a gap that Fleming seeks to fill by pointing to the complexities of traditional understandings of hair and the meaning of its cutting in Hindu sources (see Benjamin Fleming and Annette Yoshiko Reed, 'From Tirupati to Brooklyn: Interpreting Hindu Votive Hair-Offerings', *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses*, 40 (2011), 1–36). This complexity, typical of so much of Hindu religious thought, alerts us to the care that must be taken when posing questions to practitioners, based on the concerns and categories of another religious system.

schools is just how extreme the monistic vision of reality is and consequently, the relationships of deity and devotee, and of God and the world. While this school is not identical with the brand of Vedanta that has increasingly come to represent Hinduism associated with the eighth-century teacher Sankara, it still enjoys great prominence and remains one of the major philosophical and religious schools in India. Thus, in turning to Ramanuja we are not simply turning to a founding figure. Rather, we are turning to a figure whose teachings continue to have broad, even if not universal, impact and whose legacy is mediated also through this specific temple. It would thus seem appropriate to consider how Ramanuja himself would have viewed the worship of idols and how his own religious teaching could provide a frame of reference for assessing what goes on in Tirupati today.

Introducing so many factors into the discussion increases its complexity. First-hand testimony of contemporary image worship provides clear and unequivocal answers. The method I propose raises more questions than I can answer. Indeed, I myself am unable to make an unequivocal pronouncement one way or another on an issue as weighty as *avodab zarab*. For many, the ability to uphold clear-cut and unequivocal positions seems desirable. My own approach is characterized by attempting to arrive at the root of things and recognizing their complexity, even at the cost of not resolving fundamental questions, at least today. To me, this seems preferable because it paves the way for a fuller understanding that can emerge tomorrow at a time when conditions have ripened and understanding has deepened. The alternative leads nowhere.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> After reading Sperber's 'How Not to Make Halakhic Rulings', I recalled a conversation with him over a decade ago. During a discussion of Christian art, he suggested Christianity was not *avodab zarab*, whereas Hinduism obviously was. I expressed doubts at the time concerning how unequivocal we should be about Hinduism. I was therefore struck to see that Sperber's discussion includes quotes from the recent dialogue of the chief rabbinate and Hindu leaders as the kind of resource that should inform halakhic thinking. I queried him as to whether his opinion had changed and also noted that his comment was methodological, but stopped short of viewing Hinduism in the same light as he had viewed Christianity more than a decade earlier. Sperber conceded his viewpoint had indeed changed and ascribed it to his ongoing involvement in dialogue with Hindus. The more he got to know Hinduism, the more complex it seemed, and the harder it was for him to take an unequivocal position on its status as *avodab zarab*. Clearly, his earlier views had been informed by the appearance of Hinduism, while his later views were informed by greater exposure to its philosophy, as expounded by some of its leading contemporary exponents. Growing complexity thus often comes at the expense of clear-cut perspectives. This, however, is not a loss, but a gain, and one whose significance may only become obvious in the long run.

In Sperber's case their significance has emerged even in the 'short run'. In a forthcoming study of Hinduism and *avodab zarab*, he argues that the halakhah can completely accept Hindu self-understanding, thereby exonerating it from the charge of *avodab zarab*. Sperber's forthcoming study reaches the same conclusions as those reached by Steinsaltz, below.

HINDU IDOL WORSHIP IN LIGHT OF JEWISH VIEWS  
OF CHRISTIANITY: THE *SHITUF* PARADIGM

The exclusive appeal to what we see when we observe Hindu worship, namely the worship of images, followed by the declaration of Hinduism as *avodah zarab* is to a large extent a carryover of biblical and rabbinical attitudes to other religions. In this approach, the otherness of the god is confirmed by the otherness of the image and the worship offered it. However, Jewish tradition also developed alternative models that can be applied to Hinduism. These come from the Jewish Middle Ages and grow out of Judaism's encounter with Christianity. Rabbinic authorities articulated various positions about Christianity, declaring it either to be not idolatrous or to be a form of *avodah zarab* permissible to its non-Jewish practitioners. These views of Christianity are important resources for considering Hinduism and its worship of images.

The two strategies that have been used by Jewish legalists and theoreticians to deal with Christianity are mapped out elsewhere in this volume.<sup>27</sup> The first perspective, associated with the Tosafists, became the default position of much of Ashkenazi Jewry over the past several hundred years. According to this position, non-Jews are not obligated to have exclusive allegiance to God and they may worship another being alongside or as part of their view of God, provided they maintain awareness that the object of worship is God the Creator of heaven and earth that Judaism acknowledges.<sup>28</sup> This is called *shituf*—the association or worship of another being alongside God. Different standards apply to Jews and non-Jews. Since non-Jews are permitted to worship through *shituf*, Trinitarian Christianity is a valid religion for non-Jews. One of the pioneering discussions of the status of other religions in the soon-to-be-born State of Israel was that of Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog. He devoted a detailed discussion to other religions, focusing for the most part on the permissibility of maintaining Christian worship within the future Jewish state. Towards the end of his discussion, Herzog goes beyond Christianity and Islam and poses the question of the status of other religions.<sup>29</sup> While acknowledging his limited knowledge of Hinduism, he raises the possibility that Hindu worship can also be considered a form of *shituf*. Herzog does not enter into a detailed discussion of the substance of Hindu faith, but when we review his understanding of *shituf* and

<sup>27</sup> See my discussion in the Introduction and Eugene Korn's in Chapter 8, above.

<sup>28</sup> Note that the emphasis here is on the multiple recipients of worship and not on the problem of image worship. Solving one issue does not necessarily solve the other. However, because the two are related within the conceptual framework of *avodah zarab*, one issue does have an impact upon the other. If image worship implies that another being is worshipped and is therefore problematic, we can understand how the theological response might address the problem created by image worship.

<sup>29</sup> Isaac Herzog, 'Minority Rights According to the Halakha' (Heb.), *Tebumin*, 2 (1981), 178–9.



how he applied it to Christianity, his suggestion becomes plausible. If Hinduism recognizes a formless God as the source of creation beyond the myriad manifestations of divinity worshipped in a variety of ways, we may apply to Hinduism the same logic that applied to Christianity. Of course, the actual relationship between the absolute Brahman and the various manifestations of God, Ishwara, is understood differently than the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity. But the *shituf* construct is not based on a particular understanding of the relationship of the object worshipped with God in the absolute, as much as on the affirmation that in some sense one continues to worship God the Creator, or the Absolute, beyond the worship offered to the creature alongside or as part of the Creator. Our concern here would accordingly be less to appreciate Hinduism in its own terms than to identify a mechanism for viewing Hinduism broadly in a way that takes it out of the bounds of *avodah zarah* for its non-Jewish practitioners. Extending the concept of *shituf* to Hinduism achieves this goal.<sup>30</sup>

This leads me to a discussion of the only rabbinic author to have discussed Hinduism with some degree of familiarity. While the discussion is not extensive, at least it attempts to portray Hinduism in its own terms. The following passages by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz show us how a contemporary halakhic perspective on world religions can be constructed. The sum total of his discussion is, as a respondent to his piece correctly observed, extraordinary, if not absolutely exceptional.<sup>31</sup> As the respondent continues, while making no concessions to modern liberalism or even ecumenism and while characteristically identifying his position with that of the Talmud, Steinsaltz reassesses the current world religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism, as adequately monotheist, adequately non-idolatrous, and at least adequately ethical to qualify as compliant with the Noahide laws. Steinsaltz's article represents an approach so open-minded that it would not be followed by more than a few contemporary Orthodox rabbis. With this introduction, let us consider the teachings of Steinsaltz, and how they relate to the discussion of *avodah zarah*, *shituf*, and a Jewish view of Hinduism.<sup>32</sup>

Steinsaltz begins by acknowledging the changed nature of contemporary reality. Interactions that are presently possible between Jews and non-Jews are

<sup>30</sup> In *Beyond Idolatry* I intend to look more specifically at different manifestations of the divine within Hindu culture in light of Rabbi Herzog's suggestion that they may be permissible in terms of *shituf*. While *shituf* is a broad category within which various forms of worship may be included, it is worth reflecting on what this might mean according to the different kinds of objects that are worshipped—gods, forces of nature, saints.

<sup>31</sup> Alick Isaacs, 'Benamozegh's Tone, A Response to Rabbi Steinsaltz', *Common Knowledge*, 11/1 (2005), 48.

<sup>32</sup> The following discussion is based on Adin Steinsaltz, 'Peace without Conciliation: The Irrelevance of "Toleration" in Judaism', *Common Knowledge*, 11/1 (2005), 41–7.

fundamentally different from those of any previous era in Jewish history. This poses the challenge of religious tolerance, a term that Steinsaltz is not enamoured of. His challenge is to find a way of accommodating other religions from a Jewish perspective. Accordingly, Steinsaltz seeks to create a model that would allow monotheistic Judaism to recognize other world religions. The language of ‘recognizing’ other religions is significant. It appeals implicitly to the language of diplomacy and to ways in which states recognize each other’s legitimacy. Can Judaism recognize other religions and if so, how does recognition relate to Judaism’s monotheistic faith and its attendant truth claims? To appreciate Steinsaltz’s suggestion, recall that the standard view of Judaism’s message to the world consists in the main of the seven Noahide commandments, a code of moral laws that includes the prohibition of idolatry. Steinsaltz’s presentation takes as its point of departure the existence of two tracks to spiritual reality: the Jewish one that is more stringent consisting of 613 commandments, and the one for all other humans, the Noahide path. The Noahide commandments serve as the yardstick for assessing world religions and determining what is demanded of them to be acceptable to Judaism. This includes expectations regarding the knowledge of God and how it coheres with the demands on purity of approach to God, as these are made of Jews.

Steinsaltz establishes his argument on the broader recognition that law is not a universal phenomenon and that it applies to different groups in the community in different measures:

The idea that certain laws of Judaism do not apply to all is an essential feature of the *halakhab*. Special standards of religious practice apply to men, while women are exempted from all commandments that must be practiced at a fixed time. The people of Israel are not bound by the special obligations incumbent upon the priesthood: *kobanim*, the descendants of Aaron, must keep from contact with the dead outside their immediate families in order to preserve the ritual purity of the priesthood. And the priesthood is not bound by the same rules of purity that must be observed by the high priest, who cannot attend the funeral of even his own parents and children. The high priest would not think to censure his fellow priests for attending their parents’ funerals; a common priest, a *kohen*, would not think to censure an ordinary Jew for attending the funeral of a friend, teacher, or cousin (indeed an ordinary Jew might be censured for not attending). Different standards apply to different groups even within the Jewish community. The Noahide laws operate on the same principle: differing standards apply to different groups.

To this must be added a deeper philosophical understanding that respects the multiplicity of religions. In addition to the appeal to the different paths for Jews and non-Jews, Steinsaltz makes a more radical claim that touches upon Judaism’s future vision and ultimate hope. Judaism’s ultimate vision does not, according to Steinsaltz, consist of all of humanity adopting Judaism:



Judaism, despite the absolute and exclusionary quality of its monotheism, has a side that tends towards openness and toleration. This side of Judaism has also an expression in the Jewish abstention from proselytizing. Even ultimately, Judaism does not view itself as the religion of all people. It is the religion of the Jews alone and is, for almost all its practitioners, inherited. The assumption that Judaism is the religion of one people (and a few unsought converts) is emphatically a normative principle and is important to our discussion because it suggests that within Jewish doctrine there is room for the religious beliefs of others.

This principle applies not only to the world as it is today, but also to the messianic projections that Judaism makes for the future. Although the messianic era represents an ultimate vindication of truth as Judaism understands it—a time when the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will assert his dominion over all the world—at that time the peoples of the world will not embrace Judaism and will not come to observe Jewish law. In the closing chapters of his monumental *Code of Jewish Law*, Maimonides gives an account of the end of days. In his portrayal, the messianic realm is one of peace, but not uniformity of faith. According to Maimonides, when Isaiah saw the wolf and the lamb lying down together, what he envisioned was not a change in the nature of creation. Wolves will still be wolves, and lambs will be lambs; what will change is the relationship between them. At the end of days, the different peoples of the world will not become less different. And because they will not embrace a single faith, the prohibition against gentiles undertaking distinctively Jewish practices will continue. However, each religion will come to share with all the others a small set of fundamental truths, and people everywhere will abandon violence, theft, and oppression.

This is a stunning statement. Abstention from proselytizing is not seen as a consequence of political circumstances but as a fundamental characteristic of Judaism, that is supported by its messianic vision. As Maimonides' description of the messianic era does not include a description of Judaism prevailing, Steinsaltz concludes that all religions will remain in the messianic era and that their relationships will be harmonious and characterized by mutual exchange and enrichment, or at least the sharing of a common core of moral and spiritual truths.

With these foundations in place, Steinsaltz moves on to develop the notion of different approaches to God that characterize the Jewish track and the Noahide track.

'Toleration' would not be an accurate name for this doctrine, and certainly the doctrine is not one of religious equivalence. However, the approach that Judaism takes towards righteous gentiles offers a partial solution to the problem of intolerance in monotheist religions. By establishing different sets of expectations for different groups, Judaism makes room for adherents of other faiths to perform their own religious obligations in a way that entitles them to salvation by the God of Israel. While Jews are enjoined to follow 613 commandments of the Torah, the demands that nor-

mative Judaism makes of gentiles comprise only seven laws. These six prohibitions and one positive commandment are together known as the Noahide laws because (according to chapter seven of Sanhedrin) they were the series of laws given to Noah after the flood (though they differ little from the basic laws given to Adam). The Noahide laws set a universal standard for gentile religions and embody the truths that, according to Maimonides, the peoples of the world will come to recognize and share at the end of days. Thus, the Noahide laws delineate the boundaries of Jewish religious toleration: failure to observe these laws would bar a person or a people from entering their own gate into heaven.

One of the highest principles of the Noahide laws is belief in the one God. Both Islam and Christianity (though Trinitarian doctrine presents a complication) satisfy this key demand and clear the way for Jewish recognition of these religions . . .

It is an entirely normative principle in Judaism that the monotheism expected of gentiles by the Noahide laws is of a less absolute kind than that expected of Jews. In the Middle Ages, many authorities indeed recognized Christian doctrine (even the doctrine of the Trinity) as basically monotheistic belief. One can readily understand how the doctrine of a triune Godhead could contaminate Christianity's claim to be monotheistic. However, Christianity was generally not considered polytheistic or idolatrous, though Maimonides—who did not live in Christendom—dissented from the widespread rabbinic agreement on this point. The concept of the Trinity was represented in the church as a mystery or paradox because it apparently contradicted a central component of their faith in the one God. Thus the Trinity, even though it is an essential feature of Christian theology and not merely one of folk religion, could be taken by Jewish scholars as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, the idea of God as one. By Jewish standards as applied to Jews, Trinitarianism is not monotheism. But by the standards of the Noahide laws, the doctrine of the Trinity is not an idolatrous belief to which Judaism can express an objection.

Steinsaltz first establishes the rule that expectations differ for Jews and non-Jews. Not only is the number of commandments different, but what is actually expected of Jewish believers is different from what is expected of non-Jewish believers, even in relation to the very same commandment. Thus, the demand to worship one God alone may be interpreted and applied differently to Judaism and to other religions. I believe that this statement is unique. It grows out of a lengthy tradition of Ashkenazi dealing with Christianity and the development of a de facto lower standard for non-Jews, captured in the recognition that a Noahide is not commanded to avoid worship through *shituf*. However, I am not familiar with any earlier statement that grounds this view of the Noahide's theological obligations in a broader view of Judaism's relationship with world religions and its future hopes or in a theory of how the Noahide laws function as a code of law and their relationship to what is expected of Jews. The statement is novel not only in terms of the broader context that it offers, in trying to make sense of a tradition that existed in practice for hundreds of

years, but also in terms of how Steinsaltz grounds it. He presents this view as the normative, indeed as a majoritarian, view. Thus he turns the principle permitting *shituf* for the non-Jew into Judaism's representative statement.

For all its thoroughness and its systematic approach, this statement rewrites the history of Jewish law for the sake of achieving a comprehensive view and system. Indeed, the view that *shituf* is permissible to non-Jews creates parallel tracks, while maintaining a hierarchy that affords Judaism the superior spiritual status. Yet this view is far from representative. The debate still rages today as to whether *shituf* is permissible for a non-Jew or not. More significantly, the Maimonidean position may well be the majority position in relation to Christianity.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, the standards expected of Jews and of non-Jews would be identical, as would be the definition of what constitutes *avodah zarah*. Steinsaltz casts Maimonides into a minority position and even hints at historical factors that may have led to his not understanding Christianity sufficiently: he never lived among Christians.<sup>34</sup> This is an interesting argument that is rarely heard in halakhic circles. Even more interesting is the fact that Steinsaltz develops a view that is based on *shituf* without ever appealing to the term.<sup>35</sup> In any event, Steinsaltz has taken a disputed, possibly minority, view and constructed a broad theory from it. He presents it as Judaism's representative message that accommodates lower religious understanding within a hierarchical view. This is an inclusivist move allowing him to give legitimacy to lower forms of approaching God.

One of the arguments in Steinsaltz's presentation relates to the question of who speaks for the religions. As we already know with reference to Hinduism,

<sup>33</sup> The assessment of majority and minority views is hard to gauge and will remain impressionistic until further study has been conducted. While for Ashkenazi authorities, Steinsaltz's statement is clearly true, it is less clear that a majority would be found for this view when the entire corpus of halakhic literature is taken into account. My own impression is also that there has been a shift in this regard and that the Maimonidean position is gaining the upper hand among contemporary decisors, regardless of its prominence or otherwise throughout the centuries. While an assessment of majority and minority views can affect a halakhic discussion, developing a contemporary Jewish view of world religions should not be dependent on majority/minority considerations. Halakhic discussions reflect contemporary attitudes, and these were influenced by a variety of things. Most authorities repeat earlier views, without entering into a careful consideration of what the view of another religion ought to be. Therefore, when these issues are revisited within a contemporary re-evaluation of Jewish attitudes to world religions, the positions, their historical context, and their philosophical merit need to be weighed as seriously, if not more so, as issues of majority and minority views, as these may have found varying expressions in different periods and centres of learning.

<sup>34</sup> On this point, see also Korn in Chapter 8, above.

<sup>35</sup> In offering a justification for his theory, he quotes Me'iri (Steinsaltz, 'Peace without Conciliation', 45 n. 6) with whom we shall deal shortly. Me'iri is outside the common consensus and certainly cannot provide the basis for such a far-reaching view, even if one agrees with him. Me'iri does not build on *shituf*, but on another logic presented below. Apparently, Steinsaltz does rely on Me'iri, leading him to avoid reference to *shituf*, but the theological construct he presents is that of *shituf*.

religions are complex entities. Steinsaltz's discussion proceeds in terms of broad entities, such as 'Hinduism', upon which the halakhah pronounces judgement. This takes him into the question of what is essential to a religion and what is secondary. His decisions may not be shared by the scholar of religion or the theologian, yet they are important both in terms of raising these questions for the first time in the history of rabbinic literature and in terms of the positions he adopts. Steinsaltz's answer is clear. It is theologians who speak for the religions.<sup>36</sup>

Steinsaltz seems to assume that there is a core religious teaching that one can identify. This is the higher form of the religion, presumably as preached by theologians or the officials of the religion, and is distinct from what he terms folk religion. He thus recognizes that under the name of a given religion we may find a variety of phenomena. Critically, he insists that the halakhic judgement is made about the essence of the religion. There seems to be one pronouncement per religion, rather than multiple rulings, depending on the specific form or practice under discussion, and it is this single ruling that determines Judaism's attitude to that religion. It is this strategy that allows Steinsaltz to make his breakthrough statement in relation to Hinduism.

What about Indic religions and various kinds of Buddhism? Again, I do not believe that a definitive solution is possible, but a partial solution may be considered. It is important to introduce a distinction between theology and religious practice. In the ancient religions grouped under the name of Hinduism, there are many gods and local shrines, but the theological principles that guide belief and provide a uniformity of moral standards assume that all the deities revered in India or elsewhere are forms of, expressions of, or names for, one ultimate reality or God. Saivites propose Siva as the best name (among many names) for this ultimacy; Vaisnavites prefer Visnu or Krishna; *atman* is an Upanisadic word for the same principle—and *brahman* is perhaps the most common way among non-Muslim, non-Christian Indians of naming ultimacy . . .<sup>37</sup>

By the standards of Jewish law as applied to Jews, Hinduism (and Buddhism) do not count as monotheistic traditions. However, the essential point of the Noahide laws is that the standards of Jewish law do not apply to non-Jews. Radically pure monotheism is expected by Judaism only from Jews. The Noahide laws do not preclude gentile religions from developing softer, more complex, and compromised forms of monotheism. Under the Noahide laws, it is possible to assume that Hinduism and Buddhism are sufficiently monotheistic in principle for moral Hindus

<sup>36</sup> A panel on 'Who Speaks for Hinduism?' was featured in the pages of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Several of the speakers adopted the very same perspective as that recommended by Steinsaltz: theologians are the voice of religion (see *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 68 (2000), 705–835; note in particular the discussions by Brian Smith (p. 744) and John Thatamanil (pp. 791–803)).

<sup>37</sup> A paragraph on Buddhism follows, omitted from the present discussion.

and Buddhists to enter the gentile's gate into heaven. Jewish law regards the compromises made or tolerated by the world's major religions as ways of rendering essentially monotheistic theologies easier in practice for large populations of adherents. The fierceness of Islamic opposition to such compromises has no counterpart in Judaism. In Islam, it is seriously blasphemous for anyone of whatever faith to combine belief in the one God with popular ideas about other heavenly powers or with subtle theological doctrines such as the Trinity. Islam cannot tolerate such compromises because the truth that they violate is applicable universally and not simply to Muslims. The problem is that Islam is radically monotheistic (like Judaism), yet is also (unlike Judaism, which is the religion of one people) universalistic as well.<sup>38</sup>

Steinsaltz extends the paradigms established in relation to Christianity to Hinduism and Buddhism. But doing so requires him to focus on theology rather than worship. He offers us a corrective to the propensity that Jewish viewers have to focus on the action at the expense of the understanding of the action. He puts aside the ritual, which means putting aside the worship of images and the myriad gods of the Hindu pantheon, and focuses on the philosophy that underlies them.<sup>39</sup> The philosophy he offers us is fully vedantic. It seems no accident that someone who seeks to understand religion from the perspective of hierarchy and offers a hierarchical reading of Judaism's relations to world religions would appeal to a highly hierarchical view of Hinduism itself. The vedantic view is a hierarchical view that considers the vedantic teaching of the ultimate unity of Being as the highest form of Hindu teaching. For vedantins, lower forms of understanding and practice may be tolerated and accepted, while Vedanta holds the ultimate key to their proper understanding. It is thus a patient spiritual outlook. Hindu belief in reincarnation and in gradual evolution eliminates the pressure to resolve philosophical and theological differences immediately and creates a space for processes that are long-term, resulting in an attitude of tolerance. Steinsaltz develops a spirit of tolerance, while rejecting the term, without even awaiting final messianic resolution of differences. In Steinsaltz's view, religions may hold on to their imperfect views even in the eschaton. In Steinsaltz's construct, accommodation stems from the election of Israel and from the fact that different tracks have been established for Jews and non-Jews. As such, one can tolerate compromises to monotheism. Steinsaltz uses a striking phrase: 'softer, more complex, and

<sup>38</sup> Steinsaltz, 'Peace without Conciliation', 44–5.

<sup>39</sup> Steinsaltz extends a strategy first developed in relation to Christianity to Hinduism. One should note that in the case of Christianity, the ritual is transparent to the theology, that is, the theology comes through the ritual in a clear way. Accordingly, the possibility for error and misinterpretation is reduced, making the move from ritual to theology credible. By contrast, the vedantic position is often a superimposition on a ritual that is not transparent to this world-view. If so, making this theological move is literally a leap of faith, from the ritual, in faith that Vedanta offers a correct interpretation, to the realm of faith and understanding.

compromised forms of monotheism'. It is interesting that the kabbalistic tradition that informs his theological thinking may be described in the same words. To the outsider there appear to be structural similarities between kabbalistic, Trinitarian, and Hindu understandings of God. It is thus no accident that a kabbalistically minded rabbi entertains notions of softer and more complex monotheism. Hinduism is compromised monotheism, and as such is valid.

Something further is gained by this move. Religions with compromised monotheism are only valid for non-Jews. Such was the view of the early modern rabbis who upheld Christianity's value on the grounds of permissible *shituf*. In the contemporary context this provides a protective mechanism against Jewish attraction to Eastern religions. The argument echoes the teachings of Glazerson, but along more halakhic lines. What is permissible for non-Jews is considered idolatrous for Jews. Respect and protection of identity are achieved in one move.

Steinsaltz took his knowledge of Hinduism from a Hindu textbook, and in the process distorted a fact or two. Written from the perspective of Vedanta, the textbook allowed him to deal with the entire scope of Hinduism within a few lines. Perhaps it is advantageous to take a single perspective and develop a halakhic position from it, but one wonders whether more detailed study of the religion might make it harder to make broad pronouncements. Perhaps the context dictates the method. Steinsaltz wrote for a panel on religious tolerance, where he represented Judaism. Such situations seem to have their own dynamics, leading to results, even if positive in and of themselves, that are not always commensurate with the message that emerges from other contexts and genres. They bring out the best in a given presentation, but they are written in English and spoken academically. Would Steinsaltz also say these very things in Hebrew, in the framework of a *pesak*, a ruling of the halakhah?<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, he has certainly taken us a long way into thinking about Hinduism and *avodah zarah* and offered us a way of thinking that is systematic and grounded in theological principles. Above all, it is an alternative to the impressions arising from the visual aspect of Hinduism and reminds us of the priority of theology over and against practice.

If we understand Hinduism as *shituf*, Hindu religious life offers us a variety of challenges. Steinsaltz's discussion focused on the worship of gods and deities, all of whom are understood to represent a single divine principle. But another challenge is more complex and problematic: the worship of human beings, saints, sages, and teachers. One might argue that this is not fundamentally different from the Christian worship of Jesus. If a theory of *shituf* can accommodate the worship of Jesus as part of the Christian understanding of God, it

<sup>40</sup> As an aside, Orthodox teachers at Steinsaltz's yeshiva have travelled to India. One wonders what the relationship between Steinsaltz's ruling and his students' practice is.



should also be able to accommodate the worship of gurus and holy men in the Indian religious landscape. There is, however, one major distinction. Even if Jesus was a human person, to the best of our knowledge he was not worshipped while alive. To this very day, devotional attitudes to Catholic saints are practised only posthumously. Thus, in Christianity no special devotion or worship is shown to a living person. While in the case of Jesus one could argue that one is worshipping a human person, in fact it is the idea or memory of the person that is worshipped. Even if for believers that person continues to be present, in terms of ordinary day-to-day social relationships he no longer is. Thus the worship of Jesus as an incarnate human being remains ideal and in some sense only theoretical. Even if Jesus' humanity is affirmed alongside his divinity, there are no social and political consequences to worship stemming from Jesus' earthly personality. The only operative factor is the faith of believers.

The situation in India is different. Saints are worshipped while alive and often treated as divinities even as they go about their daily business. The theoretical basis for this is a combination of the recognition of God's omnipresence and its realization in the life and consciousness of an individual. However, this is an individual of flesh and blood, with bodily needs and personality, who is being treated in some way as a god. The potential for abuse is obvious. The inevitable human propensity for error and sin is at odds with the view of a person as god, and even more with the offering of worship and adoration to such a person.

Recognizing the dangers, we are also called to appreciate the depth and beauty of devotion towards spiritual teachers and leaders, the profound reverence they receive, and the absolute centrality that is accorded to the spiritual life and its representatives in India. There is also something inspiring in the reverence shown to spiritual teachers. When, as does happen occasionally, those teachers are truly great spiritual beings, there is a coherence in the system between its interior logic and its outward manifestations.

*Shituf* theology is pluralistic in the sense of recognizing different spiritual paths. The Jewish path has no room for the worship of human beings, not even teachers and great spiritual figures.<sup>41</sup> But this does not mean that Hindus who practise the veneration of their teachers are engaged in *avodah zarah*. Their actions should be interpreted within the broader religious system in which they operate. The worship of teachers is part of the quest for God. Even if the teacher is seen as God and part of the object of worship, he or she is also an instrument, a means of attaining a goal surely beyond him- or herself. Thus, in the figure of the living teacher, the guru, means and ends are in some way collapsed and identified. This can be seen as an important expression of *shituf* theology. Non-Jews may approach God through the guru, the saint, the

<sup>41</sup> This is part of what has led to David Berger's critique of the Chabad movement (see *The Rebbe, the Messiah and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London, 2001)).

teacher. That is their path and it passes through a person, who is in some way incorporated into the believers' notion of God. God may be the same for Jews and Hindus, but the paths are different and they lead to significant differences along the way, including the worship of teachers.

If we think deeply about *shituf* and understand it in theological terms, we are open to a different attitude to other religions. One important consequence is that one can no longer accept the kind of dismissive *avodah zarah* discourse, so common in Jewish references to other religions and in what little Jewish discussion about Hinduism there has been. Another consequence is the possibility of opening up a dialogue between what would be considered two valid approaches to God, one incorporating *shituf* and the other Jewish path avoiding *shituf*. Judaism can develop a meaningful spiritual dialogue with other religions, within which it has something to say, but also has much to learn. If we recognize in India a great spiritual culture, a beacon of spirituality, and a source of saints, we cannot simply dismiss its forms of worship as *avodah zarah*. If we can see them as legitimate in light of a theory of *shituf*, we must take them seriously. This is an invitation to listen to the spiritual testimony they offer and to the understanding of God they convey. Within this dialogue Judaism too has a message. It is the message of what it means to worship the one God exclusively, to approach him without any intermediary, to look to him alone. A healthy dialogue on goals and means in approaching God may be a way of affirming the unique spiritual vision of Judaism as part of the spiritual heritage of humanity. At the same time, it is important for us to hear and to assimilate other religious visions, not because we should take up their methods of worship, but because they can remind us of spiritual truths we have lost. The dialogue has not yet begun and it is hard to anticipate where a serious dialogue about God and the spiritual life could take us when carried forth from the dual platform of covenantal exclusivity and a *shituf*-based pluralism. The fruits of such a dialogue hold the promise of being spiritually beneficial to both sides.

#### HINDUISM IN THE LIGHT OF THE TEACHINGS OF MENAHEM ME'IRI

The Middle Ages provide us with two primary strategies for dealing with Christianity. The first strategy is *shituf*. The second is based on the teachings of Rabbi Menahem Me'iri.<sup>42</sup> According to Me'iri, Christianity, like Islam, is not *avodah zarah*. The common understanding of Me'iri, grounded in some of his own formulae, explains his views as a consequence of the fact that both religions have an ethical code, enforcing morality, law, and order. Me'iri posits a

<sup>42</sup> I discuss Me'iri's views in the Introduction, above, and will spell them out in greater detail in *Beyond Idolatry*.



moral criterion in the light of which these religions should be viewed, and this criterion should be equally valid in relation to Eastern religions and all other religions that do not know Israel's God. This provides a basis for recognizing other religions by shifting the discussion from theological to moral considerations. A closer look at Me'iri's work reveals that underlying his recognition of other religions is more than simply recognition of their moral value. Moshe Halbertal has shown that Me'iri has a highly developed sense of what a religion is.<sup>43</sup> Rather than simply present Christianity and Islam as non-idolatrous, Me'iri describes them as 'religions'. His appeal to the category of religion assumes certain parameters, in the light of which a religion is recognized as a valid 'religion'. These parameters include the moral dimension. However, the argument from morality does not simply point to God directly, but appeals to the notion of 'religion' as common and recognized ground between religions. Recognizing the centrality of the category 'religion' and 'the ways of religion' in Me'iri's thought allows us to apply his views of other religions and their legitimacy to religions he never considered. The very appeal to 'religion' as a means of legitimating other religions assumes that other religions, once they are recognized and classified as such, have validity. True or valid religion does not stop with Judaism.

Let us now consider a possible approach to Hinduism in the light of Me'iri's views. Let us consider first the moral dimension, understood independently of specific theological claims. If Me'iri posits the legitimacy of a religion as a function of its upholding moral living (as opposed to idolatry that encourages all forms of ugliness and sin), then surely Hinduism would also fall under the rubric of 'nations bound by the ways of religion'. Judging a religion by its fruits, be they moral or spiritual, places before us an interesting challenge. In the history of Hinduism (perhaps of all religions) we encounter the highest and the lowest of moral and spiritual values. On the one hand, it is clear that Hinduism upholds a highly disciplined life unlike the free pandering to desire and sinfulness that Me'iri associates with idolatry. Basic moral precepts govern Hindu life, and in that sense fulfil the requirements of the seven Noahide commandments. On the other hand, there are many expressions of Hindu religious life that could be construed as contrary to the sense of morality espoused by Judaism. Some of these are issues that are no longer relevant and some endure within Hinduism to this very day. Temple prostitution was part of Hindu religious life, at various points in its history.<sup>44</sup> This is explicitly condemned by the

<sup>43</sup> Moshe Halbertal, 'Ones Possessed of Religion: Religious Tolerance in the Teachings of the Meiri', *Edah Journal*, 1/1 (2000), <www.edah.org>.

<sup>44</sup> See Frédérique Apffel Marglin, 'Hierodouleia', in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* (New York, 1987), vi. 309–13. Much has been written about the status of the *devadasis*, temple dancers, and courtesans in the quarter of a century since the publication of this article. While a complex picture of their self-understanding and the realities of their lives emerges from

Torah and has close associations with idolatry among ancient Israel's immediate neighbours. Some customs that were common at various points in history may also be queried in relation to our sense of morality, for example *sati*, the burning of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres. More fundamentally, we may find fault with the social teachings and practices associated with the caste system and many of its oppressions.

This raises the difficult question of when disagreement concerning practices and moral teachings is just that, and constitutes an important dimension of the identity and teaching of Judaism in relation to other religions, and when such differences are so egregious as to force one to consider another religion as not 'bound by the ways of religion', according to the principles formulated by Me'iri. The question is not specific to Hinduism. David Berger recently queried the impact of suicide bombing on a view of Islam in the light of Me'iri's principles.<sup>45</sup> Does either wrong religious teaching, if it is indeed a teaching of the religion, or wrong practice, if it is the fruit of a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the tradition, render an otherwise legitimate religion an expression of *avodah zarah*? Put differently, could the god who tolerates the bombing of women and children or the god who tolerates temple prostitution be the same God as we proclaim?

The problem is twofold. On the one hand, if we find moral fault in another religion and declare its god to be another god, we are assuming that any religion can attain a reasonable standard of moral living that would never be called into question. While in theory this is an attractive proposition and might in some way be implied by the ethos of the Noahide commandments, in reality it is a standard we may never achieve. Upon close scrutiny we are bound to find moral fault with every religion. Indeed, the other side of the problem is that Judaism too might not emerge blameless from such moral scrutiny. Whether it be slavery of old, present-day oppression of other peoples, or a host of other spiritual ailments with which we have been plagued over the millennia, it is impossible to imagine a Judaism above moral criticism. It therefore may be preferable to use the negative pole of the definition, as indeed Me'iri does. *Avodah zarah* is identified with wanton libertinism. Whatever jihadist Islam is, and however strongly we may disagree with its practices, it is not *avodah zarah* in the moral sense portrayed by Me'iri. And the same will probably be

these studies, the fundamental issue, in terms of the present discussion, remains. For purposes of this discussion it would seem that limiting *devadasi* practice both historically and geographically, thereby making it either marginal or something of the past, and bearing in mind the efforts of reformers is more helpful than various attempts to understand the complexity of the phenomenon in sociological, psychological, or religious terms.

<sup>45</sup> David Berger, 'Jews, Gentiles, and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos: Some Tentative Thoughts', in Marc Stern (ed.), *Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age* (Lanham, Md., 2005), esp. 108 n. 54.

true of many Hindu practices that we may condemn on moral grounds. That immoral acts are committed within a religious framework does not mean the religion lacks morality. It only means that corruption has entered the religion or that somehow what we consider to be moral has been radically reconfigured within a different religious system.<sup>46</sup> But this need not affect the basic definition of the religion and its ability to point to God as its ultimate referent. Misapplication of moral, legal, or ritual principles is not wanton libertinism.

We might add that Hinduism itself has been steadily undergoing changes. It is part of the Hindu view of history that *dharma*, the teaching and practice of religious duty and obligation, steadily declines. Hinduism accommodates its own weaknesses and imperfections within a conceptual structure that accounts for how such imperfections come about. The flip side of this recognition is that such moral and spiritual decline is the occasion for the coming of great teachers, who come precisely in order to correct the balance and to restore the pristine teaching. One classical expression of this view is found in the most popular of all Hindu religious works, the Bhagavad Gita. The understanding that the present-day teacher has come to restore lost balance is common in relation to various teachers and groups.

The loss and re-establishment of teaching is not a purely internal matter for a tradition. It is also driven by encounters with other civilizations. For several hundred years India was part of the British empire, which had a profound impact on some of its practices. The British did much to uproot those dimensions of religion they considered immoral, such as the practice of *sati* or the temple dances of *devadasis*. It is commonly considered that Hinduism as encountered by early British and Portuguese colonialists was not the same as present-day Hinduism. In this discussion we should therefore consider Hinduism's contemporary expressions, rather than various practices belonging only to its past. Looking at a religion from the vantage point of the present is in fact an important dimension in Me'iri's own thinking. As Halbertal has argued, Me'iri was informed by a theory of religious progress. Religions progress and the standards for proper religious behaviour change over the ages. It is this sense of progress that led Me'iri to declare *avodah zarah* mainly a thing of the past. This theory allows Me'iri to draw practical and halakhic consequences for a contemporary view of *avodah zarah*. It is fully consistent with his thinking to recognize progress or evolution within another tradition as a basis for new reflection on its status in terms of *avodah zarah*. It is thus reasonable to conclude that in terms of the morality-based understanding of Me'iri, Hinduism should also be considered to be bound by the ways of religion.

<sup>46</sup> This formulation would allow us to consider phenomena such as *tantra*, where morality is inverted as part of a transcendental spiritual quest.

In the Introduction to this volume, I raised the possibility that Me'iri's principles could be expanded from a moral lifestyle to all aspects of the spiritual life that offer a testimony to the God who is known through personal experience. This would surely open up possibilities for recognizing God through Hinduism independently of the details of a theological view of God. Our earlier discussion of spirituality suggested that this is a major attraction of Hinduism. Indeed, Hinduism has produced and continues to produce holy men and women. Me'iri's wanton libertine should be placed at the opposite extreme of the spectrum because he stands in direct contrast with the Hindu saint. Of course, saints are few and they may be further between than popular Hindu imagination would like to admit, but the fact that Hinduism has produced great spiritual saints whose sanctity should be beyond dispute suggests that God can be known and recognized within Hinduism by the traces he leaves in the lives of those who have come close to him, who have known him, and who have reached union with him.

Thus far I have reflected upon Hinduism in the light of Me'iri's core notion of a 'nation bound by the ways of religion'. We can now move the discussion to the next level and tie explicit theological awareness to moral teaching. Me'iri sometimes stipulates 'knowledge of God' as part of his positive view of other religions. The formulations vary. In one instance, he speaks of serving 'divinity in some way, even though their faith is far removed from our own faith'.<sup>47</sup> That is, the other culture must have a notion of divinity, even if different from our own. According to Me'iri's broader view, that sense of divinity would be more encompassing than the worship of isolated trees, stones, stars, and idols could provide. It is a sense of divinity in its totality and that provides the ground for the moral life.

I cannot see how anyone could exclude Hinduism from such a formulation. Despite the fact that in theory everything is subject to worship, the governing notion is one of divinity in the broader sense posited by Me'iri. One could, of course, suggest that the distinction between a broader notion of divinity and the limiting of attention exclusively to some specific manifestations of power, trees, stars, and so on, would be the criterion that distinguishes legitimate from illegitimate religion. It may be that some forms of religious life, some practices of individual Hindus or communities, might be seen as the worship of isolated forces, removed from the broader notion of an all-encompassing divinity. In other words, it is conceivable that within Hinduism there may be expressions of *avodah zarah*, if this particular criterion is applied. However, it is fair to say that the governing understanding of the Hindu religious culture is that there is a broader notion of divinity, as opposed to viewing various powers in isolation. While this is the case for the theological schools, it also seems to be the

<sup>47</sup> Me'iri, *Beit habehirab* on BT BK 113b.

case for a large part of popular understanding of Hinduism. Thus, according to this basic definition of what is theologically required, Hinduism would again meet with Me'iri's approval. We have thus introduced into the discussion the second dimension of Me'iri's thought, the recognition of another religion as valid.

My own reading of Me'iri suggests that the question he asked of a religion is not whether it is idolatrous or even whether it is moral, but whether it is 'religion' in the full sense that he attaches to the term.<sup>48</sup> In relation to Hinduism as a family of religious beliefs with broad common traits and increasingly a common theological framework, it seems that it is very much a 'religion'. In fact, Me'iri might provide a way of helping us to identify what a religion is and to consider Hinduism in this light. If by 'religion' we refer to a particular combination of constitutive beliefs about the divine, a comprehensive world-view, fundamental moral teachings, and ritual expression, certainly all of these apply to the various forms of Hinduism. Yet more significant is the transformative power of religion. In Me'iri's view, what gives religion as such its weight is its power to transform human nature and to help guide a person in the ongoing battle against the weaknesses of human nature. Judged from this anthropocentric and spiritual perspective, not only is Hinduism as much a 'religion' as those with which Me'iri himself was familiar, but it can serve in many ways as a model that other religions should emulate. Much of its self-understanding focuses upon structuring life towards an ultimate *telos*. I refer here to the famous four-fold division of the life cycle (*varnasramadharma*) leading to the final goal of liberation, itself an expression of how religion intervenes in the battle against physical nature. This battle has produced expressions of asceticism, sacrifice, and religious ways of life that make India a model of how religion works, how its philosophy and institutions mediate the sacred, and the impact its transformative power has upon the life of individuals and society. Thus, if religion is measured by its transformative power and in accordance with the core components that make any belief system a 'religion', it is clear that Hinduism must be acknowledged as a full 'religion' and is immune to the classical Jewish charge that it is *avodah zarab*.

## CONCLUSION

The conversation is at its very beginning. If this chapter has achieved anything at all, it is the recognition that a conversation must take place. The lack of historical contact and largely imagined Other have led to a default position that Hinduism is *avodah zarab*. This implies that Hinduism is forbidden and

<sup>48</sup> For a fuller discussion of the criteria of 'religion' in this reading of Me'iri, see my *Beyond Idolatry*.

irrelevant, because it has nothing to teach us and therefore requires neither study nor dialogue. Yet this point of view is untenable because it is belied by the spiritual riches of Hinduism, by the powerful testimonies of Jewish seekers concerning Hinduism, by the classical image of India as a land of wisdom, and by the continuing testimony of Hindu saints. All these facts require us to reconsider our approach to Hinduism and to seek ways to make sense of it, despite the fact that many Jews reject Hinduism because of Hindu worship of idols.

This chapter suggests how a conversation on these issues could proceed. Whether or not my suggestions are accepted, the challenge remains and cannot be ignored. It is deeper than pronouncing a ruling on wigs made of hair offered at Hindu temples or even ruling on the halakhic status of Hinduism. Ultimately, it is a challenge of understanding what *avodah zarah* is and consequently what Judaism stands for. If we take Judaism seriously we must take this challenge seriously. In engaging this challenge in earnestness, we will probably find no worthier partner for dialogue than Hinduism.