

**Viewing the Other: From Hostility to
Hospitality**
World Religions Share their Wisdom
Study Unit 5: Hinduism

The Elijah Interfaith Institute

Where Is Wisdom Found

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PART I SOURCES FOR DISCUSSION

Below are two clusters of texts taken from the Hindu tradition. Each cluster addresses some aspect of the attitude to the other, and of the tensions of hostility and hospitality in relation to the other. Depending on time and interest, choose one or more of the following topics for group study and discussion. The questions for discussion following each cluster of texts are helpful suggestions, but they need not limit the direction your discussion takes.

Theme One: Difference as Illusion

1. Foolish men talk of religion in cheap sentimental words, Leaning on the scriptures: “God speaks here, and speaks here alone.”

*God can be realized
through all paths. All
religions are true.*

Driven by desire for pleasure and power, caught up in ritual,

They strive to gain heaven; but rebirth is the only result of their striving...

The scriptures dwell in duality. Be beyond all opposites, Arjuna:

Anchored in the real, and free from all thoughts of wealth and comfort.

- The Bhagavad Gita 2:42-45

2. God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole.

- The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, 39

3. You may say there are many errors and superstitions in another religion. I should reply: Suppose there are. Every religion has errors. Everyone thinks that his watch alone gives the correct time. It is enough to have a yearning for God. It is enough to love Him and feel attached to Him. Don't you know that God is the Inner Guide? He sees the longing in our hearts and the yearning of our soul. Suppose a man has several sons. The older boy addresses him distinctly as “Baba” or “Papa,” but the babies can at best call him “Ba” or “Pa”. Now will the father be angry with those who address him in this indistinct way? The father knows that

they too are calling him, only they cannot pronounce his name well. All children are the same to the father. Likewise, the devotees call the one God alone, though by different names. They call on one Person only. God is one but His names are many.

- Vivekananda, "My Master" in The Complete Works, Volume IV, pp. 182-183

4. Even before knowing Brahman, everybody, being Brahman, is really always identical with all, but ignorance superimposes on him the idea that he is not Brahman and not all, as a mother-of-pearl is mistaken for silver, or as the sky is imagined to be concave, or blue, or the like.

- Shankara's commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.10

5. Thou [Brahman] art the woman, thou art the man; Thou art the youth and the maiden too; Thou art the old man tottering on his stick. Thou art born in diverse forms.

- Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4.3

6. The wise man who realizes all beings as not distinct from his own self, and his own self as the self of all beings, does not, by virtue of that perception, hate anyone.

- Isha Upanishad 6

For Discussion

1. These texts highlight a unity of being that transcends all difference. Are such notions familiar to you? How are they known in your tradition? Can they be reconciled with your tradition's understanding, especially those portions of tradition that affirm otherness and difference in relation to others?
2. How can such a vision of metaphysical unity be reconciled with social and religious diversity? How would you think Hindus have reconciled them? How are similar tensions reconciled (if they are recognized) within your tradition?
3. What would you consider more important – a metaphysical view of reality or a social view of reality? What is the ideal balance between the two dimensions?

Theme Two: Foreigners, Barbarians, the "Other"

7. Now, this same deity is called Dur, because death keeps far (dura) from it. And death

likewise keeps far from a man who knows this. This same deity drove out from the other deities the evil that is death and chased it to the very ends of the earth. There it threw their evils down. Therefore, one should never visit foreigners or travel to frontier regions lest one run into evil and death.

- Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.3.9-10¹

8. The Sacred Land

The land created by the gods and lying between the divine rivers Sarasvati and Drsadvati is called “Brahmavarta” – the region of Brahman. The conduct handed down from generation to generation among the social classes and the intermediate classes of that land is called the “conduct of good people.”

Kuruksetra and the lands of the Matsyas, Pancalas, and the Surasenakas constitute the “land of the Brahmin seers,” which borders on the Brahmavarta. All the people on earth should learn their respective practices from a Brahmin born in that land.



The land between the Himalaya and Vindhya ranges, to the east of Vinasana and west of Prayaga, is known as the “Middle Region.”

The Land between the same mountain ranges extending from the eastern to the western sea is what the wise call “Aryavarta” – the region of the Aryas [nobles].

The natural range of the black buck is to be recognized as the land fit for sacrifice; beyond that is the land of foreigners.

Twice-born people should diligently settle in these lands; but a Sudra [servant caste], when he is starved for livelihood, may live in any region at all.

- The Laws of Manu 2.17-24²

9. Idiots, the dumb, the blind, the deaf, animals, old people, women, foreigners, the sick and the crippled – he [the king] should have these removed when he confers with his counsellors. He should pay special attention to this, because these wretched people and animals, but women in particular, betray secret plans.

- The Laws of Manu 7.149-150

10. Immobile creatures, worms and insects, fish, snakes, creeping animals, farm animals, and jackals – these constitute the lowest course related to Darkness. Elephants, horses, Sudras, despised foreigners, lions, tigers, and boars – these constitute the middle course related to Darkness. Caranas, Suparanas, hypocritical men, friends, and ghouls – these constitute the highest among the courses related to Darkness.

- The Laws of Manu 12.42-44

“The wise man who realizes all beings are not distinct from his own self...does not...hate anyone.”

For Discussion

1. Upon what criteria are people here considered “other”? Should these criteria continue to apply in today’s world? What criteria have been applied in your tradition? Should they continue being applied?
2. These texts treat the “other” as inferior in various ways. Can otherness be recognized without leading to a view of the “other” as inferior? Consider the testimony, for better or for worse, of your own tradition.

PART II HINDUISM AND THE OTHER

Dichotomy and Irony: “Hinduism” and the Other

“Hinduism is the oldest religion.” This claim is made by many Hindus when comparing their “tradition” with other well-known religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This claim is problematic, as it is also possible to argue that “Hinduism” is the youngest religious tradition among the so-called “great” religions of today. How can this be the case when the Vedas, argued to be the most important texts in Hinduism, are believed by secular historians to be more than 3500 years old? How is this possible when people have been practicing what we now call “Hinduism” in the subcontinent since at least 1500 BCE?

The answer to these and related questions revolves around the phrase “what we now call.” That is, the term “Hindu” is a relatively new one and only came into vogue in the last two centuries when British colonizers sought a generalizing umbrella term to describe those

traditions in India that were neither Christian nor

“Hinduism” is the youngest religious tradition among the so-called “great” religions of today.

Muslim.³ The term “Hindu,” invented in the 8th century CE, was first used by Muslim thinkers merely as a geographic term but then evolved into a religious term to refer to those people and traditions in the

subcontinent that were not Muslim. The term “Hindu” is one that was thus employed by outsiders, first as a geographic characterization, and then to refer to the religions of others. Ironically, the term has been adopted and adapted by the non-Muslim people of India itself in order to differentiate themselves from the very people who first used it to differentiate. What was once a product of alterity is now a creator of the same!

But does the relatively recent use of the term “Hindu” demarcate the beginning of notions of otherness in Hindu⁴ thought?

Antyajjas and Mlecchas: Those Excluded from the Class

System

Given the importance of *varna* (class) and *jati* (caste) in the history and development of Hinduism, it should come as no surprise that Hindus have been, and continue to be, highly aware of the boundaries that surround their communities. The internal awareness of class and caste has meant that alterity was always part of the Hindu mindset. One might mistakenly think that this meant that Hindus were ignorant of, or ignored, communities that did not have a place in the class system. This is not the case as Hindus have established taxonomies that also include those outside of the Hindu social system. In the 13th century, for example, Madhvacarya, the founder of the school of Vedanta that bears his name, used the term *antyaaja* as a way of referring to the “other.” Jayatirtha, his most well know commentator, explained that the term meant “excluded from the class system.”⁵ *Mlecchas*, on the other hand – a term first used in 800 BCE – were understood to be foreigners or barbarians, and these were strictly distinguished from *antyajas*.⁶ Though excluded from the class system, *antyajas* were nevertheless considered part of the community of sentient beings dwelling within approved or immediate areas, while *mlecchas* applied to those living in non-Sanskrit dominated cultures. Such terminology was used to differentiate and maintain exclusivity, purity, and insularity. The existence of such taxonomies proves that Hindus have always thought in terms of alterity. Do Hindus accept this today?

Stereotypes and Inclusivism

One of the most common responses to questions concerning Hindu alterity is that such differences are superficial, the product of illusion (*maya*) or ignorance (*avidya*), and that ultimately, all humans, in fact all things, are identical and/or equal to *Brahman* (the all-pervasive divine force). Such responses are either modified or simplistic versions of the metaphysic propounded by Shankaracarya, the founder of the Advaita School of Vedanta in

the 8th century, which will be referred to here as the “neo-Advaita Vedanta position.” Though the metaphysical position may be a desirable one, it identifies, some might say confuses, metaphysics with conventional reality. Shankaracarya’s position has undergone various incarnations and has largely been appropriated and put forth by leading Hindu intellectuals and politicians as the essential doctrine of Hinduism. From such a perspective, perceived differences are explained away as cognitive errors. According to this position, notions of otherness appear foreign to Hinduism.

Differences are superficial, the product of illusion (*maya*) or ignorance (*avidya*)

People who do not agree with this position or hold a different belief are placed in a hierarchy that situates the Advaita perspective at the pinnacle.⁷ Competing views are incorporated into the Advaita position, which, according to its proponents, has the purest version of the Truth. For example, any kind of theism, whether it is Hindu or Abrahamic, is deemed only partly true and at a lower level on the epistemic hierarchy than the Advaita position.

Those who do not subscribe to the neo Advaita position point to several weaknesses in this position. The all-inclusivist position is, to a large degree, itself as exclusive as any other position. While it seeks to include other, less advanced, forms of religious understanding in its worldview, the danger of a total view of reality becoming exclusivist always lurks. It too could lend itself to a hostile alterity, based on a negative images of the other, as a consequence of its affirmation of its religious superiority and the inferiority of the religiously different. Furthermore, though the metaphysics is ultimately against alterity, conventionally it exists. The social and historical reality of alterity cannot be dismissed by purely metaphysical arguments. Metaphysics aside, only a segment of the historical Hindu population has adhered to this position. To construe this position as *the* prototypical or exemplary Hindu position would therefore be incorrect.

While neo Advaita Vedanta does offer an important perspective on otherness, the complexity of Hindu life and the wealth of positions articulated in the course of its history require exploring alternatives. This leads us to an examination of the theological landscape, prior to the domination of neo-Advaita Vedanta.

Tradition? Tradition!

Pre-modern India was filled with diversity and difference. Innumerable religious communities thrived in this context, overlapping with each other, and yet distinct from each other. While some traditions were well formulated or were producers of systematic doctrines, others were amorphous conglomerations of beliefs and practices. They were distinguishable by the importance they gave to class, caste, particular gods or goddesses, and even to particular context. Unlike many other world religions, the many Hinduisms were not unified under one leader or one set of texts. Rather, diversity was the unifying element.

Alterity is also evidenced among the so-called “viewpoints” (*darshanas*) which developed into religio-philosophical schools. These schools produced doxographies, collections of philosophical opinions, such as Haribhadra’s *Saddaranasamuccaya* (8th century CE), that were obvious indicators of an awareness of the “other,” in this case, intellectual opponents.⁸ Though such “viewpoints” were literati communities, the fact remains that alterity was part and parcel of the outlook of pre-modern Indians.

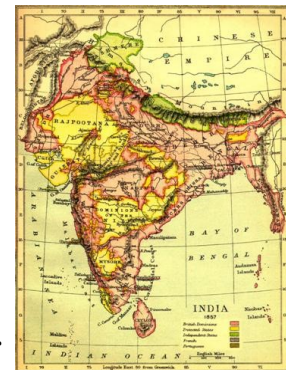
The closest proximity to “religious tradition” was the *sampradayas*, which were largely Brahmin communities founded by one leader who was believed to have propounded a systematic and coherent theological system. Such *sampradayas*, such as Madhva Vedanta, established monasteries wherein virtuoso religious leaders and practitioners were trained and knowledge could be handed down from one generation to the next. Though there were overlaps (shared texts, metaphysics, and so on), these *sampradayas* saw one another as

rivals, as “others.”

How did these *sampradayas* interact with one another? How did they confront the “other”? Before addressing internal solutions to the problems of religious diversity and alterity, it is essential to address the current complexity of “Hindutva” – an ideology that is based on and fosters hostile alterity.

Hindutva and the Religious Other

The British impact on the traditions of the subcontinent cannot be underestimated. The presence of Christian missionaries and scholars presented challenges for the religious diversity of India. Christian missionaries were able to present a relatively monolithic tradition to the leaders of the various *sampradayas* – something they themselves could not do. The pre-modern traditions of Hinduism, as suggested above, did not present many universally-held identifying characteristics. The end result was that Hindu intellectuals, such as Rammohan Roy and others trained by the British, sought to reify “Hinduism” in order to battle against their Christian counterparts. Such moves to standardize and homogenize what was once diverse were taken to another extreme when the attempts at doctrinal systematicity were combined with politics. This led to the development of “Hindutva” or Hindu-ness (*-tva* is an abstracting suffix), which saw and sees itself as a rival to Christianity and Islam. The Hindutva movement and accompanying “Syndicated Hinduism”⁹ has resulted in many Hindus defining themselves in opposition to other traditions – only possible after Hinduism was co-opted and reified. In recent times, when the Bharatiya Janata Party, the dominant and governing party until its defeat in the 2004 parliamentary elections, sought to enforce and propagate reified Hindutva, they did so *via* somewhat violent means. These activities, atypical in the history of India, were directed toward Christians and Muslims who had



British map of India circa 1857

suddenly become a threatening “other.” This current incarnation of Hinduism is a far cry from the inclusivism of neo-Advaita Vedanta since it is founded upon presumed alterity rather than unity.

Are there better, less hostile or more fruitful ways for the Hindutva supporters and others to deal with the “other”? What sorts of indigenous responses are there to religious diversity and alterity?

Debate

The various traditions and “viewpoints” of India have often sought to resolve or confront alterity and diversity through debate (*samvada*). These are formalized conversations that required participants to be more than familiar with the positions of their opponents. The debates were (and are) a way to humanize opponents and to welcome alterity. To illustrate debate, a brief examination of such practices as found in the Madhva School of Vedanta is here offered.

The Madhva *sampradaya*, a theistic school, proposes a position that is dialectically opposed to its most well known predecessor – namely the Advaita school of Vedanta referred to above. Not only do Madhvas disagree with the basic tenets of Advaita Vedanta, namely that reality is ultimately non-dual and that differences are not real, but they are also perpetually in search of debate with Advaitins.

Madhvas are famous for polemics against their rivals. In fact debate and argument with other schools is an integral part of being and becoming a proper citizen of the Madhva world. Madhvacarya, was not the first to propose the importance of debate. Such an instruction is found in Vyasa’s *Brahma Sutras*, a text central to the commentarial traditions of Vedanta, in the section known as *Samayavirodha (The Contradictions [In Other] Doctrines)*. The *Brahma Sutras*, composed in the fifth century CE, is a summary of the

teachings of the *Vedas*, specifically the *Upanishads*, and, indirectly, an explanation of how to obtain liberation. It contains arguments against numerous schools of the day, including Buddhism and Jainism. According to Madhvacarya: '[Vyasa, who is] the Lord of knowledge, composed refutations of [rival] doctrines for [his] own devotees in order to sharpen their intellect.'¹⁰ Sharpening the intellect helps devotees to not only learn the intricacies of their own tradition, but also to defend it against others. To return to the themes of this study unit, religious identity in Madhva Vedanta is thus inextricably bound to debate with outsiders. Recognizing and embracing alterity is essential for Madhvas. And, as argued elsewhere, communication forces those involved in the dialogue to recognize the human element all too often ignored.¹¹

In the Madhvacarya text known as the *Kathalaksana*, types of debate are defined, along with the context within which they are to take place. Such manuals were not uncommon among the schools of Indian philosophy, and Madhva Vedanta is no exception. This treatise on polemics is useful as a dialectical handbook for adherents who wish to debate and wish to learn about the type of arguments one can use. The debate was to be conducted with respect for the opponent and with knowledge of the opponent's position:

17. ...In the dialogue [when there is opposition] there should be praise and respect given to the other [person] who won.

21-22. If the *vadins*, disputants, [show] the signs of having no knowledge, there will be an immediate failure...

The debate was a civil and considerate form of dialogue.

Though it is true that not all traditions are so doctrinally motivated, it is equally true that members of most traditions each can speak in depth about their belief systems or practices. Whether they can argue or not, they certainly can aspire to convey the basic beliefs of their respective traditions.

Fostering Inter-religious Dialogue and Conversation

The tradition of debate can serve as an important alternative to the philosophical dismissal of alterity and to the political accentuation of alterity and the violence it leads to. Respectful debate is a means of acknowledging and seriously engaging the alterity of the other. When two people speak to one another directly, facelessness disappears and trust and hope can be fostered. Beliefs and concerns can be shared more freely, and compromise may even emerge. Participants in dialogue can learn that their conversation partners are not cold and heartless killing machines or inhuman or even juvenile, but that the participants have families, children, loves, and are also committed to preserving these and not destroying them. Though it is possible to kill someone with whom you have shared ideas, it is much more difficult when one recognizes that the person is human too.

Debates are a way to humanize opponents and to welcome alterity

Inter-religious dialogue is thus especially suited to serve as a means to preventing violence, toxic othering, and hostile alterity. Many religious traditions, such as the Madhva tradition, have themselves made such activities an integral part of their institutions. Dialogue is often believed to be an important part of becoming a citizen of a particular religious world. Followers of Madhvacarya's school of Vedanta, for example, are encouraged to debate with members of other traditions in order to gain a better understanding of and certainty in their own religious identity. As long as the conversation is alive, then so too are the participants. As long as there is a conversation between people who respect one another, an explosion of violence can be prevented. As long as there is conversation, there may be no bloodshed.

Questions for Discussion

1. The above essay argues that the Advaita Vedanta position – which, briefly, considers all difference to be illusion – can easily turn into an exclusive worldview, relegating all those who maintain the “illusion” as belonging to the “other” camp. Can you see other worldviews – which may present themselves as equally all-embracing – as similarly problematic?
2. Can there be an “inclusivist” worldview that is genuinely respectful of otherness? Should every attempt to account for the “other” in terms of one’s own system as recognizing some degree of truth, though not in its fullness, be dismissed as a hidden exclusivist view? Consider views in your own tradition. Consider whether the critique of Advaita Vedanta raised here seems fair to you.
3. This essay raises the tension between metaphysical unity and social class distinction as a critique of some philosophical schools. What is the ideal relationship between the philosophical/metaphysical dimension and the sociological order? Should they correspond to one another fully? How are we to account for discrepancies? Does the Madhava position solve these tensions? Do these tensions exist in other religions?
4. This essay demonstrates how the different streams of Hinduism, often perceived as monolithic, do, to some degree, treat each other as “other”. When is a member of a different stream of my religion an “other”? Consider the dynamics of internal “othering” within your own religious framework.
5. Is the use of debate a fair and harmonious means of exchanging with the “other”? What kind of qualities will emerge from a debate-oriented community? Is interreligious dialogue the same as debate? What are the goals and methods of each? Should one come at the expense of the other?

As long as there is a conversation between people who respect one another, an explosion of violence can be prevented.

Endnotes

1. Translation from Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
2. All translations of the Laws of Manu from Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
3. For more see von Stietencron, Heinrich, "Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term," in G. Sontheimer and H Kulke (eds.) *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Manohar: Delhi, 2001, 32-53.
4. Having deconstructed the term "Hindu," it will now be used as a convenient designation rather than a reified system. Quotation marks around the term are therefore no longer required.
5. Jayatirtha, *Tattvaprasika* 1.1.1.
6. See Halbfass' "Tradition Indian Xenology" in his *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), for an introduction to the xenological thought and categories of classical India.
7. So in actuality, neo-Advaita Vedanta is an exclusive position that is hidden behind a thin veneer of metaphysics.
8. See Halbfass' "The Sanskrit Doxographies and the Structure of Hindu Traditionalism" in *India and Europe* for more on this topic.
9. For more on syndicated Hinduism see Romila Thapar's "Syndicated Hinduism" in G. Sontheimer and H Kulke (eds.) *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Manohar: Delhi, 2001, 32-53.
10. *Anuvyakhya* 2.2.9.
11. See Deepak Sarma's "Viewpoint: Fostering Interreligious Dialogue and Conversation" *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin* 16 (2003), pp. 58-59.

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The Essay Collection: "Religion, Society and the Other" is available at www.elijah-interfaith.org.

Paper presenting Hindu perspective "Metaphysical Unity, Phenomenological Diversity and the Approach to the Other" authored by Ashok Vohra

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