

Public Lecture for School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 11th November 2003: “Teaching Non-Western Religions Today: Finance, Politics and Identity”

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1. Problem

I feel very honoured to be here at SOAS this year, and I am particularly grateful to Tadeusz Skorupski for introducing me today, and to Brian Bocking and Tom Tomlinson for the parts they played in bringing me here. In some ways, I feel a bit of an interloper, particularly in relation to the topic I have chosen to speak to you about today, which concerns problems and issues involved in the teaching of non-Western religions. SOAS is, of course, a very distinguished centre for teaching in non-Western religions, with probably the largest single concentration of scholars in this area to be found in the United Kingdom. I am not sure what I can tell you that you do not know already.

However, the topic I have chosen to speak to you about today has been an important one to me for many years, since most of my own research is on non-Western religions, and so is much of my teaching in Australia, where I work in a School of Social Sciences at the University of Newcastle. In addition, my three years in the Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster, some six to eight years ago, gave me some experience of teaching on non-Western religions in the British academic system, in the rather different context of religious studies. SOAS, of course, has distinguished departments of both religious studies and anthropology, as well as teaching non-Western religions in a variety of other contexts (history, area studies, even music).

I have said that I have chosen to speak to you about the teaching of non-Western religions. In fact, my primary concern in this lecture is with Asian religions, more specifically with Buddhism, Islam and the major religions of South and Southeast Asia (which of course include Buddhism and Islam as well as Hindu, Sikh and Jain traditions).¹

Lancaster in the 1990s was an interesting location from which to view the teaching of non-Western religions, especially those of Asia. The Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster, in its earlier years under the late Professor Ninian Smart, introduced what became the dominant paradigm for the teaching of non-Western religions in the United Kingdom, as well as having considerable influence elsewhere in the globe as well. Virtually all the larger UK theology and divinity departments have now incorporated religious studies on the Lancaster model, usually under combined titles

¹ I don't have the competence to say very much about the religions of East Asia. Nor will I be dealing in any detail with the various small-scale religious traditions that still survive, in one way or another, in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, Melanesia or Australia. In reality, of course, virtually all of these small-scale traditions, often now referred to as “indigenous religions,” exist today in complex relationships with officially defined major world religions or with Western secular systems of knowledge, and have been radically transformed as a result of those relationships. The problems they present are important and of considerable interest, but different to those I am concerned with here.

such as Theology and Religious Studies (Bristol for example), or Religious and Theological Studies (Cardiff). Elsewhere, departments exclusively devoted to Religious Studies or Studies of Religion have become commonplace, with the SOAS department, of course, being a local example.²

The approach pioneered by Ninian Smart³ could be characterised as methodological pluralism: no single discipline or mode of analysis was privileged, though several were seen as particularly relevant. Smart's approach could also, as he himself noted (e.g. McCutcheon 1999: 217, Bocking 2000), be seen as methodological agnosticism, in that it bracketed or left to one side the question of the ultimate validity of religious assertions. In this latter respect, it was very much a part of the general 1960s and 1970s British milieu. Both within the Church of England and other major religious organizations of the day, and within the secularised mainstream of British society, religious assertions were problematic matters in those days, best avoided through a combination of agnosticism and surface tolerance.

In practice, there were limits to the tolerance of mainstream society, as the reaction to the early Asian immigration and to the 1960s counterculture showed, while the agnosticism did little more than cover up the uncomfortable gaps between secular atheism and a variety of scarcely compatible religious positions. As far as the academic study of non-Western religions was concerned, however, the Lancaster solution worked quite well, and it provided a framework within which the serious study of non-Western religion could be incorporated within the university system outside specialised Asian studies departments. Since the growth in interest in Asian religions meant that there was a steady stream of students interested in studying Hinduism or Buddhism, the new approach filled an obvious need. Most of these early students were happy enough with the tolerant agnosticism of the religious studies model, and there were few other real choices in Western societies at the time. Direct contact with teachers from the religions concerned was mostly limited, and, with post-structuralism, post-modernism, feminism and post-colonial scholarship all very much in the future, students scarcely had the intellectual resources to object effectively to what they were being given.

² The main older model in the UK, Comparative Religion, has largely disappeared, at least in formal terms, with the disappearance of the historic chair at Manchester and the absorption of the department there into a Department of Religions and Theology. Much the same seems to have happened to another one-time competitor, History of Religions, the discipline over which Mircea Eliade presided at Chicago for many years. When I visited the University of Chicago website a few days ago, it was to receive the somewhat dismaying news that there were no courses being taught in History of Religions this quarter. The Divinity School at Chicago now teaches an undergraduate degree in – guess what – Religious Studies.

³ The Lancaster model was itself mostly concerned with the official major world religions, and so is most of what happens in contemporary teaching in Religious Studies departments. In part this was, I think, because the Lancaster approach was intrinsically pluralistic in its methodology, emphasising the mutual complementarity of textual, phenomenological, philosophical and social scientific analyses. Most of the small-scale religions were, until recently, the preserve of anthropologists, and while they might have had sophisticated, if often orally-transmitted, texts and remarkably subtle philosophical concepts, these had not for the most part been the object of textual or phenomenological studies of the kind applied to Buddhism or Hinduism. Their more recent assimilation to categories such as “shamanism,” “indigenous religions” or “religions of the earth” may change this situation in time, though it certainly brings along some of its own problems. I'll say a little bit about my own attempts to teach on shamanism at Lancaster in a little while.



Some thirty years down the track, things have changed. I would like to point to four major sets of changes that have occurred since the Religious Studies model began its growth to dominance.

First, [PP⁴ – “1. The student population has changed since the 1970s”] we are now dealing with a much more complex and varied body of students as far as their own religious interests and commitments are concerned.⁵ SOAS is of course a special case, with its high proportion of overseas students, but most British universities today are dealing with a far more varied range of Western and non-Western religious commitments among the student population than was the case in the 1970s. We now have substantial numbers of Western converts to Asian religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam), as well as a considerable ethnic population from Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh or Muslim backgrounds. Students too are now often less ready to identify with, or even go passively along with, the methodological agnosticism of the Religious Studies model, especially when it may be taken as devaluing the truth claims of their particular traditions or translating them into a more neutral and objectifying language. We will see more of this later on in the lecture.⁶ I’ll come to the fourth point on the slide later on.



A *second set* of changes in some ways reinforces the first [PP – “2. There are now many more options for studying Asian religions.”]. If you wanted to learn about a non-Western religion in a Western society in the 1970s, your only real choice was a conventional academic department. This is much less true today. The few fledgling Dharma centres, Islamic teaching institutions, ashrams and yoga centres of the 1970s have grown and multiplied, and now provide a wide range of alternatives to the academic context. Thus while the Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster University offered courses on Buddhism taught by academically-trained experts such as myself, a few miles up the road at Conishead Priory you could study with the Tibetan lama Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, the founder of what was then called the New Kadampa Order, and the teachers he had trained. I quote from the current Kadampa Buddhism website:⁷ [several slides on PP]

Geshe-la, as he is affectionately called by his students, is a fully accomplished meditation master and internationally renowned teacher of Buddhism.

⁴ PP indicates one or more PowerPoint slides.

⁵ To some extent this is true of staff as well, but this is perhaps better considered in relation to the second point.

⁶ Omitted material: When one adds to this mix a new self-confidence and self-assertion on the part of evangelical Christian groups on campus, the laid-back tolerance of the old model can seem a little lacking in backbone. When I was at Lancaster I taught a version of a course on shamanism which I had successfully presented for some years in Australia. It incorporated a small experiential component in which students did some neo-shamanic exercises and healing rituals, a reasonable enough tactic I thought for bringing this exotic material a little closer to the student’s own world. I was taken aback when a group of evangelical Christian students objected vociferously to the incorporation of allegedly pagan practices in my teaching. Eventually, we agreed to rearrange the experiential component as a voluntary extra, which meant that the carefully planned integration between experiential practices, readings and textual material was largely lost.

⁷ <http://www.kadampa.org/geshe.htm> accessed 6th Nov 2003

From the age of eight Geshe-la studied extensively in the great monastic universities of Tibet and earned the title 'Geshe', which literally means 'spiritual friend'. Under the guidance of Trijang Rinpoche, his Spiritual Guide he then spent the next eighteen years in meditation retreats in the Himalayas.

In 1976 he was invited to teach in England. Since arriving in the West, Geshe-la has given immaculate teachings on Kadampa Buddhism in Europe and North America, and published a series of remarkable books on Buddhist thought and meditation. . .

This remarkable teacher inspires so many people from so many different countries because he teaches from example.

He is a humble Buddhist monk dedicated to helping people throughout the world find true happiness in their hearts.

For students, especially those who already feel some personal connection to the traditions, a teacher such as Geshe Kalsang Gyatso has a claim to authenticity which the Religious Studies department at Lancaster could scarcely equal. If we professed methodological agnosticism and a willingness to bracket out the uncomfortable questions of religious assertions, he offered explicit commitment and a direct link to the tradition. We could at best teach you about Tibetan Buddhism, he could teach you how to do it yourself.

Conishead Priory was only one of many organizations growing up in the 1980s and 1990s to provide a direct line to the genuine Asian tradition. For Hinduism, for example, one might consider the College of Vedic Studies at Bhaktivedanta Manor,⁸ the ISKCON centre near Watford, which offers a range of approved vocational courses on such topics as Indian holistic therapies or Indian classical music as well more specifically religious teaching [PP]. For students interested in Islam, the Islamic College for Advanced Studies in London [PP] even offers a range of university degrees, including BA degrees in Islamic Studies and Arabic Translation validated by Middlesex University, and Masters and PhD degrees validated by Beheshti University in Iran.⁹ Obviously I could cite many other examples for each tradition, presenting the whole range from the meditative and experiential to the practical and vocational and, in some cases at least, the genuinely academic.¹⁰)

The New Kadampas at Conishead Priory are a somewhat loaded example, if one I was rather conscious of while teaching at Lancaster. The individual followers of the order whom I encountered all seemed decent and sincere people, but the New Kadampa Order achieved notoriety through its public campaign against the Dalai Lama at the time of his visit in 1996. This campaign centred around Geshe Kelsang Gyatso's attachment to the cult of a particular Tibetan protector deity (PP) which is linked to conservative monastic factions of the Gelugpa order. The Dalai Lama was attempting to close down the worship of this deity, which had a highly divisive impact within the

⁸ <http://www.covs.org/courses.htm> accessed 7 Nov 2003.

⁹ <http://www.islamic-college.ac.uk/seven.html> and <http://www.islamic-college.ac.uk/prospectus/fl.html>, accessed 7 Nov 2003.

¹⁰ In the USA, as you might expect, there is a wider range of academic options and they have been around for longer. Consider Naropa University (www.naropa.edu), or the Institute of Buddhist Studies (<http://www.shin-ibs.edu/>), a seminary and graduate school affiliated with the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley. Similar models could easily develop in the UK.

refugee community.¹¹ New Kadampa followers thus found themselves in the uncomfortable position of being enrolled in a holy war against one of the most revered and iconic religious leaders of our time, something I imagine few of them had bargained for when initially becoming involved with the order.

The New Kadampa were exceptional among Western Buddhist organizations in this particularly dramatic confrontation, but not exceptional in the wider sense that Buddhist, Hindu or Islamic colleges might have commitments quite other than those of the methodologically agnostic academy. For Geshe Kelsang Gyatso,¹² commitment to the cult of Dorje Shugden was not at all a matter to be bracketed out for academic purposes. It was the bedrock of his spiritual practice, and a central part of the teachings he gave to his students. It was also a family matter, since his uncle was a spirit medium for the deity. That the deity in question was regarded by many other parts of the Tibetan Buddhist community as a demonic entity whose primary purpose was the destruction of their *own* religious traditions was not his problem.



At the same time as these new, alternative institutions were arising, the situation within the traditional university system was also changing. As we all know, today's universities are under great financial pressure, and one consequence of this has been the demand for alternative sources of finance for teaching. Significant numbers of university positions in Asian religions are now externally funded, and the funding bodies are for the most part, as one might expect, followers of non-Western religions with an interest in promoting teaching and research on those particular traditions. In some cases these positions are funded by wealthy individuals or groups of individuals, in others by religious organizations, often those that might be classed as "new religious movements" or at least as relatively unconventional branches of mainstream traditions. (The mainstream traditions, after all, are generally well established in universities in their own countries.)

SOAS itself has a number of such positions, and for the most part, as I understand it, the relationship has been very positive and "hands off" on the part of the donors, mostly Japanese foundations or individual donors who fully understand the principle of non-interference in academic affairs. Elsewhere, things have not always been so positive. The ongoing controversies surrounding three Sikh-funded Sikh Studies chairs in Canada and the USA from the early 1990s offer a case in point [PP]. This was a sad and messy saga involving an increasingly bitter confrontation. Sikh identity was becoming heavily politicised at that time, in part because of events in India. The scholars appointed to the chairs, Hew McLeod, Harjat Oberoi and Pashaura Singh, essentially represented critical, Western and historicizing accounts of the development of Sikh tradition from a sympathetic but "methodologically agnostic" perspective. Many North American Sikhs bitterly resented the revisionist views, and clearly felt that if they had put up the money they had a right to control what was being taught.¹³ Of course, Sikh identity has become a highly politicised issue in

¹¹ Add Dreyfus ref etc.

¹² I suppose I should really call him "ex-geshe," since the Geshe title, an academic qualification within the Tibetan monastic educational system, was formally revoked by the monastery that awarded it.

¹³ See the coverage of the controversy at sites such as <http://www.sikhstudies.org/> and <http://www.sikhspectrum.com/>, e.g. Surjit Singha, "Ethos and Tragedy of Sikh Studies Chairs"

recent years. Much of the hostility directed against Oberoi and other scholars was because their work argued for Sikh identity being in many ways a relatively modern historical product. The rhetoric against Oberoi, who is himself a Sikh, is indicative of the passions aroused. Thus S. Har Iqbal Singh Sara wrote in 1994 that

Author Oberoi has abundantly established that what we have at the [University of British Columbia] is not a "Sikh Chair" in Sikh Studies, at all. What the Chair is achieving is the dissemination of propaganda against the unity and cohesion and viability of the thriving world Sikh community. What the Chair is after, appears to be the tendentious literature calculated to disparage and malign Sikhs and their future; to shake and jolt their belief pattern, and to subvert their programs for future development and progress. It is a planned part of the promotion of the "Indic culture" by repression of the Sikh religion and history. . . In any case, is this the kind of "research" and work that the objectives of the Sikh Chair Agreements had intended? The Sikh community never contracted for being subjected to such abuse of the Sikh Chair's activity. . . Is the Endowment Trust Fund at the U.B.C. now a perennial disinformation resource for the victimization of Sikhs in Canada and elsewhere? It defies credulity that the University of British Columbia could choose to become a privy to the commission of such outrage against Sikhs and Sikhism. [PP]

I will return to some of these issues somewhat later. It is enough here to note that the conflict involved, between a scholar whose work has been highly, and I think justly, praised within the Western academy, and a religious community for whom what he is saying is simply unacceptable, is not one that can easily be mediated.



An intermediate situation between the independent religious institution and the funded chair is provided by University-affiliated research and teaching centres such as the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (founded in 1985) [PP],¹⁴ the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (founded in 1997 as the Oxford Centre for Vaishnava and Hindu Studies [PP]),¹⁵ or the Dharam Hinduja Institute of Indic Research at Cambridge (founded in 1995) [PP].¹⁶ These, and similar institutions outside the UK, are highly reputable academic institutes, with governing bodies including many well-known academics. It may nevertheless be the case that staff appointed to such institutes are likely to be sympathetic to the religious tradition concerned, and may be less committed to historicizing and deconstructionist perspectives than their colleagues elsewhere.¹⁷ With the increasing lack of resources for supporting a full spectrum of

(<http://www.sikhstudies.org/Periodicals.asp?TtlCod=1118>, accessed 7th Nov 2003); S. Har Iqbal Singh Sara, "The UBC Sikh Chair: A Review" (<http://www.sikhstudies.org/Periodicals.asp?TtlCod=1239>, accessed 7th Nov 2003) S. Bindra, "York University Conference on Sikh Studies" (<http://www.sikhstudies.org/Periodicals.asp?TtlCod=1234>, accessed 7th Nov. 2003), Gurbaksh Singh Gill et al., "Are Sikh Chairs Serving Interests" (<http://www.sikhspectrum.com/092002/chairs.htm>, accessed 7th Nov 2003). Pashaura Singh, who had to defend himself against accusations of blasphemy after his unpublished thesis "was copied without [his] knowledge or authorization and circulated throughout the world," has presented his own analysis in "Recent Trends and Prospects in Sikh studies," *Studies in Religion /Sciences Religieuses* 27/4 (1998).

¹⁴ <http://www.oxcis.ac.uk/index.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.ocvhs.com/ocvhs/1/home/>

¹⁶ <http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/carts/dhiir/>

¹⁷ Klaus Klostermaier, the initial director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu and Vaishnava Studies, is undoubtedly a serious Indological scholar, but he is one of the very few serious scholars who appears to give some credence to the "long" Vedic chronology, in which the Vedas are dated back to 4000 BCE

teaching in Hinduism within the permanent staff even of major universities such as Oxford or Cambridge, much of the teaching in these areas may come by default to be provided from within centres such as the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies.¹⁸



Now, while there clearly can be problems with some of these new developments and situations, I am not at all intending to argue that all of what has been happening here is necessarily a bad thing. That is not really my point at all. In some ways, these new teaching and research contexts represent little more than the development of a situation in relation to Asian religions that we have always had for Christianity, and have had for many years, if to a lesser extent, for Judaism.

There are also some very positive aspects to some of the new developments. The externally-funded posts and institutes have enabled universities to maintain substantial teaching programmes in areas that might otherwise have disappeared, they have brought internationally-significant scholars to lecture at our universities, and they have helped build links to ethnic communities which will I think be of real value in years to come. Independent institutions such as the College of Vedic Studies or the Islamic College for Advanced Studies are also filling needs for which the conventional universities are not providing.

In any case, these things are happening whether we approve of them or not. What is important for my present purposes is that they have brought about a quite new situation in regard to the teaching of Asian religions, and one with which methodological agnosticism and the Religious Studies model are poorly designed to cope.



A **third** set of issues is perhaps more obvious [PP “3. Asian religions have become far more salient within world politics.”]: the much greater salience of religion in world politics in recent years, something which is also associated with the far greater connectedness of the contemporary world in all respects: finance, population movements, information flows. If September 11th, 2001 brought this into a far sharper focus, particularly for the USA, the events of that day and the massive Western interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq that followed were logical outflows of processes that had been under way for many years and indeed had become a central part global political and economic systems.

Among these processes has been the progressive growth of new forms of religious nationalism in large parts of the Third World, notably including South and West Asia and North Africa. I use the term “religious nationalism,” a phrase introduced I think in

or longer. See his article in *ISKCON Communications Journal* vol.6 no.1 (available online at http://www.iskcon.com/icj/6_1/6_1klostermaier.html, accessed 18 Jan 2004).

¹⁸ The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies currently notes on one of its web pages that “The OCHS presently provides all the supervisors for advanced degrees in Hindu Studies to various faculties of Oxford University. Scholars at the Centre also tutor students for Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral degree programmes. Without these supervisors and tutors the University would not accept students for Hindu Studies programmes.” <http://www.ocvhs.org/friends/achievements.html>, accessed 18 Jan. 2004.

this context by Peter van der Veer, since it at least avoids some of the manifold problems of “fundamentalism”. I think any single phrase scarcely encompasses the variety of new movements at issue. We have seen one aspect of such religious nationalism in the Sikh attacks on what they saw as the Western- or Indian-identified, anti-Sikh perspectives of scholars such as Harjat Oberoi or Pashaura Singh. I’ll come to another very recent example, this time from a Hindu context, in a few moments.

September 11th, 2001 had an immediate effect on my teaching: the quiet little course on religion and politics in contemporary societies which I had been teaching for some years in my provincial Australian university suddenly became much more popular. Enrolments jumped from an average of around 15 to more like 60. If much of the interest in Asian religions in the 1970s and 1980s was fuelled by the Western search for Asian spiritual wisdom, these students had quite different interests. They were concerned with Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam not as a path to spiritual enlightenment but as significant political forces within what was beginning to look like an increasingly risky and threatening world. They wanted to know what these religions were contributing to the overall world situation, politically, ecologically, in terms of gender issues and so on. I would suggest that any approach to the teaching of Asian religions over the next couple of decades needs to be aware that this is part of what many of our students are seeking to understand.



I have already briefly mentioned a *fourth* set of issues [PP “4. New religious movements: post-modernism, feminism, post-colonialism”]. These perhaps needs little discussion here. The growth of postmodernist thought, feminist analysis and postcolonial theory has placed a series of large question marks against all of the claims of academic objectivity and neutrality which had been in many ways taken for granted in the old Religious Studies model. We are still some way from resolving the whole question of how the teaching of Asian religions might react to post-colonial critiques.

There has been a temptation in some areas to respond by pointing to the limitations and inadequacies of these critiques, especially as applied to Indian religion. It is true that, as a number of authors have pointed out,¹⁹ the relationship between the Western academy and the religions of Asia was far more multivalent than a simplistic application of the Saidian model might suggest. Fascination, positive engagement and genuine dialogue were frequent components. As David Smith recently noted, the original meaning of Orientalism “was not oppression of the East, but the colonization of the western mind by the East,” and that has remained a significant element of the encounter up to the present day (Smith 2001:61). To reduce past scholarship to a mere element of the colonialist project is to leave out much of what really motivated our predecessors, not to say to miss the sheer brilliance and creativity of the best of their work. But the issue of who controls knowledge about Asian religions remains, and increasingly it is an issue not of postcolonial analysis but of real-world politics.



¹⁹ Among them John McKenzie, David Smith, and John Bramble.

I mentioned that I was going to discuss another recent incident, and this may help sharpen the point I am making here. The incident in question has blown up over the last couple of weeks in relation to a study of the Hindu deity Gaṇeśa by the American scholar Paul Courtright [PP]. Courtright's book, *Gaṇeśa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings* was initially published by Oxford University Press, New York in 1985 to considerable academic acclaim, and later republished in India by a well-known and respected Indological publisher, Motilal Banarsidass. I would characterise it as a sympathetic and well-informed account of its subject-matter, with relatively little in the way even of the critical historical perspectives which led, for example, to Sikh assaults on McLeod, Oberoi and Pashaura Singh.

Unfortunately, in view of what was to follow, an early section of the book ventures a psychoanalytical interpretation of the symbolism of Gaṇeśa, a natural enough approach to a deity whose head was cut off by his own father and who is described, in some texts at least, as remaining celibate because of his attachment to his mother. Courtright is not the only author to have found Gaṇeśa a prime candidate for Oedipal theory, and the temptation to throw in a few speculations about the possible psychoanalytical meaning of an elephant's trunk was perhaps hard to resist.

I must admit to having felt some disquiet at Courtright's analysis last year when I was researching Gaṇeśa for a project of my own, though less because of the question of psychoanalytical interpretation as such than because of the relatively simplistic and ahistorical nature of the analysis.²⁰ However, the psychoanalysis is mostly restricted to a single chapter, and the overall tone of the book is in no way anti-Hindu. If anything, it struck me at the time as a little over-respectful to the Indian textual tradition.

I had no suspicion of what was to follow. Late last year, Rajiv Malhotra, an Indian entrepreneur resident in the United States who runs a charitable organization charged with upgrading "the portrayal of India's civilization in the American education system and media,"²¹ published an article on the web criticising a number of American academics for alleged distortions of Indian civilization, Courtright among them.

The matter seems to have rested at that until a couple of weeks ago, at the end of October, when an Indian student resident in the United States launched a petition against the book through an online petition website. The petition gives a number of out-of-context quotes from the book, apparently taken from Malhotra's article, as well as noting that the front cover showed a "nearly naked" portrayal of Gaṇeśa (this seems to refer to the new and rather lurid cover supplied by the Indian publisher, not the more decorous 14th century sculpture on the US paperback).²² It demands that Courtright stop using the book in academia, rewrite the passages they consider offensive and issue a new publication with revisions and clarifications.

²⁰ Ref. to my Gaṇeśa paper as given in Sydney.

²¹ "This involves both challenging the negative stereotypes and also establishing the many positive contributions from India's civilization." http://www.sulekha.com/memberpages/profile.asp?shortcut=/rajiv_malhotra, accessed 9 Nov 2003.

²² The front cover of the US paperback, which I have, shows a 14th century sculpture of the deity. Unfortunately, especially in view of what followed, the Indian edition replaced that with a rather tasteless modern drawing of Ganesh. It appears from a private response by Courtright which was posted on the Hindu Unity site that he was unaware of this.

The campaign was rapidly taken up on a Hindu nationalist website, HinduUnity.org,²³ which included a couple of the most apparently outrageous quotes on its web forum. The rhetoric rapidly became quite extreme, with explicit death threats against Courtright [PP]:

How many more insults are we going to swallow before we put an end to these insults and the insulters ? . . . Can someone please put this man's residential address on this forum? His photograph will help us in identifying him if one of us here is man enough to go after him. Every breath this man takes is an insult to all Hindus and to all our ancestors who have sacrificed so much so that we might live honourably.

Another obliging contributor provided Courtright's photograph and address to the forum.

Courtright's Indian publisher, Motilal Banarsidass, was evidently feeling the heat, because on the 3rd of November (Monday last week) they offered a public apology and withdrew all copies of the book from the Indian market. A number of American academics promptly called for a boycott of Motilal Banarsidass for withdrawing the book, a rather harsh stance given the possible consequences for the Indian publishers had they *not* withdrawn it. The names and details of the American academics were promptly contributed to the HinduUnity web-site, so presumably they are now also to be regarded as appropriate targets.

Meanwhile the Shiv Sena, the well-known right-wing Hindu political party in Maharashtra, has also got in on the action, and written to George W. Bush "demanding [the book's] immediate withdrawal from the circulation and an unqualified apology by the author". I haven't yet found out anything about whether President Bush has replied.²⁴

In this particular case, it seems that the worst has been avoided. However, it is evident that a few years ago we would perhaps not have taken it very seriously if a few right-wing Hindu nationalists criticised a Western Indology text. By now, while there is certainly a touch of black humour in the prospect of George W. Bush trying to work out how to respond to Shiv Sena's demands, the whole situation is not one that can be treated so lightly. We are too aware nowadays that the consequences could easily be tragic for some of the individuals concerned, as in the case of the *Satanic Verses*

²³<http://pub6.ezboard.com/fhinduunityhinduismhottopics.showMessage?topicID=16129.topic>, accessed 5th Nov 2003

²⁴ Probably not, since it seems that the petition was subsequently withdrawn, in part at the instigation of Rajiv Malhotra. While Malhotra's article provided the initial stimulus to the campaign, he has, to his credit, dissociated himself publicly from the wilder statements and threats against Courtright and has made it clear that he wants a public dialogue on what he sees as distortions of Hinduism by Western academics, not a witch-hunt. See Malhotra's "RISA Lila 2 – Limp Scholarship and Demonology," published November 17, 2003 on the Sulekha website (<http://www.sulekha.com/expressions/column.asp?cid=305890>), accessed 9th Dec. 2003. A public discussion on 21st Nov. 2003 at the American Academy of Religion meetings in Atlanta, in which Courtright and others took part, was also reportedly a constructive and relatively friendly occasion. Further correspondence regarding the issue can be found on the Y-Indology and RISA-L discussion lists.

controversy. Yet Courtright is no Rushdie, and, if you read the book as a whole, it is hard to see how any intelligent reader could take it as offensive or anti-Hindu.²⁵



Of course, while scholars of Asian religions are trying to defend themselves from the violent and dangerous rhetoric of the Hindu right and its equivalents elsewhere on one side, they are also often struggling to defend Asian religions and their followers against equally simple-minded chauvinistic and nationalistic tendencies within our own societies. It can be quite uncomfortable to realise that we have somehow ourselves become the villains for Muslim, Hindu or Sikh nationalists. But there is a wider question here: just how do we position ourselves and see our role within this increasingly complex and pluralistic environment? Does the study of Asian religions have a legitimate place in the western academy any longer?

So far I have been outlining what I see as the problem. Of course, for the present, much of the time, we can get away with business as normal, but it seems to me that the kind of issues I am discussing are going to become more common, and more part of what we could call the standard operating environment for teaching Asian religions within the 21st century. How do we respond?

I am not immodest enough to present a universal answer to this question here. I see my present role as more one of trying to provoke some reflection on the issues involved. I am planning to organise a small workshop at SOAS next May to take things a little further with some interested colleagues. However, I think I do owe you some suggestions about how I personally might approach the situation. What legitimate and useful role could the study of non-Western religions fulfil in the early 21st century? The rest of the lecture presents my current thoughts on the matter.

2. Response

Some of you were perhaps around for Brian Bocking's plenary address to the BASR conference here in 2000. From the text that Brian has kindly passed on to me, it was clearly a very witty and amusing lecture, but it also had a serious point. Towards the end of his address he compared methodological agnosticism, as recommended in Ninian Smart's view of Religious Studies, to the then mode of operation of the Quality Assurance Agency in its assessments of academic departments:

QAA says to the department; 'we have no opinion about what *should* be going on here; tell us about *your* departmental world, about your aims and aspirations, about your students' opinions and achievements'. They are effectively treating us as a phenomenologist treats members of a religion: 'tell us about your beliefs, your practices, whatever they may be; when do you do that, why do you think you do this, what do you value about that?'.

The QAA then engages (or engaged; fortunately these matters are more or less in the past, at least in this particular form) in a dialogical exercise, based on determining the validity of the Department's own account of what it is doing. Brian went on to ask

²⁵ Another case worth considering here is Sri Lanka, with the attacks on Stanley Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed* as an example.

What exactly is wrong with this methodology and this approach? If methodological agnosticism and the phenomenological method are outdated or implausible as so many claim, what exactly is it that this method, which is being applied to ourselves more or less by ourselves, misses, in its examination of the inner life and outer manifestation of a real-life Study of Religions department?

The question is a fair one, and, leaving aside the teasing nature of Brian's example, one might well concede that methodological agnosticism and the phenomenological method may generate as good an account of what a religion does and what it means to its followers, as we are likely to get. The issues I have been dealing with in this lecture, however, are at a somewhat different level. Academics tend to regard the QAA and similar processes as at best a necessary evil, though Brian suggests that the process of QAA assessment may lead to a valuable increase in self-awareness and self-understanding on the part of those assessed.²⁶

Likewise, perhaps, the followers of a religion may see the practitioners of Religious Studies as a necessary evil, may perhaps co-operate with them in the hope that they will get the story as accurate as possible, and may experience some increase in self-awareness. But there is a further set of questions here, since religions can have an impact on the real world which goes a long way beyond that of the average academic department. Suppose a religion—as instantiated within a particular social context, and as sympathetically researched by our hypothetical Religious Studies scholar—is involved in a campaign to victimise members of the population who belong to other religions? Suppose that it is obviously oppressive to women? Is there anything we can say, apart from describing its views and practices as sympathetically as possible? How do we deal with the range of views and positions within the religion, when these are aligned with real-world political groupings who may wish certain positions to be suppressed, and others emphasised? How do we explain to our students what is happening, when the followers of a religion may in fact wish to gloss over what is happening, or to deny that it is happening at all?

I would suggest that at some point we, as scholars studying non-Western religions, need to be able to adopt a conscious value-commitment, and that this needs to be one that cannot be simply identified with the neo-colonial projects of the Western nations. In a sense, we need a moral high ground of our own from which we can have the confidence to assert an alternate and critical perspective.

My own suggestion is a simple one: that we take the ongoing sustainability of human life on the planet as a base line.

This may sound like a reductionism, to a kind of pragmatic ethics, and in a sense it is. However, there is more than that to this proposal. There is a great deal to be said for the anthropological analyses that see religion in large part as a set of techniques to manage the messy and complex business of life and of our biological embodiment, including birth, reproduction, illness and death. These *are* central concerns, in one form or another, of all religious traditions, and they are concerns that human beings ignore at their peril. Any higher spiritual or metaphysical pursuit has at some level to

²⁶ Since I have only experienced the equivalent Australian processes, which have a rather different mode of operation, I cannot really comment on how far this may happen.)

meet this set of concerns. Almost self-evidently, any religion that does not do so is unlikely to survive through the generations. Here, when I speak of “religion” I am not speaking of a set of doctrines or ethical propositions in isolation, but of religion as instantiated in an actual social environment, as part of the ongoing social life of a community.

Yet, as we note from the kinds of problems I have described earlier, many existing religious traditions are compromised in relation to a full endorsement of the primacy of human life as a whole by their commitment to a particular group of insiders, whether defined by birth, nationality or conversion. If being a Hindu in India today can involve hatred of and violence towards Muslims, if being Buddhist in Sri Lanka can be seen to legitimate oppression and murder of Hindus, if being Muslim in Pakistan or Bangladesh can encourage violence against Hindus or Christians, we have I think a right as fellow human beings to make a judgement of our own on these traditions as they are lived in today’s world. Similarly where religious traditions are used to sanction the subordination of women, the oppression of minority populations defined on non-religious grounds, or to legitimate levels of economic inequality such that substantial proportions of human populations are deprived of the resources to live healthy and fulfilled lives.

Of course, this is not just a religious issue. Societies based around secular ideologies and commitments have proved equally, if not more, devastating in all too many situations. The Israel-Palestine conflict is not primarily a religious conflict, and neither was the war against Iraq. I take it as read too that religion does not of itself, except in rare situations, actually cause violence. Rather, it serves to channel and direct resentments and frustrations whose roots most often lie in economic disadvantage or other forms of marginalisation. Nevertheless, my concern here is with the teaching of religions, and I see the claim for total ecological sustainability, at individual and global level, as setting a benchmark against which we can make judgements and in the name of which we can assert that we have something legitimate to say.

3. Indic Religions: An Example

Perhaps it might help if I exemplify in the case of South and Southeast Asia. Some of you may be familiar with the work of the Indian ecofeminist philosopher and activist Vandana Shiva. She argues in her work that rural Indian society systematically devalues the work and contribution of women towards the onward sustainability of human life, and demonstrates how this systematic devaluation allows for the destruction of resources that have been and are essential for maintaining, for example, a healthy diet. Thus monocultures of cash crops replace traditional agricultural practices. In the traditional practices, subsistence crops were being grown in complex polycultural systems, with a variety of secondary plants that provide vital nutrients incorporated alongside the major food grains. Cash crops are aligned with money, prestige and consumer goods, all matters which in rural India tend to link to the male sphere.

This devaluation is, as many scholars have pointed out, SOAS’s own Julia Leslie among them, built into the basic concepts of Brahmanical thought. As Julia Leslie has noted, a well-known Brahmanical story tells how Indra (the god of rain, fertility, and practical success in the everyday world) kills the demon Viśvarūpa, so saving the

world. You would think that this was a positive contribution. However, Viśvarūpa is a Brahmin, so Indra is condemned as a Brahmin-killer. Somehow the guilt and pollution of this act is transferred to a number of recipients, women among them. The list varies, including the earth, trees, water, mountains and rivers in different texts, but it always includes women. The cyclical fertility of women (the menstrual cycle) and of the earth (the seasonal cycle) is closely tied up with this transfer of guilt, but so is their devalued status:

In women, Indra's guilt takes the form of menstrual blood. Menstruation is thus the sign of a woman's participation in Brahmin-murder. It marks her innate impurity, her cyclical fecundity, her uncontrollable sexuality, and, by extension, the inescapable wickedness of her female nature (Leslie 1996: 91).²⁷

In contemporary Indian religion, as number of anthropologists have pointed out, the dominant Brahmanical value system, based around purity and pollution, co-exists with a second set of values which has generally been referred to as “auspiciousness”. “Auspiciousness” is about prosperity, fertility, happiness, success in everyday life, in other words with what I have referred to above as the sustainability of human life. Purity and pollution, by contrast, are largely about hierarchical distinctions, among men and between men and women, and they have a close relationship with the sphere of political authority. While impurity is a constant issue for Hindu women, women's domestic and household ritual is particularly concerned with the sphere of auspiciousness (Samuel 1997).²⁸

This relationship between a dominant value system linked to social and political hierarchy, and a subordinate one linked to sustainability, has a complex history, and in the Wilde Lectures which I gave at Oxford last year I attempted to trace some of that history (Samuel 2002b).

In those lectures I traced the history of Indian religions—including the so-called *śrāmaṇa* traditions which led to Buddhism and Jainism—in terms of an ongoing interaction between ideas which were earth- and sustainability-centred, and which tended to see men and women as equal if complementary, and those which stressed asceticism and transcendence and tended to see men as spiritually superior to women. This second set of ideas, I suggested, might be traced back to the idea of spiritual power of the *brahmacārin*, the male celibate practitioner, and that in turn might be seen as a creative adaptation of something like the male warrior-grade which we find particularly in pastoralist societies in East Africa, though there are ethnographic parallels in many parts of the world. Here I was following up on some of the ideas of Harry Falk, W.B. Bollee and Michael Witzel on the *vrātyas* and of Paul Dundas on the Jains.

²⁷ For a longer version of this quote and further discussion see Rozario and Samuel 2002.

²⁸ Gaṇeśa too is a deity who is strongly associated with this realm of auspiciousness, and some of the mythology that Courtwright and others discuss makes interesting sense when viewed in this light. I have spoken about this elsewhere, however, and will not pursue it today, beyond suggesting that there may be more behind modern Indian sensitivities regarding Gaṇeśa's sexuality than is obvious on the surface. What Gaṇeśa represents has been systematically devalued and marginalised in Indian thought, and it is significant that his shrines today are mostly secondary shrines in temples devoted to another deity (Samuel 2002a).

In fact to talk of these two complexes simply as sets of ideas is too limited: they are part of total lived and felt attitudes towards the whole business of life on earth and our physical embodiment. Elsewhere I have tried to develop a technical language for talking about such things more precisely, and I hope to develop this theme in the four Leverhulme Lectures which I will be giving at SOAS next March and April. but I obviously don't have time for that today (see Samuel 1990). The image of the *brahmacārin* forms a useful label for one complex. As a contrasting image for the other complex, I have taken the *mithuna*, the male-female couple that is so prominent in the iconography of early Indian stupas and temples. [PP]

In the earliest period for which we can say anything very useful, perhaps around the 8th to 5th centuries BCE, one can see two primary ancestral areas for the later development of Indic religions. One of these is in North India, present-day Western U.P., Punjab and Haryana, and was the heartland of Brahmanical Hinduism [PP]. The other, in the eastern Gangetic valley to the Northeast, present-day Bihar and Bengal, was the birthplace of the *śrāmaṇa* traditions and much of the early Upaniṣadic material. In both areas, religion both dealt with the 'auspiciousness' concerns, the continuance of everyday life, and offered some kind of wisdom that went beyond those concerns. We can, however, already, I think, already see different valuations and relationships developing in these two regions between what I am calling the *brahmacārin* and *mithuna* complexes.

One should be wary about simplistic dualisms here, as always, but I would see the essential contrast as being between cultures in which the *brahmacārin* complex became instantiated as a separate spiritual path for an ascetic minority, and those where it became the dominant ideology of society as a whole. One direction leads to Buddhism and the Jain tradition, the other to Brahmanical Hinduism.

Oversimplifying drastically, in Brahmanical Hinduism [PP], Brahmins, while adopting much of the ascetic persona of the *brahmacārin*, became married householder living as part of the village community and with close links to the dominant land-holding groups of the village.²⁹ They were an intrinsic part of the inbuilt structures of inequality within the village,³⁰ and they also dominated the ritual life of the village. This mirrored the similar role that Brahmins had taken on at the level of the traditional Indic state, as ritual specialists in the maintenance of the divine status of the ruler and of his good relationship to the gods. This went along with the systematic devaluation of the rituals of "auspiciousness" and of women's ritual, as indeed of women as a whole. As we have seen, the Brahmanical logic of purity and pollution was from early times constructed in such a way as to define mature adult women as intrinsically polluted and inferior. In Muslim parts of South Asia, much of this was taken over by indigenised versions of Islam, which had their own built-in ideologies of female impurity.

²⁹ In many areas, especially in the south, they might become dominant land-holders in their own right. In either case, they were closely linked to the ruling élite of the village, the few big families that generally dominate village affairs.

³⁰ There is a whole body of literature which I am skimming over here, including the various analyses of the caste system (Hocart, Dumont) and the critical writing on them, as well as more recent work on the historical development of the caste system (Susan Bayly). I hope to develop this in a monograph some day, since it will not be dealt with in detail in the Wilde Lectures volume.

In the Buddhist model in its classical form [PP](and much the same was true for the Jains), the *bhikkhu*, the Buddhist ascetic, lived as a celibate outside the village community proper. While, as time went on, the monastery became closely integrated with the community and with its values, the ongoing politics and ritual of secular life were ideally at least outside the realm of the *bhikkhu*. Thus life-cycle rites, with the important exception of funerary ritual, were not the concern of Buddhist monks, and were carried out by lay practitioners such as the so-called village or folk Brahmins that still formed a part of village religion in such places as Thailand into modern times.³¹ The ascetic path to transcendental insight and the everyday religious life of prosperity, fertility and auspiciousness proceeded in parallel, as separate if closely related sectors. While the ascetic path was primarily for men—there is a substantial literature by now on the ways in which women have been excluded from full participation in the Buddhist path to Enlightenment—secular life was not committed to the logic of the intrinsic impurity and inferiority of women. In both cases, there is a devaluation of the sphere of everyday life compared to what are regarded as the society's higher spiritual values, but the consequences are quite different.

In many ways, these two patterns continue to underlie the values and emotional structures of South and Southeast Asian societies into modern times. There is obviously a lot more that could be said here. Tantric Buddhism introduced several new twists in the argument, for a start, and the existing cultures of the remaining parts of South and Southeast Asia also need to be brought into the picture. The point in the above sketch, however, is not so much to present a conclusive analysis of Indic religions in a five-minute compass but to try to exemplify a way of dealing with the material that is capable of respecting the integrity of the material but also of bringing into relevance to contemporary concerns.

One can see the implications of the two patterns, for example, in the area of childbirth, with which I had some involvement a couple of years ago when I edited a book on childbirth and female healers in South and Southeast Asia along with my partner, Santi Rozario. In North India and Bangladesh, traditional birth attendants, *dai* to use the most common term, are strongly associated with the removal of pollution. In consequence, they are often elderly, illiterate and uneducated women who take on this largely despised work because of the lack of any preferable source of income. Some of them undoubtedly have real skill and experience in handling childbirth, but their expertise is systematically devalued and may well be ignored even by the families they are assisting. Issues of shame and pollution have also had a damaging effect on biomedical provision for childbirth in a variety of ways that Santi and I have discussed elsewhere at some length: doctors or even nurses will not touch their women patients, educated women are unwilling to take up midwifery as a career, and so on. The consequences of all this in terms of high rates of maternal and infant mortality and birth-related illness are very real.

In the rural societies of Southeast Asia, both Buddhist and Islamic, the picture is quite different, with traditional childbirth practitioners regarded as valued members of society and their expertise respected. Biomedical provision also generally handled in a much more effective way. Childbirth is a much less dangerous business in most of

³¹ See Kirsch, Tambiah, etc.

these societies than it is in North India or Bangladesh. This is part of what I mean by using the sustainability of human life as a benchmark or baseline.

I would not want to argue that the way in which childbirth is handled, or the higher status of women in Southeast Asian societies more generally as compared with South Asia, can be put down entirely to religious factors. (South India, for example, presents a rather different and more positive picture.) In reality, I think we are dealing, as always, with a very complex historical evolution in which “religion,” if it can be isolated out at all, is only part of a wider set of factors. Yet religion does have an important part to play in these processes, and it remains in many ways central to how people think and feel about many of the basic issues of human life. If ritual is a kind of condensation or distillation of culture, as some anthropologists have argued,³² then in societies such as those of South and Southeast Asia, which have continued into modern times to maintain a very rich ritual life, the cultural messages that are being conveyed in ritual undoubtedly still have power. The way in which they have been adopted and utilised as part of the contemporary politics of South and Southeast Asia is itself enough to make the point.

A key issue in all this is that I am seeking to analyse the material in ways that relate to an explicit set of values. These values concern the contribution of particular religious patterns and emphases to the building of a sustainable, tolerant society that respects the needs and importance of all its members.³³

No set of values, of course, is going to exempt the Western analyst from accusations of neo-colonialist imposition of alien values onto our subject matter. Indeed, one has to be careful here, as the ongoing tensions between Western and Asian feminisms, for example, have shown. Clearly, we need to do our homework, and to be sensitive to the concerns of the people—all the people—who live in the societies we are studying. Simplistic Western condemnations of Islamic attitudes to women, based on iconic issues such as veiling or the use of headscarfs, for example, may fail to recognise just how much Muslim women themselves are achieving within Islamic terms in many Muslim societies today.

I feel that there is a way forward here, though, and it lies in being explicit to ourselves and to our students about where we stand. The position I have outlined is in reality scarcely aligned with neo-colonialism. In fact, it involves its own radical critique of what Western societies have done over the last few decades in the name of development (not to say, more recently, structural adjustment). For me at least, it represents a more promising path than trying to subordinate our accounts of Asian religions to the value-structures of the societies we are studying, or pursuing the doubtless logically impossible struggle to be altogether value-free.

I hope that this example has given some feeling for what I am trying to achieve in some of my current work in this area. I certainly do not want to imply that this is the only way forward. However, I believe that there is something here that is worth

³² Leach I think – check reference.

³³ The flip side of the argument might be the way in which forms of religion have validated militarism, aggression and oppression throughout the centuries. This, I think, has something to do with the growth of Tantra, in both Brahmanical and Buddhist contexts, and I gave some of that argument too in the Wilde Lectures last year, but I think I had better save developing it further for elsewhere.

pursuing, both in its own right and as a response to the kinds of issues that I discussed in the first part of this lecture. As I have said, I am interested in getting a wider dialogue moving on these questions, and I hope that our workshop at SOAS next May will be a step in this direction.

If we are looking, though, for a project that might capture the interest of students, this approach, with its linkages with Third World development and ecological sustainability, may be worth giving serious consideration. It connects up with many of the kinds of concerns I have noticed among students in recent years. It offers, I think, a language in which we can speak to current and future generations of students, and help them to develop skills that may be of genuine relevance to the way in which global society reorganises its affairs over the next few decades – and to me it is increasingly clear that if some serious rethinking does not take place, the outlook is pretty bleak for most of the world's population. I can't think of many projects that are more important.

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