

The Idea of the Veda and the Identity of Hinduism

Introduction

1. Louis Renou has characterized the role of the Veda in traditional Hinduism in a memorable and familiar statement: Even in the most orthodox circles of Hinduism, reverence for the Veda was nothing more than a “tipping of the hat,” a traditional gesture of saluting an “idol” without any further commitment (“un simple ‘coup de chapeau’ donné en passant à une idole dont on entend ne plus s’encombrer par la suite”).¹ Against incautious identifications of Vedic and Hindu religiosity, Renou invokes Max Weber’s observation that “the Vedas defy the *dharma* of Hinduism.”²

Indeed, the role the Veda has played in Indian tradition appears paradoxical, ambiguous, and no less elusive than the “teachings” of the Veda itself. There seems to be a blatant contradiction between the proclamations of its sacredness and authority, and its factual neglect by the Hindu tradition. While it is often invoked as the criterion of Hindu “orthodoxy,” its actual presence in Indian thought and life seems to be quite limited. Its oldest and supposedly most sacred sections, in particular the *Rgveda* itself, have become most obscure and obsolete. For the “reality” of later Hinduism, they seem to be nothing more than a distant, barely recognizable echo of a different world.

The Vedic texts contain no Hindu dogma, no basis for a “creed” of Hinduism, no clear guidelines for the “Hindu way of life.” They offer only vague and questionable analogues to those ideas and ways of orientation that have become basic presuppositions of later Hinduism. It may suffice to recall here the cyclical world-view, the doctrine of karma and rebirth, the ethical principle of *ahimsā* and the soteriology of final liberation. For all of this, the

oldest and most fundamental Vedic texts provide no clearly identifiable basis. The Hindu pantheon, the forms of worship and devotion, and the temple cult are not Vedic. The traditional “order of castes and stages of life” (*varṇāśramadharmā*) is far removed from the Vedic beginnings. Regardless of all retrospective glorification of the Veda, even the “orthodox” core of the tradition, as represented by the exegetic Mīmāṃsā and the Dharmasāstra, follows largely unvedic ways of thought and is oriented around a projection or fiction of the Veda. This is also true for those philosophical systems of Hinduism whose “orthodoxy” is defined by their recognition of the authority of the Veda. While proclaiming the sanctity of the Veda, the Hindu tradition seems to be turning away from the Vedic ways of thought and life. The preservation and glorification of the text seem to coincide with its neglect and the obscuration of its meaning.

Renou himself says that the history of the Veda in India is ultimately a history of failure and loss (“déperdition”), and that the recitation of the text, in particular the mantras, and the preservation of its phonetic identity, occurred at the expense of a living exegesis and appropriation. From an early time, the Veda ceased to be “a ferment of Indian religiosity” (“un ferment de la religiosité indienne”); in the end, the Vedic world was nothing but “a distant object” (“un objet lointain”).³ Is this the final word on the role of the Veda in India? Are Vedism and Hinduism essentially different religions and world-views, held together only by an ideology of continuity and correspondence? Is the Veda, which the Dharmasāstra and the “orthodox” systems of Hindu philosophy present as a measure of orthodoxy, actually a projection and a fiction?

In addition to his research on the Veda as such, Renou has done much to document and explore the ways in which the Veda is present in the later Hindu tradition. His study *Le destin du Veda dans l'Inde* (“The Destiny of the Veda in India”) contains much useful information on the role of the Veda in post-Vedic India, such as the forms in which the Veda was preserved, the attitudes towards the Vedic word, and the application, interpretation, and critique of the Veda at various levels of religious life and philosophical reflection. Regardless of his statements on the merely ceremonial role of the Veda, Renou also refers to its “real extensions” (“prolongements réels”) in later Hinduism.⁴ Somewhat casually, he notes that the very essence of the Vedic world found its way, in a process of transfor-

mation (“en se transformant”), into “the living substance of Hindu practice and speculation” (“la chair même des pratiques et des spéculations hindouistes”).⁵ What is the meaning of these “real extensions,” and how do they relate to the ceremonial gestures and retrospective projections? How can the statements concerning the real “transformation” of the Vedic world be reconciled with those about its loss and obscuration? Renou’s survey provides helpful clues, but not much explicit hermeneutic reflection concerning these questions.

2. What Renou calls “the destiny of the Veda in India” is a wide-ranging phenomenon of extraordinary complexity and ambiguity. His survey makes reference not only to the literary traditions of the Hindu sects, Tantrism, Dharmaśāstra, the Epics, Purāṇas, iconography, rituals, traditions of secular learning, methods of preserving the Vedic texts, techniques of recitation and memorization, Vedic schools and auxiliary sciences, Vedic commentarial literature, and the “orthodox” systems of Hindu philosophy, but also to the anti-Vedic critique and polemics of the Buddhists, Jainas, and Materialists. We are dealing with semantic as well as nonsemantic approaches, with ritual and magical usages of Vedic words and formulas, with myths and theories concerning the unity and totality of the Veda, with forms of archival preservation, with definitions and reinterpretations, and with comprehensive attempts to establish the Veda as the source and framework of the entire tradition. In spite of the growing distance and obscuration, an idea and vision of the Veda emerges not only as a focal point of Hindu self-understanding, and a center for the precarious unity and identity of the tradition, but also as a prototype for its inner variety and potential universality.⁶

In dealing with the Veda, the Hindu tradition combines strict commitment to textual and phonetic details with an extraordinary freedom of speculation. In one sense, the Veda is the sum total of its words and sounds. In another sense, it can be summarized in a few “great sayings” (*mahāvākya*), or fundamental ideas. On the one hand, there is the idea that no single sound or syllable is dispensable. On the other hand, there is a persistent belief that this verbal multiplicity may be reduced to an original unity (such as the Ṛgvedic *akṣara*),⁷ or transcended towards one ultimate essence, that

is, the *brahman* and its closest linguistic approximation, the *om* or *praṇava*.⁸

The orthodox traditionalists of the Mīmāṃsā and of some related schools try to establish the Vedic texts as timeless, unalterable linguistic constellations, texts without divine or human author, and thus beyond the range of error and deception. They also try to demarcate once and for all the extent of genuine Vedic “revelation” (*śruti*), and to distinguish it from merely human and traditional additions or accretions. According to the most common definition, “revelation” in the strict sense comprises the Mantras and Brāhmaṇas; that is, the collections of hymns and ritual formulas in the Ṛg-, Yajur-, and Sāmaveda, together with their accompanying Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads. While the status of the Atharvaveda remains somewhat precarious, more significant debates focus on the internal differentiation of the Vedic revelation, its modes of discourse, the different kinds of linguistic entities contained in it (*vidhi*, *arthavāda*, *mantra*, *nāmadheya*), and the different types of meaning and levels of authority associated with its injunctive and factual statements.⁹

The theistic traditions, on the other hand, view the Vedas as the word of God, and as a stage in an open-ended process of revelation.¹⁰ In this view, they are susceptible to, and even call for, continued revisions, explications, adaptations, and other forms of divine supplementation and renewal. Furthermore, there is also room for the idea that the present Vedas are not the Veda per se, that is, its true and real archetype.¹¹ The “real” and original Veda is thus contrasted with the extant Vedic texts and invoked against their “orthodox” and inflexible guardians, and a dynamic sense of tradition is brought into confrontation with a static and archival one.

The Veda as Text and Reality

3. Understanding the role of the Veda in Indian thought involves more than textual hermeneutics. It also involves what we may call the hermeneutics of an event. The different approaches to the Veda are not just different interpretations of a text, and commitment to the Veda is not only, and not even primarily, acceptance of a doctrine. In another and perhaps more fundamental sense, it

means recognition of a primeval event, and a response to a fundamental reality. In the understanding of those who accept it, the Veda itself is beginning and opening par excellence. It not only speaks, in its own elusive fashion, about the origin and structure of the world and the foundations of society; it is also their real and normative manifestation and representation.

The language of the Veda is primeval reality. Bhartrhari says that the Veda is the “organizing principle” (*vidhātr*) of the world, that is, not only its “teacher” or principle of instruction (*upadeṣṭr*), but also its underlying cause and essence (*prakṛti*).¹² This may be an extreme and somewhat unusual form of expression, but the basic viewpoint it articulates is by no means isolated. The *Manusmṛiti*, as well as other dharma texts, characterize the Veda as an organizing and sustaining principle, and even as the real basis of the social and natural world.¹³ It would be wrong to view such statements as merely metaphorical. The Veda is the foundation of language, of the fundamental distinctions and classifications in the world, and of those rituals which are meant to sustain the social and natural order. It is itself the primeval manifestation of those cosmogonic occurrences which establish the dharma.¹⁴ Text and world, language and reality, are inseparable in this world-view and self-understanding.¹⁵ The “text” itself opens and sustains the “world” in which it appears, to which it speaks, and by which its own authority has to be recognized and sustained.

Commitment to the Veda in this sense means, above all, accepting one’s ritual obligations, one’s dharma; that is, one’s duty to renew and perpetuate the primeval occurrences represented by the Veda, and to uphold the structure of the world established by it. The recitation, memorization, and exegesis of the Vedic texts, just as the correct usage of the Sanskrit language in general, has ritual implications. The “rehearsal” (*svādhyāya*) of the Veda not only supplements the actual physical rituals, but to some extent may even replace them.¹⁶

In a sense, the Veda precedes or transcends the entire semantic dimension. This applies specifically, but not exclusively, to its mantra portions. According to Kautsa’s controversial thesis, the mantras have no semantic status at all. Authoritative advocates of the tradition, such as Yāska, Śabara, and Sāyaṇa, reject Kautsa’s notion of the “meaninglessness” (*ānarthakya*) of the mantras.¹⁷ Yet even they

recognize the protosemantic dimension of the Vedic language, specifically of the mantras, a reality of the Vedic word that is more fundamental than any semantic functions, and that precedes the dichotomy of “word” and “meaning.” Even though the mantras may not be “meaningless,” the amount of information they provide is not their most significant aspect. They are, above all, “real” components of a mythical and magical world, and basic ingredients of the rituals necessary to uphold this world. As such, they have to be employed and enacted, not “understood.”¹⁸

From the perspective of later Hindu thought, the entire Veda is sometimes associated with the idea of a protosemantic presence of “words” and “sounds.” In this view, the Veda is “primarily word” (*śabdapradhāna*) and thus distinguished from the Purāṇas, which are said to be *arthapradhāna*, that is, texts in which “meaning” and “information” predominate.¹⁹

4. What then is the role and “destiny” of the Veda in later Hindu thinking and self-understanding? What are the basic hermeneutic positions and presuppositions in dealing with the Veda? What are the basic forms and patterns of its preservation and neglect, its interpretation and misinterpretation? What is implied in the “transformations” of the Vedic world to which Renou refers? What kind of continued presence does the Veda have within such transformations? What is the relationship between preservation, transformation, obscuring, and loss? Are there modes of presence and elements of continuity that remain unaffected by the growing distance and obscuring, and inherent in all the later fictions and superimpositions? In what sense is the relegation of the Veda to the distant past, this inapplicability and obsolescence, compatible with its continued recognition and authority? Is such withdrawal from the actual world of living Hinduism, such remoteness and transcendence, perhaps a peculiar manifestation of sanctity and authority?

How can we distinguish the “real extensions” (“prolongements réels”) of Vedic thought and life from later projections and reinterpretations? Is there any inherent connection between these “real extensions” and the later myths and fictions *about* the Veda? Why did the Veda become the focus of so many fictions and superimpositions? Why were so many ideas that seem to be foreign to, or even incompatible with, “real” Vedic thought projected into the

Veda? Does the Veda provide a genuine basis for the processes of superimposition?

In order to deal with these questions, and to account for the fictions and projections that post-Vedic India has associated with the Veda, inevitably, one must examine the extra-Vedic components of later Hinduism. But regardless of such external accretions,²⁰ how does the Veda lend itself to these later developments? Is there a sense in which the Veda itself has been conducive to the superimpositions and fictions attached to it? Are there reinterpretations, fictions or myths, and perhaps even forms of rejection and neglect, that are at the same time genuine effects and “real extensions” of the Veda?

Whatever the answer to these questions may be, and regardless of the highly elusive and ambiguous nature of the historical relationship between the Veda and Hinduism, the Hindu tradition has, for many centuries, defined itself in relation to the Veda. The Veda, or the idea of the Veda, has provided one indispensable focus for Hindu self-understanding. It may be true that “the Vedas defy the *dharma* of Hinduism”;²¹ yet it is also true that they have provided this *dharma* with its most significant point of reference and departure, and with a basis for its tenuous continuity and identity. We may even say: There would be no Hinduism without the Veda; its identity and reality depends upon the idea, or fiction, of the Veda. But what is the “reality” of Hinduism?

“Orientalist Constructions” and the Problem of Authenticity

5. It has often been stated that Hinduism has neither a well-defined, clearly identifiable creed nor a coherent organizational structure, and that it is not a religion in the sense of Christianity and Islam. More recently, this observation has been radicalized in various ways. There has been a tendency to call the reality of Hinduism itself into question, or to challenge the legitimacy and authenticity of the concept of Hinduism. W. Cantwell Smith says: “There are Hindus, but there is no Hinduism.”²² In his view, this concept is nothing but a foreign—Islamic and European or Christian—superimposition upon the “luxuriant welter” of a tradition

that “is not a unity and does not aspire to be,” and an inappropriate attempt “to systematize and congeal the spontaneous.”²³ Similarly, H. von Stietencron states that “Hinduism” is a European invention, “an orchid bred by European scholarship. . . . In nature, it does not exist.”²⁴

Von Stietencron’s statement echoes P. Hacker’s observation that Hinduism is nothing but a “collective label” (“Sammelbezeichnung”), which was produced by Western scholars of religion in order to have a common designation for “the innumerable, partly cognate, partly divergent religious phenomena of one geographical and historical region” (“die zahllosen, teils verwandten, teils divergenten religiösen Erscheinungen eines geographisch-geschichtlichen Raumes”).²⁵ According to Hacker, the similarities and common denominators that can be found in this “group of religions” are primarily due to contacts and coexistence in the same area of South Asia.²⁶

From a different angle, various Indian authors have also rejected or criticized the concept of Hinduism, as well as its characterization as a religion.²⁷ Yet, since the early nineteenth century many other Indians have asserted the unity and identity of Hinduism, and they have tried to establish it as a religion fully commensurable with Christianity and Islam.²⁸ Others (and this may be the more characteristic approach) have tried to define the “essence” of Hinduism not in terms of a specific religion, but as a more comprehensive and inclusive constellation of religious thought and life, and as a potentially universal framework for religious plurality. According to this view, such religions as Islam and Christianity should not be compared to Hinduism itself, which appears as a kind of “metareligion,” but to the sects or sectarian “religions” within Hinduism, such as Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism.²⁹

Are both of these modern conceptions radical deviations from the tradition? Are they expressions of a nonauthentic self-understanding, a borrowed sense of identity, an adoption of Western ways of objectifying the life and thought of the Indians? Is such a sense of “religious” identity and such an allegiance to “Hinduism,” or “the Hindu way,” without genuine precedent in premodern or at least pre-Islamic, India? This is indeed the case, according to critics like P. Hacker. In Hacker’s view, questions concerning the “essence” of Hinduism have meaning only from the standpoint of Neo-Hindu-

ism; the idea of such unity and essence is motivated by, and inseparable from, the modern Indian search for national identity.³⁰

6. Other, even more radical denunciations of the concept of Hinduism are associated with the critique of “Orientalism” and scholarly “discourses of domination,” which has gained momentum in recent years. This movement of critique and “deconstruction” tries to expose links between the scholarly exploration and the political subjugation of India and the “Orient,” to identify and eliminate Western constructs and superimpositions, and to provide a comprehensive revision of the conceptual apparatus of Oriental and Indian studies. Western Orientalists, according to such critics, have tried to “represent” the Orient, to deprive it of a genuine self-understanding, to project it as a sphere of “otherness,” to objectify, categorize, and classify it in accordance with European interests of domination. More specifically, Indologists have categorized, redefined, or even invented “much of India’s ancient past.”³¹ In a more or less explicit alliance with the British colonial administration, and in consonance with such measures as the census reports, they created the “caste system” in its currently accepted sense, and “Hinduism” as a clearly definable religious category. If there is a connection with pre-modern India, it is through the conceptualizations and theoretical norms of the brahmins, whose writings provided the source materials for the scholars as well as the colonial administrators. Through this unholy alliance, colonialism “elevated Brahmanic formulations to the level of hegemonic text,”³² while “Indological discourse” continued to project “the essence of Indian civilization” as “just the opposite of the West’s”; that is, as the caste system and the “religion that accompanies it, Hinduism.”³³ In the hands of the colonialists, “caste became an administrative tool to arrange and register Indian society into a definable sum of parts,” and “helped to transform brahmanical hypocrisy into an established social fact.”³⁴

There can be no doubt that the time for such critique concerning the premises, goals, and ramifications of Indian and “Oriental” studies has come. Yet it is equally obvious that its own premises and procedures, too, call for critical reflection and clarification. This may be exemplified by referring to the most famous and influential contribution in this field, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (first published in 1978).

7. In a broad and general sense, Said claims “that all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact,”³⁵ and that Orientalism as an academic discipline is “a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient.”³⁶ “Orientalism overrode the Orient. . . . Can any other than a political master-slave relation produce the Orientalized Orient?”³⁷ The positivism of Western research appears itself as an ideology of domination; philology is a symptom of the Western will to power: “There is an unmistakable aura of power about the philologist.”³⁸ Europeans have not tried to understand the Orientals; they have tried to articulate or prescribe a self-understanding for them: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.”³⁹

Said’s book deals specifically with certain French and British approaches to the Islamic “Orient” since the end of the eighteenth century. However, these approaches appear as symptoms of much more pervasive European attitudes and of much deeper links between thought, speech, and power. In Aeschylus’s drama *The Persians*, which was written after the battle of Salamis in 480 B.C., Said finds a programmatic summary of the central motifs of Orientalism: “Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant. Aeschylus *represents* Asia. . . . It is Europe that articulates the Orient.”⁴⁰ What is more, F. Nietzsche and M. Foucault are invoked to enhance such critique with even more general suggestions concerning the nature of truth and the inherent connections between language, power and illusion.⁴¹

The rhetorical qualities of Said’s procedure are obvious; its contribution to historical understanding and conceptual clarity is, however, questionable and elusive. Said merges different levels of argumentation and analysis; he confounds highly selective historical observations with broad philosophical generalizations. The specter of “Orientalism” he conjures up is a combination of very specific and very general traits. Much of what he says applies only to the European treatment of Islam, but not of other parts of Asia or the non-Western world; other statements, though meant to depict “Orientalism,” apply equally to European ways of dealing with Occidental, European phenomena. And finally, a very substantial part of what he says applies by his own admission to the encounter of civilizations and to human group behavior in general, and thus to “Ori-

ental” as well as “Occidental” ways of dealing with “the other” and his otherness.⁴² At the end, “Orientalism” emerges as a historical and conceptual hybridization that is no less a construct and projection than the so-called Orient itself.

8. Said does not deal explicitly with European approaches to India. This has been done by other authors. For instance, R. Inden has criticized “Orientalist constructions of India” and ways in which “Indological discourse” has denied to Indians “the power to represent themselves” and thus reinforced processes of alienation and subjugation.⁴³ Indology, too, has projected its objects into a sphere of “otherness,” has “reified” and “essentialized” them in its own way, and “has appropriated the power to represent the Oriental, to translate and explain his (and her) thoughts and acts not only to Europeans and Americans but also to the Orientals themselves.”⁴⁴ In particular, it has construed the caste system as the “essence of Indian civilization.”⁴⁵

Inden’s critique of Indology is by no means a mere extrapolation of Said’s procedure, yet it raises some analogous questions. It, too, blends specific historical issues, concerning specific European misinterpretations and false “essentializations” of Indian phenomena, with fundamental epistemological and metaphysical questions concerning the role of essentialization and conceptual representation and construction in general. Such specific issues as the role and meaning of “castes” in medieval India require empirical historical research and efforts of understanding; so does the genesis of European constructions or misconstructions of the “caste system.” The epistemological and metaphysical issues concerning “representation” and “construction” per se; that is, ultimately the very structure of our world of appearance, demand an essentially different approach. The commensurability and mutual applicability of the two sets of problems can certainly not be taken for granted; greater efforts of reflection and clarification are called for. Moreover: What is the role of essentialization and representation in the critical process itself? What are the standards to expose false constructs and superimpositions? To what extent are “Orientalism,” “Indology,” and the other targets of criticism themselves constructs and imposed essences?

Another question to be addressed is: What is the relationship

between European and non-European, specifically traditional Indian modes of conceptualizing and “representing” others in their otherness? It may be true that there is something unprecedented about the European ways of objectifying and representing others, and this something may have to do with what has been called the “Europeanization of the Earth.” Yet in order not to be parochial and naive, “xenological,” “heterological” reflection requires a comparative perspective.

Self-questioning and the critique of Eurocentric preconceptions are necessary ingredients of any responsible study of India. However, the attempt to eliminate *all* Western constructs and preconceptions and to liberate the Indian tradition from all non-Indian categories of understanding would not only be impractical, but also presumptuous in its own way. Although it would seem to be diametrically opposed to the Hegelian Eurocentric method of subordinating and superseding non-European traditions, it would raise the problem of a “reverse Eurocentrism.”

“The capacity to have true knowledge and to act have to be, as it were, returned to the many Others from whom Western practices have taken it. We cannot claim to accord independence of action to a sovereign, independent India while still adhering (whether intentionally or not) to presuppositions that deny the very possibility of it.”⁴⁶ The West has imposed its methods of research, its values and modes of orientation, its categories of understanding, its “epistemic absolutism”⁴⁷ upon the Indian tradition and alienated the Indians from what they really were and are. It now takes the liberty to remove such superimpositions, to release the Indians into their authentic selfhood, to restore their epistemic and axiological sovereignty. This self-abrogation of Eurocentrism is at the same time its ultimate affirmation.

9. What kind of “authenticity” would the Indian civilization have once it has been freed from “Orientalist constructions” and Western “discourses of domination”? Would it be a reality and identity free from all constructs and essentializations? Would it be a reality left to indigenous, Indian, and thus “legitimate” constructions? Could it still be subject to inappropriate and illegitimate, though

indigenous, constructions and superimpositions? Does the tradition itself have its own modes of alienation and epistemic subjugation?

We have referred to the argument that there has been an unholy alliance between the brahmins and the colonialists, and that brahminical constructions of Indian society were adopted and translated into social reality by colonial administrators or misinterpreted as truthful descriptions of Indian society by Indological scholars. Accordingly, the exposure of Western “Orientalist constructions” would have to be combined with a critique of internal, brahminical superimpositions and “discourses of domination,” as found, for instance, in the Dharmasāstra texts or the Mīmāṃsā literature.⁴⁸

The desire of the early “Orientalists” to find in the normative and theoretical dharma literature factual accounts of Indian society and its governance was obviously mistaken. But does this mean that such texts and their teachings are inauthentic and insignificant as far as the *reality* of the Indian civilization is concerned? Where the earlier reading may have been too literal and naive, more recent approaches have gone into the opposite extreme, tending to explain and dismiss these texts as documents of wishful thinking and theoretical constructs, and to overlook their real authentic role in the multilayered totality of the Indian tradition.

At this point, we cannot and need not discuss to what extent the norms and precepts found in these texts have been applied or implemented, and in what sense their schemes and theories correspond to actual occurrences in society. Whatever the answer to these questions may be, the texts themselves, as well as their “theoretical” constructions, have an overwhelming presence among the extant records of the Indian civilization. Whether or not they have much value as “descriptions” of this civilization, they certainly are its products and reflections. They may be expressions of wishful thinking, attempts to legitimize divisions of society and relationships of exclusion and subordination. Yet, they are also expressions of a sense of identity and community that transcend such divisions and relationships of exclusion. They reflect a commitment to a shared structure of mutual relations, which assigns different forms of participation to different groups; that is, they are expressions of a self-understanding and sense of identity which is characterized by the idea of dharma.

The Idea of Dharma and the Coherence of Hinduism

10. What are the premodern antecedents of the modern ideas of “Hinduism,” the “Hindu way,” etc.? Is there a traditional sense of identity or coherence that pervades what Hacker calls the “innumerable religious phenomena” of South Asia? Is there, or was there, a “reality” of Hinduism over and above the “reality” of individual Hindus? In order to answer or clarify these questions, no concept is more significant than the concept of dharma.

“In the history of traditional Hinduism, *dharma* is one of the most pivotal, most symptomatic concepts. It is the key-term of ‘Aryan’ self-understanding. Its uses exemplify the basic orientation, but also major changes, reinterpretations, and tensions in the tradition. The term refers to the primeval cosmogonic ‘upholding’ and opening of the world and its fundamental divisions, and then to the repetition and human analogues of the cosmogonic acts in the ritual, as well as the extension of the ritual into the sphere of social and ethical norms. Subsequently, there is increasing emphasis on the ‘upholding’ of the social and religious status quo, of the distinction between hereditary groups and levels of qualification (i.e., the *varṇāśramadharma*), and on the demarcation of the *ārya* against the *mleccha*. The rituals and social norms which were once associated with the upholding of the universe are now primarily a means of upholding the identity and continuity of the Aryan tradition. An ancient cosmogonic term becomes a vehicle of traditionalism and ethnocentrism.”

“We cannot reduce the meanings of *dharma* to one general principle; nor is there one single translation that would cover all its usages. Nevertheless, there is coherence in this variety; it reflects the elusive, yet undeniable coherence of Hinduism itself, its peculiar unity-in-diversity. There is no *one* system of understanding *dharma*, but a complex network of interactions and tensions between different usages. Various groups and movements have laid claim to this fundamental term. They have reinterpreted it in different ways, and they have used it in order to challenge the ‘orthodox’ core of the tradition. Yet these reinterpretations and competing usages were in most cases indebted to, and oriented around, the ‘orthodox’ brahmanocentric usages. It is easy to argue that Mīmāṃsā and

Dharmaśāstra do not represent the totality of the Hindu tradition; but it is also easy to underestimate their central and paradigmatic role.”⁴⁹

This is not the place to discuss the specific developments that have led to the modern notion of “Hinduism,” to its interpretation as a “religion,” to the Neo-Hindu reinterpretations of dharma, and to the lexicographic equation, or at least coordination, of dharma and “religion.”⁵⁰ The changes are obvious and significant. It is important, however, not to overlook the traditional, premodern dimensions of unity and identity, contextuality and coherence, and the centripetal and inclusive elements in what W. Cantwell Smith calls the “luxuriant welter” of traditional Hindu life.⁵¹ To be sure, this is not the dogmatic and institutional identity of an “organized religion”; but on the other hand, it is neither an “Orientalist construction,” nor can it be reduced to a brahminical fiction or projection.

11. It has often been suggested that in traditional India a sense of religious identity and allegiance comparable to what we have in Christianity and Islam may be found in the “sectarian” movements of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, but not with reference to “Hinduism” as such.⁵² Indeed, such movements may represent self-contained religious constellations and much more immediate and obvious domains of religious commitment and identification than the wider field of “the Hindu tradition.” Yet the manner in which the theoreticians and literary representatives of these theistic formations relate and refer to one another, juxtapose or coordinate their teachings, and articulate their claims of mutual inclusion or transcendence, indicates the presence of this wider field. It reflects a wider sense of identity, a sense of coherence in a shared context and of inclusion in a common framework and horizon, and it refers us to some fundamental implications of the elusive reality of “Hinduism.”⁵³

The commitment to unity and identity, and the idea of one comprehensive structure and framework for the variety of Indian religious thought and life, is much more explicit and compelling in the work of such “supra-sectarian” theoreticians and ideologists of the Hindu tradition as Bhartr̥hari, Kumārila, Śaṅkara, Sāyaṇa, and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī.⁵⁴ In all these cases, the idea of a compre-

hensive unity of the tradition, and of a common ground of orthodoxy, is inseparable from a vision of, and commitment to, the Vedic revelation. The Veda is invoked as the source and focus of the unity and identity of the tradition, but also as the prototype of its inner variety. It is invoked against the internal, sectarian disintegration of the tradition, as well as against the "external" (*bāhya*) and "heterodox" (*nāstika*) challenges of Buddhism, etc.⁵⁵

The modern idea of "Hinduism," or of the "Hindu religion," is a reinterpretation of the traditional ideas and, in a sense, a hybridization of the traditional self-understanding. Yet it is by no means a mere adaptation of Western superimpositions. It is also a continuation of the tradition, an expression and transformation of that self-understanding which articulates itself in its commitment to the Vedic revelation. It is this commitment that provides the focus for traditional Hindu self-understanding, and that provides a paradigm and exemplary precedent even for those movements that pay little attention to the Vedic revelation, or try to supersede and replace it.

12. The following essays deal with theoretical aspects of the Hindu tradition, and with central issues of traditional Indian self-understanding. They deal with such topics as dharma, karma, and saṃsāra, with conceptualizations and rationalizations of the system of "four castes" (*varṇa*), with questions concerning the motivation and justification of human actions, and with reflections on the goals and sources of human knowledge. They deal, above all, with the relationship between reason and Vedic revelation, with theoretical reconstructions of traditional norms and concepts, and with philosophical responses to the idea of the Veda.

These essays are primarily based upon philosophical and normative literature in Sanskrit, that is, on texts which were for the most part composed by brahmins. They explore the self-understanding and the complex traditionalism of such thinkers as Kumārila, Śaṅkara, Bharṭṛhari, Jayanta, Vācaspati, Udayana, etc. Their approach is partly philosophical, partly historical and philological; their goal is, above all, to contribute to a better understanding of some representative manifestations of traditional Indian self-understanding.

These essays deal with indigenous Indian reflections on the sources, the structure and meaning of the Hindu tradition, and with

traditional philosophical responses to social and historical realities. They do not deal with social and historical realities per se. They are, however, based upon the premise that for understanding these “realities,” the reflections and “constructions” of traditional Indian theorists are no less significant than the observations and paradigms of modern Western historians and social scientists.