

THE MANTRAS OF ANTI-BRAHMANISM  
THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE IN AN INDIGENOUS DEBATE

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "The Mantras of Anti-Brahmanism: The Colonial Experience in an Indigenous Debate" submitted by Raf Gelders in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy is his original work and has not been submitted for the award of any degree of this or any other university.

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More than two years in two different worlds... One in India, the other one in Europe... Having spent most of my life in one, I set out to live through the other... Whilst being in one I could never express what I missed about the former. I had to relapse into clichés and vacuous slogans so as to remember the *embracement* felt in each of them. As it often goes with academic journeys, personal experiences prove to be more significant than the purely scholastic ones.

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New Delhi,  
May 2003.

## One

### INTRODUCTION: THE ORIENTALIST-ANGLICIST DEBATE

#### Visions of Empire

When in 1772 the Court of Directors assumed the *divani* assigned by the Moghul emperor seven years earlier, the East India Company took a major step towards transforming itself from a private trading company into a fully-fledged colonial power. Evidences in Parliament expressed the serious concern that the subordinated population would unite and overthrow the British Empire if administrators would not conciliate with the manners and customs of the indigenous culture.<sup>1</sup> As the first governor-general of Bengal (1773-1785), Warren Hastings established Orientalism as the official policy and unofficial disposition of the Raj: a colonial vision that, sensitive to the indigenous culture and its local customs, would last long into the nineteenth century. Aware of the precariousness of British rule, Hastings promoted a firm correspondence between colonial governance and awareness of the Indian civilization: Hastings '*sought to understand Indian culture as a basis for sound Indian administration.*'<sup>2</sup>

Political expedience and personal enthusiasm resulted in an intellectual fascination with the South Asian civilization. The rules of diplomacy, the background of political intrigues, geographical and sociological data on the land and on the people, their religion and society, were vital information for colonial governance. Hastings promoted diverse intellectual enterprises, supported Nathaniel Halhed in his research on Hindu law, encouraged William Jones' enthusiasm for Sanskrit, and supported the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784). With the establishment of the College of Fort William (1800), such noted scholars as Henry Thomas Colebrooke and Horace Hayman Wilson continued to work in close collaboration with *pundits* versed in Sanskrit and in Persian. They appreciated the alien culture, genuinely sought to understand the foundations of its religion and society, and adopted the sound policy of accommodation Jesuit missionaries had been known for.<sup>3</sup> They studied Indian culture, learned its local languages, collected and preserved what belonged to its cultural inheritance and discovered a grand past that presented an India excelling in the political, social, religious and intellectual domains.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Warren Hastings, 1813, British Parliamentary Papers – Colonies East India (BPP) Vol. 4 [1812-1813]; Thomas Munro, 1813, BPP Vol.4 [1812-1813]; Teignmouth, 1813, BPP Vol. 4 [1812-1813].

<sup>2</sup> Percival Spear, 1965: 69.

<sup>3</sup> See Ines Zupanov, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> See O. P. Kejariwal, 1988; Raymond Schwab, 1984.

From the beginning, an alternative colonial ideology confronted Hastings' policy of conciliation.<sup>5</sup> Evangelical missionaries such as Charles Grant and William Ward considered India to be intrinsically corrupted and perceived British rule as an instrument of Providence. The Empire, they believed, had the divine task to spread the Word of Christ and to transform the heathen country from moral depravity into moral righteousness. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, radical reformers such as James Mill, Thomas Macaulay and Charles Trevelyan reasoned along similar lines: Indian culture was perverted and its population irrational, retarded, superstitious and morally depraved. Convinced of the supremacy of British culture and religion, Evangelicals, Anglicists and Utilitarians ardently attacked colonial policies of reconciliation and adjustment to local customs and accused the Company of supporting the heathen religion.<sup>6</sup> They wrote their opinionated histories of South Asian religion and society on the basis of the tremendous labour of Orientalist scholarship, pouring their anathemas over the European public.

The fight between both factions waged from the end of the eighteenth until the middle of the nineteenth century and is generally known as the Orientalist-Anglicist controversy: a political and academic debate that is used nowadays as an explanatory framework to understand colonial attitudes vis-à-vis South Asian culture on the one hand, and to grapple with the Indian response to modernization on the other hand.<sup>7</sup> In the subsequent subsections I will focus less on the universe of discourse that constituted the Orientalist-Anglicist debate. Alternatively, I will present an introductory outline of the argument that will move along throughout this essay.

### **The Modernization of Tradition**

Some trends within contemporary scholarship evaluate the production of 'colonial knowledge' – to use the modern jargon – as consequential to colonial governance. As Bernard Cohn has argued ever since the 1960s: archives, libraries and antiquarian collections, archaeological surveys, the command of Indian languages and the translations of ancient manuscripts, together with watertight compartments of religion, caste and village community, shaped a predictable India that could be catalogued for administrative pursuits of power.<sup>8</sup>

In the wake of Edward Said and backed by highly theory-laden concepts, numerous scholars explained prejudiced representations of Indian history, religion and society as providing the validation

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<sup>5</sup> See P. J. Marshall (ed.), 1968: 72.

<sup>6</sup> See Robert Frykenberg, 1979: 314.

<sup>7</sup> For studies on cultural interaction within the framework of the Orientalist-Anglicist divide, see Christopher Bayly, 1996; Penelope Carson, 1991; Nancy Cassels, 1991; Bernard Cohn, 1968, and 1996; Vasudha Dalmia, 1998; Nicholas Dirks, 2001; Robert Frykenberg, 1979; Kenneth W. Jones, 1976; O. P. Kejariwal, 1988; David Kopf, 1969, 1975, and 1991; Lynn Zastoupil and Martin Moir (eds.), 1999, etc.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Cohn, 1968, and 1996.

of colonial conquest. Colonial representations of an otherworldly religion and society were said to have rationalized colonial dominance.<sup>9</sup> In chorus, additional vogues in postcolonial theory that paid less attention to the liaison between knowledge and governance, closely examined the substantial position of South Asian culture in European imaginaries and self-understanding.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, guardians of Orientalist learning tried to rescue the Orientalist project from critical postcolonial theory about the service of anthropological knowledge in colonial ventures. Their attempts to save Orientalist scholarship from postcolonial critiques sharply discriminated it from Anglicist and imperialist historiographies, singling out a scholarly enthusiasm and an attempt to genuinely understand the South Asian civilization.<sup>11</sup> Others have made nuances to both trends in colonial discourse analysis. In a collection of essays, edited by Beckenridge and van der Veer, Rosane Rocher, for instance, was in search of a diversity of motives behind so-called 'colonial knowledge production.' Some of the work resulted from the colonial rationale of governance, and some did not, even though she continued to depict the College of Fort William where most of the Orientalists were educated as a training centre for imperial-minded administrators.<sup>12</sup> For the sake of the contention of this essay, there are two preliminary points I want to make here:

1. As mentioned above, specific trends in contemporary scholarship assume a theoretical rift between Orientalists and Anglicists in order to understand colonial policies and colonial moods regarding South Asian civilization. However, the analysis of colonial understanding I will present below suggests that these differences are in fact superficial when it comes to an assessment of the fundamental structure of Indian religion and society. That is to say, (1) both attitudes ran remarkably parallel whenever it came to their appreciation of *contemporary* religious and social practices. Moreover, (2) both points of view coincided when they rendered the European experience of contemporary India – as well as India's history – intelligible: both agreed on the identification of Brahmins and their false religion as being responsible for the corruption they experienced in colonial India.

Since it was the alleged duty of the Company to upgrade the religious and moral status of its subjects, social and religious reform brooked no delay. For the Orientalists, the great traditions of the past formed the benchmark to resuscitate the present-day society they tried to administrate. For the Anglicists, reform and modernization entailed, by definition, a far-reaching westernisation. However, in an emphatic agreement, all contributors identified the Brahmins as 'priests' of the faith that had to be eliminated or – in the most favourable case – invigorated. Religious customs and social practices had to be reformed because of the depraving influence these 'priests' had upon religion and society.

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, Aijaz Ahmad, 1992; Ranajit Guha, 1989; Ronald Inden, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Wilhelm Halbfass, 1988; Raymond Schwab, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, Nancy Cassels, 1991; O. P. Kejariwal, 1988; David Kopf 1969, and 1991.

<sup>12</sup> Rosane Rocher, 1993: 218.



Brahmins were held responsible for the creation and sanctification of the caste system that had brought social development to a halt. Colonial conceptions unveiled that this classification was designed to preserve religious and social privileges of the Brahmin caste. They were convinced that Brahmins had used their religious authority to dominate those with civil power as well. This explained why those in power did not contest the system of hierarchical castes. Consequently, the Brahmin caste was seen as the main impediment for education and for imparting truthful religiosity and a sound system of social organization. The dynamics of a crafty priesthood, as I will demonstrate below, were given a most central role in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century colonial historiography and anthropology. Any administrative policy to resuscitate or to radically reform Indian religion and society saw its efforts in opposition to a Brahmin ideology that was alleged to dominate the religious and the social realm.<sup>13</sup>

If there were differences between Orientalists and Anglicists in this regard, they were quite insignificant. Anglicists found Indian culture and society intrinsically distorted from the very beginning. Hence, they promoted a radical transformation. Orientalists saw India's culture as based on sound principles that were steadily corrupted and advocated a revival of the lost traditions. But the cause of contemporary religious, moral and social corruption was in both cases the same: a crafty Brahmin priesthood. That is to say: *colonial historiography and anthropology elucidated the sacred and the profane by way of priestly corruption and decline.*

2. That 'colonial knowledge production' stood service for an imperialist rationale does not elucidate this brand of history writing: the primary role assigned to Brahmins so as to explain a supposedly decadent religion and corrupt society, as I will demonstrate below, cannot be simply explained by referring to governance. Fixed religious and social categories might have been created to administrate a subordinated society and belittling images of religion and society might have been produced in order to justify colonialism. Yet neither the need to govern, nor a genuine interest in the indigenous culture, entails the principal role of a priesthood in colonial explanations of religious and social practices in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century South Asian civilization.

Most of the central characters already mentioned above will serve in the first part of this essay as a range of commentators on this issue that transcended ideological and theoretical boundaries: from proto-Orientalists such as John Zephania Holwell and Abbé Dubois, from William Jones and Henry Thomas Colebrooke to Horace Hayman Wilson and Max Müller, from Charles Grant and William Ward to James Mill and Mountstuart Elphinstone, among others that will guide us in the analysis below, agreed that the indigenous religion was dominated and contaminated by the

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<sup>13</sup> On Brahmin opposition to conversion, see Penelope Carson, 1991. On their resistance to Western education, see the Evidences in Parliament by Mountstuart Elphinstone, 1830, extracted in the *Asiatic Journal* Vol. 6 [1831]; John Malcolm, 1828, BPP Vol. 6 [1831-1832].

Brahmin caste. They also agreed that India's rebarbative brand of social organization resulted from a priestly craving for worldly power. The influence of proto-Orientalist writers, subsequent Orientalist scholars, Evangelical missionaries and the Utilitarian historian James Mill will be evaluated in the context of the highly formative period of the Orientalist-Anglicist debate.

### **Brahmanism of the Mind**

In a recent study (2001), the celebrated South Asia expert at Columbia University, Nicholas Dirks, presented a genealogy of the concept 'caste' as we are said to encounter it in academics and postcolonial consciousness today. Caste as we know it nowadays was a modern phenomenon and the manner in which it is said to manifest itself these days resulted from an historical encounter between India and 'colonial forms of knowledge production.' Not that the British managed to establish such a reprehensible vision of the social on their own. After all, the Portuguese recognized it straight away from the moment they set foot on Indian soil. In the tradition of colonial discourse analysis initiated by Bernard Cohn and Edward Said and popularised in avalanches of postcolonial writings, Dirks' *Castes of Mind* suggested that it was under the influence of two hundred years of colonial rule that 'caste' became a concept capable of expressing the diverse forms of social identity in the Indian subcontinent. In contrast, in pre-colonial India, caste had never been a signifier that could exhaust the entirety of social identities. Dirks put the matter as follows:

In precolonial India, the units of social identity had been multiple, and their respective relations and trajectories were part of a complex, conjectural, constantly changing, political world. The referents of social identity were not only heterogeneous; they were also determined by context. Temple communities, territorial groups, lineage segments, family units, royal retinues, warrior subcastes, 'little' kingdoms, occupational reference groups, agricultural or trading associations, devotionally conceived networks and sectarian communities, even priestly cabals, were just some of the significant units of identification, all of them at various times far more significant than any uniform metonymy of endogamous 'caste' groupings. Caste ... was just one category among many others, one way of organizing and representing identity.<sup>14</sup>

In addition:

Regional, village, or residential communities, kinship groups, factional parties, chiefly contingents, political affiliations, and so on could both supersede caste as a rubric for identity and reconstitute the ways caste was organized.<sup>15</sup>

Through a detailed historical account Dirks presented an outline of the '*textualization of tradition*' that had made these social categories into the fixed and rigid socio-religious concepts prevalent in

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Dirks, 2001: 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.: 13. On the emergence of caste as a defining feature of so-called Hindu ethnicity in the course of colonialism, see as well Susan Bayly, 1998: 94.

postcolonial politics. (1) The multitude of customs that characterized the religious life in local settings was delineated into a grand religion that turned out to be more and more 'Brahmanic.' The colonial conception of local customs grew to be progressively centred on high Sanskrit texts and on 'Brahmanic' testimonies. For the convenience of administrative purposes, colonial scholarship had structured these practices into the confines of a grand religion guarded by Brahmin principles.<sup>16</sup> (2) The identification and translation of the *Manu Dharm a Shāstras* that brought about William Jones' *Institutes of Hindu Law* (1794), the canonization and explanatory power of the text in colonial thought, as well as the identification of a much older *Purusha Shukta* story so as to account for the origin of the caste system (the Brahmin born from the head of *Purusha*), in conjunction with an emphasis on the so-called *varna*-theory (the notion of a fourfold hierarchical division with the Brahmin at its crown), rendered India's social organization by definition 'Brahmanic' and provided the fixed caste categories Dirks discerned in contemporary India.<sup>17</sup>

Dirks continued that over a period of more than two hundred years, different ideological schools of thought accepted these parameters within which religion and society were interpreted. Evangelical missionaries, ardent Anglicists and conservative Orientalists shared a fundamental understanding of Indian religion and society in which the *varna*-view of caste became standardized. A Brahmin-centred religion and a Brahmin-centred caste system provided 'transregional' and 'metahistorical' modes of reasoning about Indian culture, capable of unambiguously expressing a multitude of *sam pradāys* on the one hand, and a myriad of local *jātis* on the other. That is to say, whenever it came to a fundamental assessment of Indian religion and society, colonial writers transcended clear-cut ideological boundaries.

In the tradition of Cohn's analysis of colonial thought, Dirks' state-of-the-art research set up an explanatory link between governance and information. In a foreword to an anthology of Cohn's essays, Dirks, therefore, revealed that '*information was required in order to assess and collect taxes, maintain law and order, and identify and classify groups within Indian society.*'<sup>18</sup> In order to do so, colonial scholarship pigeonholed regional differences, a multitude of indigenous practices and a complex arena of social identities in a Brahmin-centred religion of caste. Regarding the outline of the argument that runs throughout this essay, there are five important comments to be made:

1. Having said this much, Dirks' work stagnates at a particular point. Dirks fails to explain (1) why different schools, traditions and practices were grouped into an all-embracing religion based on so-called 'Brahmanic' texts and 'Brahmanic' principles, and (2) why a myriad of fluid *jātis* and social

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Dirks, 2001: 150-51.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.: 14.

<sup>18</sup> In Bernard Cohn, 1996: xiii-xiv.

identities could be clustered into a Brahmin-centred caste system as it is said to exist today. As suggested above, the necessity to govern a subordinated society through the means of predictable knowledge does not per se explain our colonial understanding. That is to say, that information enables rule does not explain the particular form of knowledge the Europeans produced. That the British needed knowledge in order to administrate a subordinated society and to collect revenue taxes does not entail, by definition, the particular kind of 'knowledge production' which Dirks and those that paved the way for him noticed, and thus, does not entail, by definition, the construction of a *Brahmin-centred* religion and a *Brahmin-centred* caste system as we are supposed to know it nowadays.<sup>19</sup>

2. In Dirks' argument Brahmins indubitably came to have authority on matters of religion and social custom. In the wake of the Great Rebellion of 1857 administrative choices regarding custom and tradition were made on the basis of a Brahmin understanding of the religious, though elsewhere Dirks wrote that it was a new generation of Orientalist administrators that would decide what would count as Hindu religion and what not.<sup>20</sup> The question remains: Why did these new administrators give Brahmins this authority? To be precise, their understanding of Brahmin authority on matters of religion and custom *preceded* their decision to employ Brahmins as native informants. Moreover, as this essay will hopefully demonstrate, the belief that Brahmins unambiguously understood what the administrative investigators were talking about is highly questionable.

3. As suggested above, together with monotonous critiques on textual dispositions and colonial modes of representation, Dirks failed to grapple with the underlying cultural and historical dynamics in the West that provide an answer to the question of colonial thought regarding Indian religion and society. As a matter of fact, the '*textualization of tradition*' Dirks talked about seems to have had a much longer history in colonial writings than postcolonials suggest. As mentioned above, in the first part of this essay I will present an outline of the colonial debate. I will demonstrate that different relevant factions, secular Orientalists, Jesuit missionaries, Evangelicals, and Utilitarians, elucidated the sacred as well as the profane by way of Brahmin authority. Subsequently, in the second part of this essay, I will propose that this chronicle about a priestly class, which was said to be responsible for the socio-

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<sup>19</sup> Suffice to refer to the Mughal administration. Cohn referred to Al-Biruni and to the late sixteenth-century gazetteer at Akbar's court, Abu'l Fazl, to demonstrate that 'indigenous constructions' of Indian society were familiar with the *varna*-theory. Nevertheless, the Mughal lists of military and revenue obligations demonstrated that they operated solely within a localized setting of kin-based groups. (Cohn, 1968: 5.) The new Cambridge historiography agrees on this issue: Christopher Bayly's work on information gathering by colonial powers suggests that pre-colonial regimes accumulated data in much the same way as the British did. Yet, in contrast to the British, their discourse on religion remained localized in much the same way as race and caste remained only one signifier among the many others. (Bayly, 1996: 20-30.)

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Dirks, 2002: 150-51.

religious status quo, repeatedly uncovers several aberrations in a distinctively hedging way. I will suggest that these anomalies rendered their explanation of colonial India a contentious one.

Nevertheless, Evangelicals, Orientalists and Anglicists shared a deep and fundamental understanding of religion, of the role played by priests, and of the relationship between society and its priesthood. This conception, I will suggest, can actually account for colonial historiography and for the unchallenged primary role assigned to the Brahmins. Consequently, this conception can account for the colonial propensity to concentrate on Brahmin testimonies and to structure indigenous practices and social identities into a *Brahmin-centred* religion of caste.

4. Notwithstanding the problems outlined in the second part of this essay, the colonial explanation of Indian religion and society remained unchallenged. I will propose that colonial scholarship could derive its structure and coherency from an inherent *religious* understanding of religion that had structured Europe's conception of religion for the past fifteen hundred years. On the one hand, the Biblical story of a revealed religion that was corrupted in the course of time was the framework that structured colonial history writing on non-Semitic religions: indigenous practices were said to be consequential to a corruption of the original religion that God had bestowed upon *humanity*. On the other hand, because Christianity assigned a principal role to the clergy, religion was an affair of the priests only. Consequently, the mechanism of degeneration had to be found in the priesthood: priests became the instruments of the Devil and began to transform this original God-given religion in search for worldly advantages. In addition, they had installed socio-religious hierarchies inside and outside the Church. This *religious* understanding of religion and its bond with priesthood, I will further emphasize, became more structured and more coherent against the background of the Reformation and the Protestant critiques on the Roman-Catholic Church. This *religious* understanding, I will suggest, also structured the European quest for the religious elsewhere. Brahmins were identified as 'priests' who were supposed to have created a general and all-inclusive religious system – one of the salient features of this priestly religion that preserved their spiritual and worldly privileges was the caste system.

At the outset of this essay it is important to mention that I do not propose to argue that both Jesuit missionaries such as Dubois and secular researchers such as the Orientalists and their antagonists, the Utilitarians, were in actual fact actively engaged in Protestant theological thinking. However, in the light of the discursive framework constituted by Semitic and specifically Christian beliefs, I will merely seek to demonstrate how colonial scholarship came to explain the religious and social landscape in a non-European civilization as they did. These Semitic and Christian beliefs, I will suggest, came to be part of the Western conception of religion. That means to say, neither Jesuit missionaries, nor secular researchers were Protestant thinkers, yet the general understanding of

religion had come to be centred on a *de-christianised Christian understanding of religion* that had matured in Protestant thought and that came to be part of the cultural experience of Europe.

5. If this suggestion can be demonstrated it follows that our postcolonial understanding of colonial historiography fails to provide a satisfactory explanation of colonial scholarship on Indian religion and its so-called caste system. I will suggest that a sustained emphasis on the relationship between 'knowledge production' and the rationale of power impedes a serious understanding of colonial historiography and anthropology that assigned a primary role to the Brahmins in its understanding of religion and society. If the Mughal administration did not have to create this *Brahmin-centred* religion and *Brahmin-centred* social organisation, why did the British Raj construct it? Moreover, if this suggestion can be demonstrated, neither our colonial understanding of Indian religion and society, nor our postcolonial assessment of this understanding, surpasses the confines of *Christian theology* – a specific system of *religious* beliefs and theory. As a consequence of which we still lack a scientific, non-theological understanding of the multitude of traditions and practices that were delineated into this grand religion of Brahmin 'priests.'

### The Indigenous Response

Christopher Bayly's *Empire and Information* (1996) was representative of the new school of Cambridge scholarship that challenged the belief in a stagnated South Asian civilization in eighteenth-century India. Bayly tried to soften the divide between 'tradition' and 'modernity,' arguing for clear-cut traces of continuity between a vibrant pre-colonial India and the early nineteenth-century society during the British Raj.<sup>21</sup> European colonial states, as Bayly argued, required practical knowledge of how to gain most profit from their overseas ventures. They needed military and diplomatic information pertaining to the establishment of stable government in a society that was different from their own. Bayly suggested that their ability to derive information from a well-established indigenous information order, described as the Indian ecumene, was a necessary condition for colonial rule: the aptitude to derive crucial information from a varied assortment of Muslim court servants, literate scholars and *pundits*, peripatetic bards and bazaar rumour-mongers proved crucial for the success of their military, diplomatic and economic ventures. In the process of establishing a secure colonial government, the most important source of data were the *munshis*: a highly sophisticated community of writers, both Hindu and Muslim, skilled in Persian and Sanskrit language and literature, and maintainers of the so-called administrative culture of eighteenth-century South Asia. This highly active class of urbanized writers passionately debated religion and society long before the seminal period of the mid-nineteenth century. The intelligentsia and 'enlightened natives' continued this tradition of rhetoric and polemics.

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<sup>21</sup> Christopher Bayly, 1996.

They started to penetrate into the Orientalist-Anglicist debate and criticized or supported the different administrative policies of the Raj.<sup>22</sup>

A number of groups in Bengali society had come to regard English education as crucial for their future security. The majority amongst them constituted the so-called *bhadralok*: a highly educated community that had traditionally supplied the Muslim rulers with administrators versed in the Persian language. As mentioned above, contemporary scholarship argues that many of the responses from the outset of Indian reform movements should be seen in the context of either Anglicist or Orientalist dispositions.<sup>23</sup> By the early nineteenth-century a significant section of the indigenous elite had come to accept colonial programs of reform. As under British rule the English language replaced Persian in matters of administration, English education was increasingly supposed to be the language of status and power. Both Orientalist and Anglicist conceptions had had a significant influence on the Bengali selected few and brought about a tension between radical reformers and those that were favourable of Orientalist policies.

However, the desire for Western learning and reform would prove to be compatible with a sustained pride in the indigenous culture. In a seminal study on the Orientalist movement and the so-called Bengal Renaissance, David Kopf referred to psychological motives that made the majority of the Bengali intelligentsia choose to adopt the golden-age theory of Orientalist writers. The indigenous elite might have accepted Western programs of reform and might have advocated English education for socio-economic reasons, yet the majority of them never accepted a whole-scale condemnation of their culture as proposed by Anglicist fanatics. As Kopf suggested, different indigenous moves – the founding of a Sanskrit College at Calcutta, the establishment of the Hindu College by the Bengali elite (1816), its secular character that combined Bengali and English education, a first indigenous journal, *The Brahmunical Magazine*, edited by Raja Rammohun Roy (1821), the local polemics on religion and society, etc. – were all responses to either Orientalist or Anglicist dispositions. Yet the Orientalists identified closely with the alien culture and proposed a reform from within, engrafted on native institutions and modes of learning, that was compatible with the indigenous and psychological need to maintain one's own cultural integrity. As Kopf summarized it himself: '*The intelligentsia were simply not prepared to disavow their heritage. On the contrary, they required a sympathetic cultural ideal projected historically to rationalize their desire for change.*'<sup>24</sup>

One of the most influential of these native reformers was Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), born in a Bengali Brahmin family with a long history of service for the Muslim rulers. Popularly regarded as the *Father of the Bengal Renaissance*, or even as the *Father of Modern India*, Roy is said to have

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.: 180-211.

<sup>23</sup> See pp. 3, ff. 7.

<sup>24</sup> David Kopf, 1969: 286. See as well Zastoupil and Moir (eds.), 1999: 15-17.

been an excellent example of this duality in indigenous response to the Orientalist-Anglicist divide.<sup>25</sup> Whilst arguing for a revitalization of Indian religion, founded on a grand *Vedantic* past that was discovered in Orientalist research, Roy simultaneously defended the introduction of Western learning in the English language.<sup>26</sup> He advocated Western learning and education, yet, as Kopf argued, could not accept a total condemnation of the Indian past. In short, it is generally accepted that Roy's interpretation of indigenous religious thought was an answer to the Orientalist golden-age theory. Yet again, as regards to the tread running throughout this essay, there are three points to be made:

1. In the third part of this essay I will use the example of Rammohun Roy in order to argue, in defiance of, for instance, David Kopf, that the Orientalist-Anglicist polarization theory does not elucidate the interpretation so-called modern Indian intellectuals provided of Indian religion. It might well be that Roy's identification of a grand past in religious thought was consequential to Orientalist learning, yet (1) his evaluation of the present multitude of indigenous practices as well as (2) his explanation of these practices was consonant with those principles which Orientalists and Anglicists shared. Consequently, the schism between both factions does not provide a satisfactory explanation of Roy's conceptualisation of 'Hinduism.' On the basis of *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, I will suggest that his clarification of the history of Indian religion reiterated the principal role of the Brahmins as established in the Orientalist-Anglicist debate. The religion he wanted to reform needed a renaissance because of their priestly influences. Consequently, I will suggest that Roy had come to accept a *Christian-theological* understanding of religion that was shared by different ideological factions in the Orientalist-Anglicist debate.

2. In the third part of this essay I will also refer to a second indigenous reformer in order to demonstrate the long-lasting authority of this account. Separated by a century of changing political and socio-economic circumstances, Bhimrao Ambedkar took up those practices seemingly forgotten by Roy – i.e. caste practices.<sup>27</sup> Ambedkar (1891-1956) can be considered to be a central character in the Dalit Movement: a movement for social reorganisation and the abolishment of the caste system. Where Roy significantly focussed on a transformation of the religious sphere, Ambedkar's polemics were mainly directed towards the social. As outlined above, colonial historiography elucidated the sacred as well as the profane by way of priestly corruption and decline: colonial scholarship explained contemporary Indian religion and its caste system by means of priestly despotism. My reading of Roy will suggest that nineteenth-century religious reformers accepted these *theological* conceptions based on

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<sup>25</sup> See Sophia Collett (ed.), 1913: 102-07; Zastoupil and Moir (eds.), 1999: 15.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, his famous letter to Lord Amherst, 1823d.

<sup>27</sup> Sumit Sarkar, for instance, has argued that Roy's Renaissance was basically confined to the intellectual plane and did not take the real social issues into account. See Sumit Sarkar, 1975: 47. See as well A. K. Majumdar, 1975.



Christian beliefs. In addition, my reading of *Babasaheb Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches* will suggest its unconditional acceptance by twentieth-century social reformers.

3. A final methodological remark: my selection of both reformers is based on the issues each one of them is known for. Besides his limited attempts for social reform, Roy is recognized for his zealous crusade against idolatry, Ambedkar for his campaign against the caste system. Where colonial historiography and anthropology tried to explain the sacred and the profane, each one of them respectively focussed on a reformation of religion and its alleged social organization. While doing so, both accepted exactly those principles shared by Orientalists and Anglicists: they came to criticize 'Brahmins' as 'priests' and Indian religion as a deprived religion of the priests. Secondly, that both reformers are separated by more than a century suggests the strong influence of these *Christian theological* conceptions on the Indian intelligentsia. This brings to mind the fact that the 'modern' Indian intellectual's conceptualisation of Indian religion and society does not surpass the confines of Judeo-Christian cum Protestant theology.

## Part One

### THE MANTRAS OF ANTI-BRAHMANISM

If the people of India shall, by the influence of instruction and the persuasion of wisdom, throw off the thraldom of spiritual slavery and the chains of idolatrous superstition; and, having bowed to Messiah's sceptre, stand up as citizens of Zion, whom the truth has made free, — your Majesty will rejoice in their devout allegiance, and your Government will enjoy peace in their obedience.

— William James Massie, 1840: vii.

## Two

### AN OUTLINE OF ORIENTALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

#### After the Black Hole

Already by the middle of the eighteenth century, individuals in Company service maintained an intellectual appreciation of South Asian civilisation in much the same way as Warren Hastings would develop later on. On the night of the 20th of June 1756 the headquarters of the Company fell to Siraj-ud-Daulah, the Moghul *nawab* of Bengal. John Zephania Holwell (1711-1798) was one of the twenty-three that survived the horrifying events in the fort's punishment cell, commonly known as the Black Hole incident. He had started his Company service as a surgeon, became the Chief Magistrate of Calcutta and retired from India after a brief placement as Governor of Bengal.<sup>1</sup> Since the East Indies had become significantly important to Great Britain, Holwell saw his task as the elucidation of their history and religion and the education of the Company in its function of administrator. His seminal work, *Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Provinces of Bengal, and the Empire of Indostan* (1765-67), transpired to be highly influential both in England as well as across continental Europe. The manuscript was translated into German in 1767, in French in 1768 and subsequently influenced the German Romantics as well as the deistic notions of Voltaire.<sup>2</sup> The basic elements still found in modern textbooks on Indian religion were already prevalent in Holwell's writings.<sup>3</sup>

For the earliest works of British Indology, Persian literature played a crucial role in understanding India's past. Ever since the sixteenth century travel reports had repeatedly mentioned the existence of Hindu sacred scriptures – which they called the 'Beths,' 'Beds,' or the 'Vedam.'<sup>4</sup> Since the seventeenth century, *Vedic* literature had been approached through ambiguous texts, spurious fragments and deficiently copied manuscripts. Consequently, Holwell's mid-eighteenth century work relied heavily on Persian sources, yet it was also founded on what he claimed to be translations from an ancient and contentious Sanskrit text, the *Chartah Bhade Shastah*. The decisive shift from eyewitness authority towards the Orientalist premium on ancient texts would manifest itself in Holwell's history writing: his early emphasis on translations of antique texts in collaboration with native *pundits* would result in the modus operandi of a subsequent Orientalist movement.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See P. J. Marshall (ed.), 1970: 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.: 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> See David N. Lorenzen, 1999: 639.

<sup>4</sup> See P. J. Marshall (ed.), 1970: 17.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael John Franklin (ed.), 2000: xiii.

Holwell himself was very conscious of the significance of his own work and presented it as a break with the available literature on India from the Ancients until the present time. After collecting all that was previously written on the empire of Hindustan, he was particularly critical of descriptions of idolatry by so-called Popish authors. Religious prejudices had led to represent the Hindus as merely a race of stupid and vulgar idolaters.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge of the native languages, Holwell said, was essential for the success of any neutral representation. For were the traveller

... skilled in the language of the people he describes, sufficiently to trace the etymology of their words and phrases, and capable of diving into the mysteries of their theology; he would probably be able to evince to us, that such seemingly preposterous worship, had the most sublime rational source and foundation.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his promise to shed light upon contemporary India, his historical method to 'dive into the mysteries of theology' compelled him to make a clear distinction between the present and the past. Confronted by an endless multitude of rituals and ceremonies, this is how he assessed the situation:

... we should touch only on the original *principal* tenets of these ancient people the *Gentoo*s; for were we to penetrate into, and discuss the whole of their modern ceremonials, and complicated modes of worship; our labor would be without end: these are as diffuse, as the ancient fundamental tenets of *Bramah* are short, pure, simple and uniform ...<sup>8</sup>

A so-called characteristic Orientalist stance emerged: the Indians had been rational, in a period long gone. From then onwards the history of India read as a history of growing corruption and decline. Holwell was rather explicit about the cause of this corruption. The pristine, pure and simple religious tenets promulgated by *Bramah* were originally conserved in a text called the *Chatah Bhade*. Yet the Brahmins, who were supposed to preserve this message, had made it increasingly obscure and forced a nation into sacerdotal slavery. This chronicle of decline was said to be expounded by some of his native informants, though most of the Brahmins would never confess the role their tribe had played in these developments. The original religious doctrines had been authentically preserved for a period of thousand years. The *Shastas* continued thus:

... about the close of this period, some *Goseyns* [*Gentoo* Bishops] and *Battezaaz Bramins* [Expounders of the *Shastah*]; combining together, wrote a paraphrase on the *Chatah Bhade*, which they called the *Chatah Bhade of Bramah*, or the *six scriptures of the mighty spirit*; in this work the original text of *Bramah's Chatah Bhade* was still preserved ... it was now also that *they* first began to veil in mysteries, the simple doctrines of *Bramah*.

That about five hundred years later ... the *Goseyns* and *Battezaaz Bramins*, published a second exposition, or commentary on the *Chatah Bhade*; which swelled the *Gentoo* scriptures to eighteen books ... the original text of the *Chatah Bhade*, was in a manner sunk and alluded to only; the histories of their Rajahs and country,

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<sup>6</sup> John Zephania Holwell, 1767, Part I: 5-7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.: 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> John Zephania Holwell, 1767, Part II: 1, all emphasis in the original.

were introduced under figures and symbols, and made a part of their religious worship, and a multitude of ceremonials, and exterior modes of worship, were instituted; which the commentators said were implied in *Bramah's Chatah Bhade*, although not expressly directed therein, by him; and the whole enveloped in impenetrable obscurity by allegory and fable, beyond the comprehension even of the common tribe of *Bramins* themselves; the laity being thus precluded from the knowledge of their original scriptures had a new system of faith broached unto them, which their ancestors were utterly strangers to.<sup>9</sup>

The accomplishment of these developments was due completely to the Brahmin priests. They had realized that the power of their class was supported by making the laity dependent upon them and diverted the people from the original simple tenets of religion. Holwell continued that

... the *Goseyns* and *Bramins* by the first of these *Bhades*, determined to enlarge, and establish it, by the promulgation of the *last*; for in this the exterior modes of worship were so multiplied, and such a numerous train of new divinities created, ... that those professors of divinity, became of new and great importance, for the daily obligations of religious duties, which were by these new institutes imposed on every *Gentoo*, from the highest to the lowest rank of the people, were of so intricate, and alarming a nature, as to require a *Bramin* to be at hand, to explain and officiate, in the performance of them: they had however the address to captivate the minds of the vulgar, by introducing show and parade into all their principal religious feasts, as well as fasts; and by a new single political institution, to wit, *the preservation of their cast of tribe*, the whole nation was reduced to sacerdotal slavery.<sup>10</sup>

His allusion to the *Chartah Bhade* was most likely a reference to two distinct classes of Sanskrit literature, *Veda* and *Shastra*, and was almost certainly a confused reference to the four *Vedas*. The commentary that was written five hundred years after the *Chartah Bhade of Bramah* was constructed most likely refers to the eighteen *Purānas*.<sup>11</sup>

Even though the extracts speak for themselves, it is important to emphasise some constitutive elements of the story that is outlined here. The crux of the argument is the *replacement* of original and pure religious tenets with something else: a corpus of complex and elaborated expositions and commentaries. What was not part of religion is made part of it and is falsely worshiped. What was not explicitly addressed in the original is made compulsory by means of sophisticated reasoning. Consequently, the religion was no longer accessible without the help of a specialist, i.e. the priest. What kept these developments going was the increasing thirst for yet more power. What began as priestly power soon extended itself to a longing for worldly richness and civil authority. The result was caste: a political institution designed to keep a whole nation under the sway of sacerdotal slavery.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.: 13-14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.: 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> See Michael John Franklin (ed.), 2000: xiv.

Indian religion was a system of faith and practices that the priests imposed upon the laity. In his attempts to encapsulate a myriad of local practices, Holwell discerned a pristine system of religious thought. Sacerdotal corruption and decline was immanent to the annals of this religion: priests played a constitutive role in illuminating modern ceremonial. In accordance with Dirks' observation that caste only became increasingly important in later colonial writings, references to caste remained limited, even though Holwell sufficiently noticed the creation of a 'new single political institution' in an attempt to dominate the masses. The social make-up was the product of a long-lasting sacerdotal force that had already caused religious decline. Hence, Holwell anticipated a twofold consensus about the influence of this priesthood. First of all, the Brahmins had corrupted an earlier more rational and monotheistic religion. In the second place, they instituted the caste system. In subsequent colonial scholarship the emphasis came to rest on one or on both of these aspects. Though his account displayed an incompetence with reference to the Sanskrit texts, Holwell's early attempts to narrate and to elucidate the history of Indian religion and its influence upon society adumbrated a vogue in colonial historiography that would come to be entrenched in later times: Holwell illuminated the sacred as well as the profane via the industry of a crafty priesthood.

His understanding of later texts illuminated the erosion of *Vedic* theism into contemporary polytheism and idolatry and explained the multitude of practices in medieval *Vaishnava* and *Shaiva* movements. The latter might well account for Wilson's nineteenth-century focus on 'medieval history,' which highly influenced the mid-nineteenth-century historiography of Elphinstone. His discourse of degeneration, however, anticipated the Orientalist focus on the ancient past. The distinction Holwell set up between contemporary Hindu custom and ritual and the purity of an ancient monotheism was characteristic for the deistic outlook in eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought – a contrast that would characterize the subsequent work of members of the Asiatic Society such as Jones and Colebrooke.<sup>12</sup>

### **Their Manners, Customs and Ceremonies**

When the British turned to India they were confronted with a bewilderment of dispositions, habits and prejudices. If it was expected that servants of the Company conducted themselves in unison with the customs of the natives it was by and large believed that one should identify the foundations on which they were based. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Major Wilks, therefore, clearly expressed the exigency to accumulate and to generalize colonial data. Wilks confirmed that even though he and his colleagues were familiar with the habits and prejudices of the native population, these were only '*known to the Europeans as insulated facts.*' What was needed in order for this data to be

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<sup>12</sup> See Wilhelm Halbfass, 1988; David Kopf, 1969; O. P. Kejariwal, 1988; Raymond Schwab, 1984.

productive was 'a work that should enable us to generalize our knowledge.' Such generalizations depended on 'unfolding the sources from which those prejudices are derived.'<sup>13</sup> A work that provided reliable generalizations, beneficial to colonial governance and highly recommended by Wilks to the Madras Government, was the manuscript of Abbé Dubois' *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (1816). Subsequently, Lord William Bentinck, governor of Fort St. George, mentioned Dubois' foray to be of 'the greatest benefit in aiding the servants of the Government in conducting themselves more in unison with the customs of the natives.'<sup>14</sup>

Abbé Dubois (ca 1770-1848) arrived in India in 1792 and left the country in 1823. As a Jesuit missionary from Paris he resided in Mysore, Tanjore and in the Carnatic. Like the majority of missionaries Dubois was particularly censorious of Brahmins. In 1823 he had published his *Letters on the State of Christianity in India* and discerned the Brahmins as chief impediments for conversion. While evaluating the possibility to proliferate the Christian religion, Dubois wrote that

The Hindoo ... has been bereft of his reason and understanding by his crafty religious guides... As long as we are unable to make impression on the polished part of the nation, on the leaders of public opinion, on the body of Brahmins in short, there remains but very faint hopes of propagating Christianity among the Hindoos...<sup>15</sup>

Consonant with the common view of Christian missionaries and social reformers, any kind of reform perceived its efforts at variance with Brahmin ideology. Nevertheless, Dubois strongly supported Company policy to keep missionaries outside of its territories and to reconcile colonial procedures with local customs. Dubois insisted that colonial interference in local customs, civil as well as religious, would undoubtedly result in chaos and in the breakdown of any foreign political power.<sup>16</sup>

His main work opened with the kind of generalizations Major Wilks was looking for: a characteristic outline of insulated rules, customs and social identities encapsulated by the *varna*-theory. Even though Dubois agreed with most missionaries that the caste system was the main obstacle to conversion, he demonstrated an idiosyncratic appreciation for it.<sup>17</sup> His understanding of caste anticipated the hedging uncertainty colonial administrators were confronted with: caste was a kind of civil institution instigated by India's ancient lawgivers, yet simultaneously rooted in religious prejudices. The relationship between civil law and Brahmin priests remained ambiguous as well:

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<sup>13</sup> Cited in Nicholas Dirks, 2001: 21.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in the third edition, edited and annotated by Henry K. Beauchamp, 1906: xv.

<sup>15</sup> Abbé Dubois, 1823: 54-55, emphasis mine.

<sup>16</sup> Abbé Dubois, 1816: 97.

<sup>17</sup> He invited the reader to 'picture what would become of the Hindus if they were not kept within the bounds of duty by the rules and penalties of caste by looking at the position of the Pariahs, or outcastes of India, who, checked by no moral restraint, abandon themselves to their natural propensities.' (Dubois, 1816: 29)

Brahmins seemed to be rather tolerant regarding the observance of religious practices but held on firmly to each and every rule of civil conduct.<sup>18</sup>

The *Purusha Shukta* story offered an allegorical explanation of the socio-religious fabric. The hymn from the *Rig Veda* narrated the sacrifice of the primeval Man into four distinctive parts and contained the first mention of four hierarchical classes or *varnas* – a scriptural explanation that would come to be canonized in later colonial writings. Accordingly, the proper function Brahmins maintained was priesthood and each of its many duties.<sup>19</sup> In harmony with the *varna*-theory that is said to confine priesthood to the selected few, Dubois maintained that ‘*Brahmins are also, as a rule, the gurus of the various sects of Hindus...*’<sup>20</sup> The authority of religious teachers was not merely confined to the religious realm: the gurus, so Dubois wrote, were held in high esteem by kings and by princess. As a rule, Brahmins were gurus, and ‘*gurus, as a rule, rank first in society.*’<sup>21</sup>

His understanding of Indian religion unmistakably proved to adumbrate the later consensus. Dubois stressed in a clearly Orientalist idiom that he could ‘*not believe that the original law-givers of the Hindus intended to introduce a creed so abominable and palpably absurd as that which at present exists among them.*’<sup>22</sup> Most of the practices he observed were based on commonsensical principles that were perverted in the course of time. Rules for purity and impurity and customs concerning diet and bodily cleanliness were initially based on climatic considerations. In contrast, the present ‘childish’ and ‘puerile’ ceremonial had to be attributed ‘*partly to popular superstition... partly to popular ignorance, and partly to the cunning and avarice of the hypocritical charlatans who mislead the people.*’<sup>23</sup>

Their corrupted original possessed more than only rational prescriptions. Without doubt, ‘*[t]he people of India, sunk from time immemorial in the darkness of error by reason of the avarice and ambition of religious teachers, still preserve some positive ideas of a Supreme Being, and foresee rightly enough the immortality of the soul...*’<sup>24</sup> Brahmin priests or gurus had imposed a novel system of faith upon the laity, by means of ‘*the fables and traditions which are at the bottom of it all, such as the wonderful adventures of the gods, giants, and ancient kings, the miraculous proceedings of the ancient Hindu sages, and the spiritual seclusion and sanctity of the ancient Hindu hermits.*’<sup>25</sup> As we know by now, Dubois was not the first to identify these dynamics. The original tenets expressed in the *Vedas* preceded later commentaries and ceremonial prescriptions.

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<sup>18</sup> Abbé Dubois, 1816: 302.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.: 14, and 47.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.: 127-28.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: 129.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.: 105.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.: 186-87.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.: 566-67.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.: 576.



Brahmin ideology now encompassed the whole of Indian society.<sup>26</sup> As priests it was their duty to interpret and to protect religious scriptures. However, at all times, instead of safeguarding the originals, priests had sought more power. They had always made themselves indispensable by imposing a false system of faith on the rest of society:

And in this the modern Brahmins are so much the more to blame because they have done their best to distort and render unrecognisable the primitive religion of which they constituted themselves the guardians, and which, however imperfect it may have been, was far from possessing the monstrous character which it acquired later in the hands of its avaricious and hypocritical interpreters.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to Holwell's neutral representation, Dubois' manuscript anticipated a distinctive trend in colonial scholarship. Though his generalizations were confined to the isolated instances he observed, Dubois maintained that, nevertheless, the religion of the Hindus formed a reference point for the various facts British administrators were confronted with.<sup>28</sup> All caste-practices and customs in line with which Government servants had to conduct themselves, rested on '*some religious principle or other*.'<sup>29</sup> Both the examples of Holwell and Dubois suggest that both secular and religious research fully agreed on the imposition of a false religion on Indian society. Moreover, they agreed on a priestly authority that encompassed the civil sphere of kings and empires. In order to elucidate the sacred as well as the profane they generalized colonial data into an all-encompassing religion of crafty priests.

Dubois' anthropology was not only valued by colonial officials: in a prefatory note to the revised and annotated edition (1906), the noted Orientalist Max Müller positively assessed his eyewitness-account, free from theological and other prejudices.<sup>30</sup> However, the generalizations Dubois provided were based on Brahmin scriptures and on an entirely textual *varna*-theory. Secondly, the framework from within which Dubois 'impartially' interpreted the facts to be generalized was conspicuously theological in nature. References in the text to the Biblical tribes of Israel were recurrent and even clarified the name of different castes.<sup>31</sup> Just as the notion of Biblical tribes provided a solid explanation, the Mosaic Law, the Genesis story, and allusions to Noah and the Flood performed a similar analytical function in Dubois' account.<sup>32</sup> With such a prodigious explanatory force of Christian theology, colonial anthropology was a seemingly straightforward activity. Consequently, the seven

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, the marriage ceremony of Kshatriyas (Dubois, 1816: 233), Sudras keeping the Brahmanical fasts (Dubois, 1816: 274), their ceremony of adoption (Dubois, 1816: 371), etc.

<sup>27</sup> Abbé Dubois, 1816: 606-07.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.: 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.: 30.

<sup>30</sup> Max Müller, 1906: v-vii.

<sup>31</sup> Abbé Dubois, 1816: 24. References to these tribes are not exclusive to Dubois but are also prevalent in Holwell (1767, Part II: 20, 21), Charles Grant (1796: 35 ff., 36 ff.), and William Jones (1807: 331).

<sup>32</sup> For instance, Abbé Dubois, 1816: 198-99.

Hindu Penitents, or the forefathers of the Brahmins, could be identified as the seven sons of Japheth, 'who, with their father at their head, led one-third of the human race towards the West, when men began to disperse after the Flood.'<sup>33</sup>

Given that the *Purusha Shukta* story was merely an allegorical fable, Dubois provided his own clarification of the social organization. As a twist of fate, the basic features of the caste system – i.e. ritual purity, division of labour, endogamy and commensality – were already widespread amongst the Biblical tribes of Israel. The system of castes which colonial authors discerned in India had been prevalent in other civilizations as well. Dubois rendered this strange state of affairs perspicuous by referring to the ancient laws that Moses had received from the Christian God.<sup>34</sup> As the Bible clearly demonstrated: all ancient legislators must have known how to bring stability in their social environments. It is interesting to note that the explanatory value of the Genesis story and the Mosaic history of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Torah or the Christian Old Testament, was additionally substantiated by so-called secular scholarship in the Asiatic Society of Bengal.<sup>35</sup> In subsequent chapters I shall say more about Biblical historiography and Christian theology. The point here is to hint at the influence of the Semitic tradition on an anthropological understanding of non-Semitic cultures.

Holwell and Dubois familiarized a large number of colonial officials with the particularities of Indian religious practices and social customs. In particular, Dubois' antiquated text would be copiously referred to in later writings, both Orientalist and Evangelical-cum-Anglicist. In the argument that follows I will seek to demonstrate that the explanation of the socio-religious territory of the subcontinent by means of a priestly agency came to characterize subsequent modes of colonial scholarship, both Orientalist and Anglicist. I will demonstrate that at least two issues are obscured in a sustained emphasis on the Orientalist-Anglicist polarization theory: the common principles in both their evaluation and rationalization of colonial India remain out of sight.



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<sup>33</sup> Abbé Dubois, 1816: 102.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.: 46-47, and 198-99.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, William Jones, 1792. For a similar observation of the relationship between the Genesis story and Jones' seminal research, see P. J. Marshall, 1970: 15-16.

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## Three

### THE HEYDAYS OF ORIENTALISM

#### Good Laws and Obedience

In 1772 the Company resolved to reform itself from a private trading company into the superintendent of revenue management and civil administration. From now on commercial servants had not merely to engage in mercantile activities but also had to govern and to install courts of justice in a society that was different from their own. Hastings' programme of reconciliation instigated a firm visualisation of religion and society so as to mould an India receptive to colonial management.<sup>36</sup> The exigency to amass information and to understand indigenous practices inspired Orientalist scholarship to delve into the mysteries of India's ancient past.

As a jurist in Company service, William Jones (1746-1794) set out for Calcutta, one year before he established the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784). Thanks to his attempts to portray the history of the East as indispensable to an historical understanding of mankind, devotees of the Asiatic Society have entitled him as the *Copernicus of History*.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, Orientalists such as Jones and Colebrooke would never venture into the grand history writing that came to be fashionable for later generations of scholars. Jones achieved his reputation from endeavours in Oriental literature and from his discovery of the historical kinship between Sanskrit and the European languages. In his *Third Anniversary Discourse: On the Hindus* (1786), published in the earliest edition of the *Asiatic Researches*, he confirmed the Orientalist dictum and argued against the belief in an intrinsically stagnant society. He wrote that he could not

reasonably doubt, how degenerate and abased soever the *Hindus* may now appear, that in some early age they were splendid in arts and arms, happy in government, wise in legislation, and eminent in various knowledge...<sup>38</sup>

That the Hindus were no longer eminent in various areas of knowledge by the time Jones arrived in Bengal was reflected in two of his *Charges to the Grand Jury at Calcutta* (1785, 1787). Since the natives were never compelled to keep their oaths in court, lying under oath was a serious problem to colonial jurisprudence. Jones' forays into indigenous systems of law suggested that the ancient Hindu lawgivers had never been definite on the question of perjury: the brevity of their remarks made them obscure and open to diverse interpretations. He cautioned the Board of judges and saw a

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<sup>36</sup> See Beckenridge and van der Veer, 1993: 6.

<sup>37</sup> O. P. Kejariwal, 1988: 28.

<sup>38</sup> William Jones, 1786: 347, emphasis in the original.

straightforward link between false religion and the sense of ethics indigenous conduct was based on: present-day Hindus were debauched and abased because

such, after all, is the corrupt state of their erroneous religion, that if the *most binding* form on the consciences of men could be known and established, there would be few consciences to be bound by it...<sup>39</sup>

In accordance with Hastings' policy of conciliation, the colonial administration tried to establish a judicial system congenial to indigenous practices – a project that is currently deconstructed as emerging from the vicissitudes of colonial governance.<sup>40</sup> Jones took charge of the compilation of a Digest of Hindu Law and played a decisive role in the translation of so-called Hindu law books, in particular the *Manu Dharm a Shāstras* (ca 200 BC–200 AC), published under the title *Institutes of Hindu Law; or, the Ordinances of Menu* (1794). The colonial administration needed guidelines because, as Jones emphasized in his preface, '*the best intended legislative provisions would have no beneficial effect... unless they were congenial to the disposition and habits, to the religious prejudices... of the people for whom they were enacted...*'<sup>41</sup> The introduction to his *Institutes* would reiterate that the Hindus were also neither wise in legislation, nor happy in government any longer. Their system of rights and duties was indeed nothing but

a system of despotism and priestcraft, both indeed limited by law, but artfully conspiring to give mutual support, though with mutual checks; it is filled with strange conceits in metaphysics and natural philosophy, with idle superstitions, and with a scheme of theology most obscurely figurative, and consequently liable to dangerous misconceptions ...<sup>42</sup>

Jones' translation of Manu's text, a key text in the so-called Brahmin canon, was a major contribution to the codification of scriptural law as civil law: the *Dharm a Shāstra* literature elaborated the various rights and duties of each of the four *varnas*. The identification of the *Manusmṛiti* as the keystone of constitutional rights and obligations, Hindu habits and dispositions, genial to their religious prejudices, rendered the manuscript indispensable to an understanding of the indigenous society – a status the text only would receive under colonial rule and, according to Dirks, intimately related with the British propensity to understand religion and society in 'Brahmanic' terms.<sup>43</sup> The manuscript that has been consumed over the last two hundred years so as to provide a theoretical account of the alleged original *varnas* and an explanation of so-called local sub-castes by means of mixed marriages unequivocally came to describe the social territory of the subcontinent. The social fabric was

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<sup>39</sup> William Jones, 1787: 29, emphasis in the original.

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, Bernard Cohn, 1968, and 1996; Nicholas Dirks, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> William Jones, 1794: 75.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*: 88.

<sup>43</sup> See Nicholas Dirks, 2001: 14.

considered to be founded on a religion of caste, primarily built on the despotism of a '*sacerdotal class*'.<sup>44</sup> In the same way as the Orientalist Paterson reassured the Society about fifteen years later:

The Hindu religion ... was the united effort of a society of sages, *who retained the priesthood to themselves*, and rendered it hereditary in their families, by the division of the people into separate castes...<sup>45</sup>

Despite huge intellectual efforts, future generations of Orientalist scholars never fundamentally challenged the religious structure of Indian society as Holwell and Dubois had outlined it: as far as its religion and priesthood were concerned, sympathetic voices did not change the picture. Sacerdotal supremacy continued to be a trans-historical and pan-Indian phenomenon that could account most perfectly for the religious and social landscape of nineteenth-century India.

### The Vedic Resurgence

The method of understanding the character of Indian civilization and the texture of Indian society by seeking recourse to the origin of customs, of rites and rituals and castes in antiquated texts was expounded by one of the best Sanskrit scholars, Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765-1837), presiding over the Society from 1806 onwards. By the time Orientalist methodology solidly displayed the prominence of ancient texts, the reference points to understand indigenous practices became firmly set: the ancient *Vedas*, or the sacred Brahmin literature, emerged as the source of greatest authority to understand the foundations of Indian religion.

In his threefold essay *On the Religious Ceremonies of the Hindus, and of the Brahmens Especially* (1801), published in the fifth and seventh volume of the *Asiatic Researches*, Colebrooke confirmed the ideas that had long engaged Calcutta Orientalists: the modern Hindu misunderstood the doctrines of his own scriptures that indubitably resonated from a monotheistic sense of the divine.<sup>46</sup> His seminal work *On the Védas or the Sacred Writings of the Hindus* (1805) finally stilled the discussion as to whether or not the Hindus actually did possess something like the *Vedas*. Sir Robert Chambers at Banaras had collected fragments of the manuscript and William Jones had already translated valuable portions. Yet it was not until the accidental discovery of the complete manuscript, including the most sacred *Rig Veda*, that an Orientalist scholar wrote a commentary on the entire text. Even though the manuscript was alleged to be of crucial importance in understanding the religious landscape of the Company's dominions, there had never been a consensus on its actual existence:

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<sup>44</sup> William Jones, 1794: 86-87.

<sup>45</sup> J. D. Paterson, 1809: 44, emphasis mine.

<sup>46</sup> Henry Thomas Colebrooke, 1801c: 279.

It was doubted, whether the *Vedas* were extant; or, if portions of them were still preserved, whether any person, however learned in other respects, might be capable of understanding their obsolete dialect.<sup>47</sup>

Colebrooke's contributions to the Asiatic Society successfully communicated the golden-age theory of Orientalist writers. David Kopf has suggested that his essays were not merely influential in Orientalist circles but also contained the essence of the later arguments of many native reformers focussing on the rift between textual analyses and contemporary practices.<sup>48</sup> The Jones-Colebrooke tandem would open up new roads for colonial research and provided a vital remedy for the loss of Bengali self-esteem. Colebrooke established decisively the anthropological importance of the *Vedas*. Brahmin literature grew to be central in understanding local practices and was supposed to illustrate a pure and ancient monotheism at variance with corrupted modes of worship in later *Vaishnava* and *Shaiva* movements and in so-called *Shakti* and *Ganesha* sects.<sup>49</sup> As had been clear by the time Colebrooke wrote his essays, the latter were nothing but '*a curious instance of priestcraft and credulity*.'<sup>50</sup>

With reference to the subject of caste, colonial anthropology was still in a kind of flux in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century. In his *Enumeration of Indian Classes* (1801), based on a close examination of *Tantric* manuscripts, Colebrooke characteristically drew upon the *varna*-theory and the dynamic of mixed marriages so as to provide an overall framework for the multitude of local operational sub-castes. The latter illustrated that the rigid classification of closed *varnas* was in the colonial environment '*less rigidly maintained than heretofore*.'<sup>51</sup> Yet Colebrooke discerned at least one feature all later accounts would certainly agree on: as far as the social identity of priesthood was concerned, India's social landscape was certainly fixed and stable:

It appears that almost every occupation, though regularly it be the possession of a particular class, is open to most other classes; and that the limitations, far from being rigorous, do, in fact, reserve only one peculiar possession, that of the Brahmana, which consists in teaching the *Veda*, and officiating at religious ceremonies.<sup>52</sup>

### **Orientalism in the Age of Reform**

The transformations associated with the modernizing programs of the colonial state were first and foremost established within the so-called Great Education Debate.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the era of Marquis Hastings (1813-1823) the question of English education versus instruction in the native languages and

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<sup>47</sup> Henry Thomas Colebrooke, 1805: 377, emphasis in the original.

<sup>48</sup> David Kopf, 1969: 198.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Thomas Colebrooke, 1805: 495.

<sup>50</sup> Henry Thomas Colebrooke, 1801c: 282.

<sup>51</sup> Henry Thomas Colebrooke, 1801a: 53.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*: 64

<sup>53</sup> See Zastoupil and Moir (eds.), 1999: 1-8.

the debate on the introduction of Western sciences would come to create the universe of discourse for Orientalist scholarship. The first few decades of the Orientalist-Anglicist controversy would prove to be the golden age of British Orientalism in India and, as Kopf pointed out, newfound channels for the transmission of ideas provoked an ardent indigenous debate on the so-called modernization of a traditional society.

Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1860) came to India in 1808 as a surgeon in Company service and succeeded Colebrooke as secretary of the Asiatic Society in 1811. He took charge of the composition of a new Sanskrit dictionary, first published in 1819, and, henceforward, established himself as the leading Orientalist in India. The early Orientalist preoccupation with a *Vedic* civilization was not merely softened here: besides his focus on the 'medieval' past Wilson went further beyond traditional Orientalist scholarship and experimented with social and educational programs of reform. For Wilson, Orientalist learning was intimately related to questions of concern to colonial management.

As secretary to the General Committee of Public Instruction, established by Marquis Hastings in 1823 to superintend the educational provisions of the 1813 Charter Act, Wilson promoted a policy of engraftment: a vital element of the Orientalist educational program in the first few decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>54</sup> As mentioned above, Orientalists saw India's civilization as originally based on sound principles and refused to radically abandon all forms of indigenous learning: the modernization of a traditional society had to commence from within. Wilson, therefore, defended a study of the indigenous culture in tandem with Western learning. Any instruction in superior sciences had to be consonant with traditional forms of learning and was required to be in synthesis with knowledge contained in classical South Asian literature. The fusion of European and Asian thought was well embodied in his vision of two complementary institutions to be accommodated in the same building. Wilson organized government support for the Hindu College, imparting Western and secular education, yet simultaneously recommended the establishment of a Sanskrit College that offered Hindu philosophy, law and Sanskrit grammar.<sup>55</sup> The Orientalist uneasiness concerning colonial reform was perspicuously expressed in Wilson's confidential letter to the new governor-general, Lord William Bentinck (1828). As long as the Hindus grasped the religious tolerance of the colonial administration, Wilson wrote, they would be

tractable to any arrangements intended for their improvement; but if they once suspect an ulterior object, such as that of the subversion of their fate, they are likely to relapse into a sullen distrust and reluctant

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<sup>54</sup> See Zastoupil and Moir (eds.), 1999: 9.

<sup>55</sup> See Michael Franklin (ed.), 2001: xiii. However, if the curriculum of the Hindu college comes to be described in the relevant literature as being 'secular,' the question arises why the Sanskrit college, imparting *philosophy, law and grammar*, is said to be complementary to it. See as well David Kopf, 1969: 180-85; Zastoupil and Moir (eds.), 1999; etc.

acceptance of any offered amelioration. If this can be avoided, there is every reason to hope, that the elements of European knowledge, the principles of pure morality, and even the precepts of Christianity, may be in time widely disseminated... but they will not contend in matters of speculation against authority.<sup>56</sup>

Needless to say, Wilson fully agreed with the substantial poverty of morals and religion in colonial India. The single point of divergence from Anglicist analyses was the means he advocated towards the same end. The verdict was set in 1835 as soon as Bentick accepted the suggestions of radical reformers such as Charles Trevelyan and Thomas Macaulay. After he left India in 1833 to take up the first Sanskrit chair at Oxford, Wilson continued to advocate a policy of engraftment in ardent analyses of Bentick's resolution: only a synthesis between Western and indigenous learning could be a feasible solution for questions of interest to modernization. Secondly, only the educated Indians themselves were able to overthrow the existing system of ideas and to revive their own systems of learning and literature. In a letter to the editor of the *Asiatic Journal*, dated 5 December 1835, Wilson was clear about those natives he was thinking of:

Bacon was deep in the fallacies of the schools: *Luther had preached the doctrines of the church of Rome*: and one pundit or maulawi, who should add English to Sanscrit and Arabic, who should be led to expose the absurdities and errors of his own systems, and advocate the adoption of European knowledge and principles, would work a great revolution in the minds of his unlettered countrymen than would result from their own proficiency in English alone.<sup>57</sup>

Like the majority of Orientalists, Wilson worked in close collaboration with Brahmin informants at the College of Fort William, selected by the colonial administration as principal authorities on religion and society. Like the majority of Orientalists, as well, Wilson did display sympathy for those Brahmin informants he was working with – the *pundit* willing to expose *the absurdities and errors of his own systems*. Though Orientalists were sympathetic to certain members of the Bengali *bhadralok*, their view on the majority of Brahmins was not unlike the missionary position. Wilson was, therefore, rather specific about the natives that had to be selected in order to promote his modernizing synthesis.

His ideas on 'the common run of Brahmins' had already become clear in two lengthy essays on medieval religious sects, published in two subsequent volumes of the *Asiatic Researches* (1828, 1832). While the first discussed the so-called *Vaishnavas*, the second work provided a detailed account of *Shaivas* and miscellaneous sects. The discussion of the *Vaishnava* movement started with an outline of religious degradation. The second essay ended correspondingly. What distinguished these movements from the 'purer system of belief' was *bhakti* or devotion to the deity. *Bhakti* was an invention, Wilson

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<sup>56</sup> Horace Hayman Wilson, 1828b: 189.

<sup>57</sup> Horace Hayman Wilson, 1835: 10, emphasis mine.



said, 'and apparently a modern one ... intended like that of the mystical holiness of the Guru, to extend their own authority.'<sup>58</sup>

On the issue of caste Wilson tried to temper the condemnation earlier administrators expressed. His lectures at Oxford demonstrated that even within the lowest classes caste was nothing but a subject of pride and privilege. As a matter of fact, those occupying the highest echelons seemed to be far less attached to it: 'in proportion as the scale of society descends, so are the people more tenacious of their caste.' Nevertheless, the principle behind the distinction remained indefensible.<sup>59</sup> A similar ambiguous attitude characterised his understanding of Brahmins. The Brahmin of learning would never approve of the modern ritual and idolatry his less enlightened colleagues advocated. But still, Wilson stressed that a learned Brahmin had temporal interests of his own: 'he derives no small share of emolument and consideration from his connexion with religion, as the interpreter of the works in which it is taught.'<sup>60</sup> Therefore, he wouldn't oppose any innovation whatsoever as long as new doctrines and views did not 'meddle ... with existing institutions... or trespass upon the privileges, of the Brahmans.'<sup>61</sup> As suggested above, despite Wilson's kind appreciation of *pundits* in the College of Fort William, the sad connection between Brahmins, religion and society remained indubitable.

It was thus that any colonial policy of reform perceived itself in opposition to the alleged religious and worldly authority of Brahmins. The new school of colonial administrators that rose to prominence after the final Anglo-Maratha war (1817-1818) shared an ideology that in many respects continued the policy of Warren Hastings.<sup>62</sup> Thomas Munro, governor of Madras (1820-1826), Mountstuart Elphinstone, governor of Bombay (1819-1827), and his successor, John Malcolm, subsequent governor of Bombay (1827-1830), strongly supported educational policies of engraftment and sought to resuscitate Indian civilization.<sup>63</sup> Yet any revival of the indigenous civilization entailed the reconciliation of those in power. While requesting resources to promote modern institutes of learning, Malcolm confirmed in Parliament that the civil sphere of the Empire in India was saturated with the religious and temporal interests of Brahmins. No kind of amelioration, he said, could be

more foreign to the habits of intrigue, or gradually more subversive of those superstitious prejudices, for which the Brahmins are so remarkable, than the studies and pursuits to which those educated at this institution will be devoted...<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Horace Hayman Wilson, 1832: 312. As a matter of fact, the 'religious degradation' Wilson identified as the *Shaiva*-movement most probably referred to the *Advaita*-philosophy of Shankaracharyas, instigated by the philosopher Shankara (ca. 700-800 AC).

<sup>59</sup> Horace Hayman Wilson, 1840: 107.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*: 81.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*: 86.

<sup>62</sup> See Percival Spear, 1965.

<sup>63</sup> See Zastoupil and Moir (eds.), 1999: 9-12.

<sup>64</sup> John Malcolm, 1828, BPP Vol. 6 [1831-1832]: 526.

Any colonial policy of reform, embedded in Hastings' policy of conciliation, in Orientalist methods of engraftment, or in the rather sweeping transformations of Evangelicals and Anglicists, was supposed to exist at variance with the crafty religion of the Brahmins. As Elphinstone testified before the Lord's Committee on East-Indian Affairs:

In general I should think they [the Brahmins] are rather unfavourable [pertaining to improvements], though some individuals have exerted to promote it ... [a]s long as they do not perceive the inseparable connexion between the diffusion of education and the destruction of the superstition on which their power is founded.<sup>65</sup>

### The Last of the Orientalists

The last major contribution to debates on Indian religion and society can be found in the work of the German Indologist Max Müller (1823-1900). In a series of lectures presented at Cambridge in 1882, Müller tried to correct the views of candidates for the Indian Civil Service who studied James Mill's work. In the introduction to the Penguin India edition of the collected lectures (2000), Prof. Johannes Voigt drew attention to the fact that Müller's publication of the *Rig Veda* (1849-73) had had a comparable impact on Hinduism as Luther's translation of the Bible had in Europe.<sup>66</sup> A significant claim, as Luther reacted against the power-claims of Catholic priests who were said to have corrupted a pure religion. In his presentation of all the things India could teach us, Müller, therefore, would be thinking 'of India such as it was a thousand, two thousand, it may be three thousand years ago' and invited his students to look at its 'religion... if only purified from the dust of nineteen centuries...'<sup>67</sup> That which we could learn from this course would be the manner in which 'the human mind arrives by a perfectly rational process at all its later irrationalities.'<sup>68</sup> His preface to *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879) had already explained the manner in which the human mind arrived at that stage. As usual, the dynamics of a pan-Indian priesthood explained what Orientalists could not account for:

The priestly influence was at work, even before there were priests by profession, and when the priesthood had once become professional, its influence may account for much that would otherwise seem inexplicable in the sacred codes of the ancient world.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Mountstuart Elphinstone, 1830, extracted in the *Asiatic Journal* Vol. 6 [1831]: 23.

<sup>66</sup> Johannes Voigt, 2000: xiii-xiv.

<sup>67</sup> Max Müller, 1883: 7-12.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*: 195.

<sup>69</sup> Max Müller, 1879: 15.

## Four

### AN OUTLINE OF EVANGELICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

#### Priestly Despotism Taken for Granted

Almost from the beginning an alternative ideology challenged the colonial policy of Hastings and the Orientalists. Embedded in Evangelical dispositions and resonated in the secular writings of Utilitarians, this imperialist vision would make increasing progress in the early nineteenth century and would culminate in Bentinck's resolution to suspend much of the Orientalist program in favour of radical reformers. The College of Fort William came to be dismantled; the Asiatic society experienced severe financial difficulties; the Serampore College had started to anglicise its core curriculum; and the Calcutta Madrasa along with the Sanskrit College came close to termination.<sup>70</sup> From an ideological faction that found itself at the totally opposite side of Orientalist policies one would expect a different theoretical stance a propos the religion and society that were in need of reform. In general, missionary views were a straightforward repudiation of the Orientalist golden-age theory. Nevertheless, though Orientalists presented their case in the garbs of rationality and open-mindedness, when it came to the identification of Brahmins as the cause for the corrupt state of Indian religion, the enslavement of the minds of the masses, and the preservation of priesthood, the resemblance to the story told by Protestant missionaries was exceedingly remarkable.

Charles Grant (1746-1823) was one of the earliest and most influential representatives of the Evangelical movement. He arrived for the first time in Bengal in June 1768 and embraced Christianity after the death of both his children. Appointed to the Board of Trade by Lord Cornwallis in 1787, his most important achievement was the reorganization of the Company's Export Warehouses. The important clerical posts were made inaccessible to native employees as the moral and intellectual superiority of Europeans was said to give more honest management to the Company's trading system.<sup>71</sup> Grant's conviction that moral reform eventually would be indispensable to any political reform found expression in *A Proposal for Establishing a Protestant Mission in Bengal and Behar* (1787). As an early pamphlet in support of missionary work it clearly anticipated his later writings and proved to be of major importance to the history of Protestant missionary activities in India.<sup>72</sup>

Grant's major concern was the moral depravity of the native population. To make this 'wretched' state of affairs intelligible in order that the East India Company could be more efficient in its ameliorations he had to identify the causes that had led to the present situation. The outcome of

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<sup>70</sup> See David Kopf, 1969: 241.

<sup>71</sup> See Ainslie Thomas Embree, 1962: 112.

<sup>72</sup> See Charles Grant, 1787.

his search can be read in his seminal *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain, Particularly with Respect to Morals; and the Means of Improving It* (1792). Primarily written to support Wilberforce's first attempt in 1793 to activate the Pious Clause that would change the Charter of the Company in favour of missionary activities, it would only become widely acknowledged when published in the parliamentary papers of 1813. By that time the efflorescence of Evangelicalism in Europe, combined with the rise to political power of both Grant and Wilberforce, compelled the Company to grant missionary licences inside India.<sup>73</sup> The impact of his prescriptions would extend as far as the aftermath of the Great Revolt when Queen Victoria called off the missionary zeal he advocated.

As suggested above, the colonial opinion that the lands in the Indian subcontinent found themselves in a state of dissoluteness was not the exclusive prerogative of Evangelical missionaries. To give his detailed report of Hindu selfishness, injustice, corruption, and general immorality more weight, Grant could liberally refer to testimonies by previous Company servants. Besides Governor Holwell (1760) and Governor Verelst (1768), Grant copiously quoted, amongst others, Lord Clive (1765) and Warren Hastings (1772).<sup>74</sup>

Once more, Christian theology could account for the ethics of a traditional society: in the memory of William Jones, the assumed relationship between truthful religious thought and ethics was asked to explain the lack of morality in Indian society. According to Grant, the Brahmin tribe could be held responsible for almost everything he noticed in contemporary India. For their own benefit Brahmins had made the ignorant masses believe in a false religion. The rays of light that still shined through the *Bhagavad-Gita* had been '*conceived from the vulgar*' to support, together with the ceremonies of the *Vedas*, '*the consequence, and the very existence of the Brahminical order.*'<sup>75</sup> From within the purview of the colonial canon, Grant argued that the Brahmins '*have made themselves indispensably necessary.*' They had '*formed the religion, they are the sole exclusive depositaries of its ordinances ... It is thus that abject slavery, and unparalleled depravity, have become distinguishing characteristics of the Hindoos.*'<sup>76</sup>

Yet again, the running thread throughout Grant's account was one of sacerdotal despotism. Where former colonial writers such as Holwell mentioned a 'new political institution,' Grant claimed that the priests had deceived the ignorant masses and installed their superiority in a system of social stratification. This divergence from the genuine principles of equity, truth, and honesty had truly influenced the spirit and the manners of the native population. In order to demonstrate these principles Grant made more than generous use of Jones' translation of the *Manu Dharm a Shāstras*. The

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<sup>73</sup> See P. J. Marshall, 1968: 72-3.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Grant, 1792: 25-26.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*: 48.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*: 58.

law, Grant said, 'stands upon the same authority as the Hindoo religion; both are parts of one system, which they believe to have been divinely revealed.'<sup>77</sup> Nothing was clearer than the fact that

this whole fabric is the work of a crafty and imperious priesthood, who feigned a divine revelation and appointment, to invest their own order, in perpetuity, with the most absolute empire *over the civil state of the Hindoos, as well as over their minds.*<sup>78</sup>

In order to implement a newfound colonial administration, colonial anthropology attempted to visualize the religious and the social territory of the subcontinent: colonial scholarship stood service for governance and for reform. Both intimately related projects of the colonial state relied heavily on a theoretical understanding of the indigenous society. The schism between Orientalist and Anglicist policies is said to be expressed in different theoretical analyses. However, on a fundamental level Evangelical theorizing concerning South Asian religion and society seems to be similar to Orientalist scholarship: both the sacred and the profane, the religious and the civil, were said to be consequential to the sway of a pan-Indian priesthood. As a consequence, and contemptuous of any reconciliation, yet in total accordance with Orientalist trepidations, Grant cautioned the Board of Directors: the institution of European knowledge and the Christian religion amongst the benighted natives stood in direct opposition to the concerns of their priestly rulers.<sup>79</sup> As William Wilberforce asked before the Commons while defending the Pious Clause:

Is it not notorious that the Hindus have, from the earliest times, groaned under the double yoke of political and religious despotism?<sup>80</sup>

### The Systems of the East

The conception of priesthood would remain the underlying notion that structured succeeding missionary accounts. Claudius Buchanan, John Shore, William Carey and William Ward all constructed extensive accounts in much the same tone as Grant's *Observations*. William Ward was a colleague of William Carey at the Serampore Mission and was both a Baptist missionary and a printer in trade. In missiological history, Carey, Marshman and Ward became known as the Serampore trio. As a Baptist missionary, Ward (d. 1823) sincerely doubted the presence of any virtue in India's past and present. His *Account of the Writings, Religion and Manners of the Hindoos* was originally published at Serampore in 1811 but subsequently republished with some alterations in content and in title. The reading below is based on the 1817 edition: *A View of the History, Literature, and Religion of the Hindus etc.*

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.: 34.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.: 35, emphasis mine.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.: 86.

<sup>80</sup> William Wilberforce, 1813: 188.

Ward's polemics were directed first and foremost towards Brahmins – towards saints, gurus or priests. The assumed universal dynamics of priestcraft, as Ward saw it, could account for all systems of paganism in the East.<sup>81</sup> The prevalence of ceremony and ritual in early nineteenth-century India made Ward enquire where piety and morals in the subcontinent were more superior to the morals in his own country. Concerning the Hindus it was nothing but clear that they had *'still ... a system of morals to seek ...'*<sup>82</sup>

His main argument was short and simple: even though the Hindu religion might have displayed some faint traits of pure monotheism, its original doctrine was false in its irrational assessment of the deity. Priests had imposed the belief that the One and Only could manifest himself in the form of pure energy, in idols, trees, rivers and in holy men. Consequentially, *'the brahmin and the devout medicant, as sharing more largely of the indwelling deity, have received the adoration of the multitude.'*<sup>83</sup> As a consequence to which, gifts for Brahmins were highly commendable, *'as might be expected in a system exclusively formed for their exaltation.'*<sup>84</sup> The notion of an all-pervading energy was a general principle extracted from the priestcraft that pervaded all the systems of the East. Ward extended the colonial theory of priestcraft and explained, yet again, that *'the founder of the joinu sect, as well as Booddhu, Nanukum and Choitunyu, owe their success to this notion [of] possessing a large share of the divine energy.'*<sup>85</sup>

After demonstrating the immorality that resulted from such false beliefs, Ward rejected the body of Orientalist scholarship, even though he based his own judgement on the works of Colebrooke, Jones, Halhed, and others. Among other things, he questioned the antiquity of the Hindu scriptures as nothing but a whimsical Brahmin strategy. Because the public *'could not ascertain the point of time when the Hindoo shastrus were written, they therefore at once believed the assertions of the Brahmins, and their friends, that their antiquity was unfathomable.'*<sup>86</sup> The laity was taught the irrational doctrine of idol worship and was misled to believe that their books were ancient scriptures of divine nature – once again, all for the profit of the universal brotherhood of priests.

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<sup>81</sup> William Ward, 1817: 458.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.: xi.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.: xiv.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.: lii.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.: 459.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.: lxxv.

## Five

### THE HISTORIES OF BRITISH INDIA

#### The Continuity of Discourse

The late eighteenth and nineteenth-century works discussed above suggest a constancy and internal coherence in European accounts of Indian society across religious and ideological boundaries. Missionaries and secular Orientalists transcended the Orientalist-Anglicist debate: both agreed that contemporary ceremony was created by priests who had used their religious authority to invest a system of social stratification. This understanding would become the stock-in-trade about India and would become standard in the more general writings consumed by the European public at large. One of the most influential works in this genre was James Mill's *The History of British India* (1817).

Though he lacked direct experience of India himself, Mill (1773-1836) believed that his compiled *History of British India* covered the whole of Indian society – essentially the difference, as Mill saw it, between an insider's account and that of an outsider using the scarce and heterogeneous assemblage of earlier writings.<sup>87</sup> Besides the work of Grant, Mill copiously referred to Abbé Dubois and founded his judgement on early works of colonial historiography by Holwell and by Dow, and on the secondary works of Orientalists like Jones, Halhed, and others. Though his *History* was partially written to refute some of the ideas of Orientalists such as Jones, as a Utilitarian historian, Mill was nevertheless able to draw upon Orientalist scholarship as the chief part of his sources. He produced the kind of text that Jones never could and which, according to Ronald Inden, became 'hegemonic' as a first all-inclusive account of South Asian history, religion and society.<sup>88</sup> The text remained for a decisive time mandatory in the East India Company College at Haileybury. It would exercise sincere effect upon the British administration and, as such, decisively influenced Bentinck's resolution in favour of Anglicist positions.

To provide the British with the necessary knowledge to establish local government, Grant's evaluation and explanation of Indian society was (as one would expect) not difficult for Mill to accept: priestly despotism was, yet again, the main evil that held sway over the subcontinent. After all, secular thinkers had never abandoned the Protestant doctrine that *'[t]he priesthood is generally found to usurp the greatest authority, in the lowest state of society [and] artfully clothe themselves with the terrors of religion.'*<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> James Mill, 1817: 3-7.

<sup>88</sup> See Ronald Inden, 1986: 417.

<sup>89</sup> James Mill, 1817: 48.

As a secular thinker Mill argued that righteous notions of God could be obtained from two sources alone: from Revelation as well as from a rational reflection upon the frame of the universe.<sup>90</sup> Because the One and Only hadn't been so benevolent as to reveal Himself to India and thus, because the Hindus lacked both, they '*produced that heterogeneous and monstrous compound which has formed the religious creed of so great a portion of the human race; but composes a more stupendous mass in Hindustan than in any other country...*'<sup>91</sup> Still, Brahmins showed the tendency to corrupt things: with the insertion of flattery and the worship of heroes they had made it even worse than it ever was and anywhere had been, because '*in Hindustan a greater and more powerful section of the people... have... been solely occupied in adding to its volume and augmenting its influence.*'<sup>92</sup> Having remixed and annotated the work others had done before him, Mill arrived at the same conclusion as his informants: '*Never among any other people did the ceremonial part of religion prevail over the moral to a greater, probably to an equal extent...*'<sup>93</sup> Needless to say, this religion was based on the prejudices of a Brahmin priesthood. They alone were responsible for India's decadence.

In the idioms of postcolonial scholarship: the writing of such an all-inclusive *History* was manifestly consequential to the colonial project of control and command, rationalizing the movements of a colonial administration in search of stability. While transcending all ideological boundaries, Mill maintained that the original laws demonstrated that Indian kings were merely instruments in the hands of Brahmins; the classification of the people showed that '*through a system of priestcraft, built upon the most tormenting superstition that ever harassed and degraded any portion of mankind, their minds were more enslaved than their bodies...*'<sup>94</sup> Like Charles Grant before him, Mill made abundant use of Jones' *Institutes* to substantiate this claim: Brahmins appeared as the sole guardians of the so-called sacred books, using their religion and sacerdotal caste-rules to exercise power over the civil sphere of kings and empires.

### The Orientalist Response

Throughout the nineteenth-century Mill's *History* remained the primary textbook on Indian history. As Inden pointed out, subsequent writers either reiterated his understanding of Indian civilization or they wrote in direct defiance of it.<sup>95</sup> The fifth edition of the *History* brought both Orientalist and Utilitarian scholarship together in the same text. Wilson's decision to edit the fifth edition to provide long and scholarly comments in numerous footnotes might well be the result of his straightforward Orientalist indignation. Wilson not only grieved over Mill's ignorance but also complained about the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.: 186.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.: 191.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.: 191.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.: 193.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.: 472.

<sup>95</sup> Ronald Inden, 1986: 418.



evil effects the book had had on British servants and on their relationship with the native population. His own experiences provided different impressions: they did not confirm that immorality was an integral part of the indigenous culture. Looking back upon his residence of twenty-four years in Bengal, he remembered '*occasions of public and private intercourse with respectable and learned Hindus*' about whom he confirmed that they '*afforded me many opportunities of witnessing polished manners, clearness and comprehensiveness of understanding, liberality of feeling, and independence of principle that would have stamped them gentlemen of any country in the world.*'<sup>96</sup> However, while Mill's sweeping statements might have been in need of severe nuances, it is extraordinary how similar the editor's 'sensitive' understanding of the relationship between Brahmins, religion and society was.

In his last footnote to Mill's *General Reflections* Wilson agreed that India was far behind the evolutionary stage that Europe had reached. Fascinatingly, he explained the difference by '*the advantages we possess in a purer system of religious belief.*' In Wilson's kind understanding of India, the Hindus were stagnated and had to be compared with their contemporaries: '*with the people of antiquity...*'<sup>97</sup> In footnotes that expounded Mill's views on the supremacy of Brahmins, Wilson confirmed the canonical dictum and explained that '*from his high birth alone, a Brahmen is an object of veneration even to deities...*'<sup>98</sup> The history of Indian religion and society had been essentially similar to European history: Wilson came to a clear understanding with Mill and noted that '*it was in the dark ages that the Romish priesthood usurped so many privileges.*'<sup>99</sup> To emphasise the influence Brahmin priests had had upon religion and society in India, Wilson cited Orme's *On the Government and People of Indostan*, so as to demonstrate clearly how '*the influence of priestcraft over superstition is no where so visible as in India.*'<sup>100</sup> As must be clear, Mill's major adversaries hardly disagreed on this issue.

### The History of India

In the middle of the nineteenth-century the notion of religious degradation and the twofold influence of Brahmin priests upon religion and society was still the consensus. As the governor of Bombay, Elphinstone had advocated an empire of opinion and promoted the foundation of the Poona College for Sanskrit education, which he had to defend against Mill's rigorous polemics.<sup>101</sup> He felt the need to explain why he had to write another history of India so soon after Mill's publication had provided the Government with all the necessary information. Like Wilson, Elphinstone testified that those

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<sup>96</sup> Cited in David Kopf, 1969: 40.

<sup>97</sup> Wilson in James Mill, 1858: 164 ff. 1.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.: 129 ff. 2.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.: 128 ff. 1.

<sup>100</sup> Cited in James Mill, 1858: 131 ff. 1.

<sup>101</sup> See Zastoupil and Moir (eds.), 1999: 11.

experiences he had in India *'may sometimes lead to different conclusions.'*<sup>102</sup> In spite of all his time in India, Elphinstone's understanding of contemporary ceremony and social customs remained within the purview of the Orientalist-Anglicist canon: his *History of India* (1842) reiterated the conventional analysis of the religious and social status quo. While elaborating on Wilson's essays referred to above, Elphinstone argued that monastic orders had started to succeed the original purity of Indian religion: theism as advocated by the *Vedas* was *'supplanted by a system of gross polytheism and idolatry...'*<sup>103</sup> The followers of the *Vedas* did not attempt to bring these developments to a halt: they permitted this worship of too many gods and never erected a temple for the One and Only – all for *'the authority of custom and the interest of a priesthood.'*<sup>104</sup> The new orders could not but recognise the divinity of Brahmin laws and hence, *'could not withhold their acknowledgement of the high station to which the class had raised itself by the authority of these writings.'*<sup>105</sup>

Indeed, Elphinstone had already emphasised that at the time of Manu even the monarch was subjected to *'the laws promulgated in the name of the divinity; and the influence of the Brahmins... would afford a strong support to the injunctions of the code.'*<sup>106</sup> Via a classic account of the *Division and Employment of Classes*, once again exclusively based on Jones' translation of Manu's text, Elphinstone presented an outline of the Hindu government and its legal system at the time of Manu. The priests, so he explained, *'began to combine and act in concert: that they invented the genealogy of caste, and other fables, to support the existing institutions.'*<sup>107</sup> After Manu's codification of the law the movement of decline accelerated: as far as the caste system was concerned, the lowest classes had started to display *'a large division of castes within themselves.'*<sup>108</sup>

### At the End of an Outline

1. First of all, Mill was neither an Evangelical missionary, nor an Orientalist scholar. Secondly, as a Utilitarian historian, his assessment of Indian religion and society might have appeared as the secular counterpart of Evangelical scholarship. However, Mill wholeheartedly accepted the story that united different ideological and theoretical schools of thought. Holwell and Dubois had already set the tone of the argument and the early Orientalists that were anathema to Mill's fulminations indubitably reasoned in chorus. In addition, Wilson never endeavoured to provide interpolations to Mill's socio-psychological pontificates with reference to Brahmins; neither did he challenge their assumed

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<sup>102</sup> Mountstuart Elphinstone, 1842: a2

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.: 86.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.: 86.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.: 61.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.: 19.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.: 99.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.: 55.

influence upon contemporary religion and society. In search for new vistas for colonial management and revenue collection, Mountstuart Elphinstone never questioned this time-honoured opinion either.

2. With reference to a theoretical conception of colonial India, the Orientalist-Anglicist controversy was a pseudo-debate. All participants agreed on the facets of South Asian civilization that were in urgent need of reform. They also agreed on the reason why alterations could brook no more delay. Evangelical and Anglicist theorizing might have understood Indian religion and society as being corrupt from the very beginning and Orientalists might have believed in a departed age of splendour, yet they certainly came to a clear understanding pertaining to the status quo and its roots: a pan-Indian force had combined a system of false religious beliefs with a rebarbative brand of social organization so as to invest a priestly order in perpetuity.

3. Yet Brahmins were given this centrality not only on a theoretical level: the identification of those who were said to have most authority on matters concerning religion and society unmistakably preceded them to be selected as the chief informants of the administration, working in close collaboration with Orientalist scholars in Banaras and in Calcutta. Dirks, however, suggested that the social and religious territory of the subcontinent grew to be more and more 'Brahmanic' in the course of the nineteenth-century. Brahmins provided the testimonies needed and the colonial emphasis on Brahmin texts rendered Indian society increasingly 'Brahmanic.'<sup>109</sup> However, it is possible to contrast the canonical representation of a crafty priesthood with the aberrations and hedging uncertainties that colonial anthropology displayed in its accounts. Moreover, evident contradictions were ubiquitous. In the subsequent chapter I will suggest that this brings to mind the fact that the colonial mantras of anti-Brahmanism did not fit the social and religious landscape of the subcontinent. In addition, it will also suggest that Brahmin informants, who Dirks at times seemed to hold responsible for this understanding, initially simply did not understand what the administrators were referring to when questioned about their identity of 'priesthood,' and their so-called secret texts and prejudices.

4. As suggested above, the need to govern a subordinated society might well account for the exigency to collect data and to structure information into predictable formats, yet the dialectics between knowledge and governance do not explain the actual manner in which colonial administrators answered questions of anthropology and historiography. The examples of hedging uncertainties and ambiguities I will provide below rendered the colonial construction of a pan-Indian priesthood as *dues ex machina* highly contentious. Nevertheless, the reference to a Brahmin

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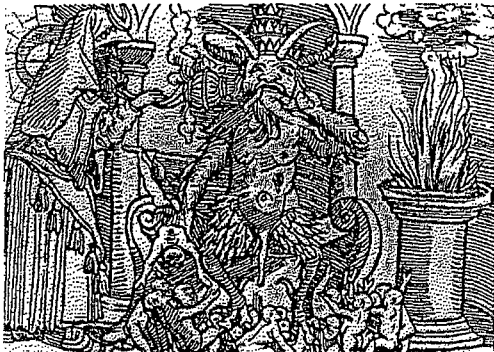
<sup>109</sup> See Nicholas Dirks, 2001: 151.

community in colonial explanations of contemporary ceremony and customs was not challenged. Postcolonial theorizing, then, does not explain why colonial scholarship nevertheless rendered religion and society 'Brahmanic' – to use Dirks' terminology. It does not explain the selection of Brahmin informants as highest authorities on matters pertaining to customs and practices either. When such a contentious representation transcends all ideological and theoretical boundaries, there must be a more fundamental common framework from which its consistency is derived. At the end of the next part of this essay I will suggest that this coherence could only be obtained from a *Christian-theological* understanding of religion, and more precisely, from its Protestant variety.

Once again, it is not my intention to argue that Orientalists as well as Utilitarians such as James Mill were crypto-Protestant thinkers. What I will argue is that, despite their claims for secular research, their understanding of religion remained, nevertheless, *Christian-theological* in nature. As a consequence of which, critical postcolonial theory fails to grapple with the underlying cultural and historical dynamics in the West that actually provide an answer to the question of colonial thought regarding a *priestly-centred* religion of caste that is alleged to pervade the social and religious landscape of the subcontinent.

## Part Two

### PROTESTANT REVOLT VERSUS THE TYRANNY OF PRIESTHOOD



(1) The idol of Calicut eating souls, represented as the Christian Devil – according to a woodcut in the first German edition of the Bolognese traveller Ludovico di Varthema's *Itenerario* (1515). The Triple Crown symbolizes the Papal kingdom and refers to the tradition of Popes in Hell. The creature's three crowns, four teeth and four horns remind us of the dragon of the Apocalypse. The Satan has a soul in his mouth while simultaneously taking a soul from below. (Reprinted in Partha Mitter, 1977.) (2) Artist's interpretation of Varthema's description of a Brahmin worshipping the Devil. (Reprinted in Partha Mitter, 1977.)

## Six

### THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF PRIESTHOOD

In 1543 the pioneering Spanish Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552) wrote a letter to Rome stating that the Brahmin's *'whole study is, how to deceive most cunningly the simplicity and ignorance of the people.'*<sup>1</sup> With a similar insight into the Brahmin identity, Ralph Fitch (d. 1611), one of the first British travellers in the subcontinent, wrote in 1584 that *'[t]he Bramanes, which are their priests ... be a kind of crafty people, worse than the Jews.'*<sup>2</sup> As folks still said in later times: *'[t]he religious teachers set the example, and they are scrupulously followed by all classes.'*<sup>3</sup> This extraordinary understanding of the Europeans when they arrived in India induced them to write early on that Brahmin priests were most conspicuously the minions of the Devil, luring the innocent and childlike *gentiles* into the false religion of the Antichrist.<sup>4</sup>

In 1610 a first theological Consultation was held in Cochin in order to decide on puzzling socio-religious topics that perturbed the Christian missionaries. Three years later one of its most prominent members, the Archbishop Francisco Ros, defined the local customs as being *'introduced by the Devil, according to which those of noble families do not consort with those of inferior status, as the Jews of Old did not mix with the Samaritans.'*<sup>5</sup> When Grant and Ward wrote their anthropology in the late-eighteenth century, rumour still adumbrated the theoretical notion of a satanic religion of crafty priests. However, that Christian theology structured Evangelical anthropology should not come as a surprise. How else could they see the customs of the Hindus if not as worship of the Prince of Darkness? If this was the case, the Brahmins who performed and directed the rituals could only be the priests, albeit of the Devil's false religion. Where did the missionaries, travellers and colonial administrators derive such remarkable insights from? In a detailed study on *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance* (2000), Joan-Pau Rubiés demonstrated the fragmentary nature of sixteenth-century ethnological accounts of India.<sup>6</sup> In the middle of the nineteenth century, Wilson, for example, still realized the extraordinary limits of colonial anthropology and cautioned that *'we may conjecture what we please of a stage of society of which we know nothing...'*<sup>7</sup> Still, he knew for certain that Brahmins were *'something transcendently divine.'*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> St. Francis Xavier, 1543: 158.

<sup>2</sup> Reprinted in Locke (ed.), 1930: 104-04.

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Massie, 1840: 467.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of early seventeenth-century Jesuit notions of Brahmins as satanic ministers from hell (*ministri infernali*), see Joan-Pau Rubiés, 2000: 333-36. For an analysis of the relationship between European beliefs in demons that misled the laity and early representations of Indian religion, see Partha Mitter, 1977: 1-72.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Ines G. Zupanov, 1999: 75.

<sup>6</sup> See Joan-Pau Rubiés, 2000: 11

<sup>7</sup> In James Mill, 1858: 147 ff. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: 130 ff. 1.

As I will demonstrate below, the Old Testament unmistakably suggests that a system of tribes, with a restricted tribe of priests, pervaded by rules of purity and impurity, endogamy and hereditary occupation, previously existed among the Biblical tribes of Israel.<sup>9</sup> In the next chapter I shall further elaborate on the influence of these Biblical notions on colonial anthropology. Again, the point here is merely to hint at the religious convictions colonial writers carried along in their understanding of non-Semitic cultures. In whatever manner one interprets the *varna*-story that Brahmin informants might have told the administrators to explain the social organization, the notion of a grand division ruled by a priesthood was already known to the Europeans and preceded the explanation Brahmin informants were asked for – the notion of a hierarchical division and a community of priests preceded the colonial understanding of the *varna*-theory which, *under colonial rule*, rendered religion and society increasingly ‘Brahmanic’– to use Dirks’ idiom.

In his genealogy of the concept ‘caste,’ Dirks pointed to the secular historiography of Alexander Dow (1768). Under the guidance of a Brahmin *pundit* at Banaras who elaborated upon the four *varnas*, Dow wrote that ‘*the first, and most noble tribe, are the Brahmans, who alone can officiate in the priesthood like the Levites among the Jews.*’<sup>10</sup> Dirks, however, straightforwardly assumed the rather surprising fact that, first of all, Dow unambiguously understood that which the Brahmin was talking about when the latter referred to *varna* – or maybe, for that matters, to *varnāśhramadharma*. Secondly, that the Brahmin knew what Dow was talking about when the latter ventured into Christian theology and referred to the Levites, the priestly tribe of the Israelites, so as to ‘explain’ the ‘priesthood’ Brahmins were said to constitute.

In addition, and assuming that the Brahmin informant did refer to the concept ‘priesthood,’ the assumption that he knew what ‘priesthood’ and ‘priestcraft’ meant for an eighteenth-century Protestant European is rather unlikely. However, critical postcolonial scholarship hardly reflects on the particular condition that both factions came from entirely different socio-political, historical and, most significantly, cultural surroundings. Postcolonial theory seems to suggest that the cultural background of the participants did not interfere in the exchange between administrators and informants – that Dow’s or, for instance, Holwell’s or Dubois’ understanding of ‘tribe,’ ‘priesthood,’ ‘Levites,’ ‘religion’ and ‘Jews’ did not intervene in a process of cross-cultural dialogue, and that they impartially understood the *varna*-theory which ‘explained’ what European accounts had already assumed since the early sixteenth century. Critical contemporary scholarship, then, suggests the so-called textuality of colonial discourse: ‘colonial knowledge production’ is examined these days with

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<sup>9</sup> See as well Abbé Dubois, 1816: 46-7. As already mentioned above, references to the tribes of Israel and the Pentateuch were also ubiquitous in secular research.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Nicholas Dirks, 2001: 20.

the revolutionary insight that it was hardly based on empirical research but mostly on textual sources such as the *varna*-theory and *Purusha Shukta* – as if an empirical study would have resulted in an impartial understanding of ritualistic ceremonies, identity construction and the social organization in a non-Semitic culture, and those who were supposed to constitute its ‘priesthood.’

Moreover, the hierarchical division of the social was also assumed before the *Purusha Shukta* story provided a theoretical explanation that, according to Dirks, increasingly grew to be canonized. As the primeval Man who was sacrificed into four distinctive parts, the *Purusha* was most likely rather lying down instead of standing up – the most favourite position for sacrifice, according to commonsense. Nowhere in the story does it state that the primeval man was standing up – as a consequence of which there was no higher or lower but a horizontal division of diverse body parts. What we see than is a forced reading of an allegorical story in order to demonstrate the hierarchical stratification in Indian society with a crafty priesthood at its crown.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned above, Christian theology structured the interpretation of various facts that Dubois confronted whilst providing ‘trustworthy’ generalizations. References to the Genesis Story and to the Flood, the Mosaic Law and the Levites that populated the Biblical narration of human history were ubiquitous. William Jones substantiated the historiography of the Pentateuch. For Alexander Dow, the Biblical reference to the Levites corroborated the alleged universality of priesthood. References to the tribes of Israel induced the allusions Holwell, Grant and Jones made to the Brahmins as a tribe. The absence of Revelation accounted for the ritualistic society Mill saw in nineteenth-century India.

As a secular thinker James Mill assumed a universal brotherhood of priests that was ‘*generally found to usurp the greatest authority, in the lowest state of society...*’<sup>12</sup> After describing the corruption of a pure religion into contemporary ceremonies, Holwell wrote that ‘*in this predicament the Gentoos are not singular, as the original text of every theological system, has, we presume, from a similar cause, unhappily undergone the same fate; though at first promulgated as a divine institution.*’<sup>13</sup> However, the only previous illustration Holwell and Mill reasonably could have known at that time resided in what Protestant theology had said about the Christian religion in Europe. That means to say, without any detailed knowledge of India’s religion, its social organization and the construction of social identity in the subcontinent, early colonial writers simply presumed the universality of these dynamics when they identified the Brahmins as India’s ‘crafty priesthood.’

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<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Balu for these insights.

<sup>12</sup> James Mill, 1817: 48

<sup>13</sup> John Zephania Holwell, 1767, Part II: 1



However, in the nineteenth century, Wilson, for example, felt it necessary to make nuances to Jones' opinion as based on the *Manusmriti*. The canonization of the text and the application of the category 'priesthood' had led to an entirely misguided understanding, so Wilson said. Wilson suggested that Brahmins were not '*in great measure the ghostly advisers of the people... This office is now filled by various persons ... Many of these are Brahmans, but they are not necessarily so, and it is not as Brahmans that they receive the veneration of their lay followers...*'<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in his editorial comments to Mill's text, Wilson made similar nuances to the outdated representation of modern Brahmins as a priesthood. He wrote that

*In modern times the Brahmans, collectively, have lost all claim to the character of a priesthood ... and where they are met with in a religious capacity, it is not as Brahmans merely, but as being the ministers of the temples, or the family gurus, or priests of the lower classes of the people, offices by no means restricted, though not frequently extended, to the Brahmanical caste...*<sup>15</sup>

In order to correct the canonical representation, Wilson cited the same text as this understanding was based on – the *Manusmriti*. Nevertheless, the canonical *Dharm a Shāstra* literature most certainly must have spoken about pre-colonial Brahmins. According to Wilson – who must have closely examined the *Manusmriti* – the text also said that '*if possessed of wealth, a Brahmin is enjoined to give liberally... Brahmans are prohibited from taking gifts indiscriminately, habitually or excessively, and from receiving any reward for teaching, or any fixed wages of reward for sacrifices.*'<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Manu, apparently, made it clear that '*neither did the Brahmans, like the priests of the Egyptians, keep to themselves a monopoly of spiritual knowledge.*'<sup>17</sup> With the intention to ameliorate colonial scholarship, Wilson relied on the same textual source as previous writings were based on – as a consequence of which, the antiquated text that is said to provide a theoretical understanding of caste identities can hardly be said to provide an unambiguous account of the social identity colonial writers explicitly assigned to the Brahmins. Similarly, Colebrooke, long before he was well versed in Sanskrit, wrote in his *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal* (1806) that '*in practice, little attention is paid to the limitations to which we have alluded; daily observation shows even Brahmans exercising the menial profession of a Sudra.*'<sup>18</sup>

The concept 'priesthood' was inapplicable to designate the modern Brahmins. Time and again, colonial authors referred to the fact that occupational divisions were far softer than the *varna*-theory prescribed. The question is, then, whether or not these limitations did actually ever exist or not – whether the so-called 'Brahmin ideology' and the *varna*-theory as understood in colonial scholarship

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<sup>14</sup> Horace Hayman Wilson, 1832: 311.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson in James Mill, 1858: 133 ff. 1, emphasis mine.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.: 133 ff. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.: 133 ff. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Bernard Cohn, 1968: 13.

described the socio-religious territory of the subcontinent. Besides, the fact that Brahmin informants knew what colonial investigators were talking about was rather contentious. Moreover, any group in Indian society has always been able to set up its own temples. It can be empirically shown that members from the respective *jātis* could choose their own 'priests' to perform rituals.<sup>19</sup> Be this as it may, twentieth-century sociology still believes in a cunning priesthood that concealed its scriptures from the rest of society. Talking about the *Vedas*, one of the most influential scholars on the sociology of Hinduism, Max Weber, suggested that *[a]fter their transcription by different schools of Brahmins they continued in accordance with ancient correct practice to be withheld, from non-Brahman readers, as the Bible is withheld from the laity in the Catholic Church.*<sup>20</sup> However, that Brahmins did not seem to be perturbed when colonial administrators read their secret books was well expressed in a letter Colebrooke wrote to his father as early as 1797: *'I cannot conceive how it came to be ever asserted that the Brahmins were ever averse to instruct strangers... They do not even conceal from us the most sacred of their Vedas.'*<sup>21</sup>

A crafty priesthood longing for worldly richness and power was accountable for contemporary ritual and ceremony. After the priesthood first tasted the powers of seduction they had used their religious authority to invent a religion of caste that would invest their own order in perpetuity. Weber, therefore, understood the Brahmins as, by definition, occupying the highest social stratum. Pace Weber, *[c]aste is, and remains essentially social rank, and the central position of the Brahmins in Hinduism rests primarily upon the fact that social rank is determined with reference to Brahmins.*<sup>22</sup> And, *[a]s a status group, caste enhances and transposes this social closure into the sphere of religion, or rather of magic.*<sup>23</sup> Yet Weber seems to be rather perplexed pertaining to this issue: *'It is perhaps impossible to determine the rank order of the castes; it is contested and subject to change. An attempt was made in 1901 by the British census to settle this rank order once and for all. It was not repeated; the excitement and discontent that resulted was out of all proportion to the intended result.'*<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, *[w]e know ... of many cases in which Indian kings personally degraded single castes in due form or expelled individuals, including Brahmins from their castes. ... Degraded castes often continued to contest such decisions for centuries; the Brahmins, however, usually took it.'*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Willem Derde for this insight. See, for instance, Partha Chatterjee, 1989: 195. and 1993: 188.

<sup>20</sup> Max Weber, 1958: 26.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in O. P. Kejariwal, 1988: 99.

<sup>22</sup> Max Weber, 1958: 30.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.: 42-3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.: 47.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.: 48.

There were other elements that did not fit the picture of a class of priests that controlled the laity through the corruption of pure beliefs. Regarding their secret books, Charles Grant, for instance, claimed that *[w]ith respect to the real tenets of the Hindus ... they are to be taken from their ancient books...*<sup>26</sup> However, when Rammohun Roy later translated the Upanishads a contemporary *pundit* charged him with having fabricated them himself.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, on the subject of Bengal, the eminent Sanskritist Fitzedward Hall wrote in 1868 that *[u]ntil very recently, the learned Bengali has long been satisfied, substantially, to do without the Veda.*<sup>28</sup> A strange state of affairs, suggesting that at least Bengali Brahmins didn't really know what Europeans were talking about when they enquired about their sacred books. Even more, those who did seem to know about the texts did not seem to understand them. With reference to their secret language, Abbé Dubois had the following observation to make:

It is true ... that those who devote themselves to the study of these books [the *Vedas*] cannot hope to extract any instruction from them, for they are written in ancient Sanskrit, which has become almost wholly unintelligible; and such numberless mistakes have been introduced by copyists, either through carelessness or ignorance, that the most learned find themselves quite unable to interpret the original text. Out of twenty thousand Brahmins I do not believe that one could be found who even partially understood the real *Vedas*.<sup>29</sup>

Apparently, what Dubois saw was not the exception but the rule. When talking of the prayers in the *Vedas*, Wilson discovered that they were hardly studied at all. Besides, *'when they are studied it is merely for the sake of repeating the words; the sense is regarded as a matter of no importance, and is not understood even by the Brahman who recites or chants the expressions.'*<sup>30</sup>

As mentioned above, Wilson suggested that a resistant attachment to caste corresponded with the lower classes. Elphinstone agreed and noticed that the lowest classes started to display a large division of hierarchies among themselves. In the words of Dubois: *'The Sudra caste is divided into most sub-castes.'*<sup>31</sup> Indeed, from an empirical point of view, most will agree that a multitude of sub-castes can be identified in the so-called lowest social strata.<sup>32</sup> To argue that the priesthood imposed such an organization upon society requires, minimally, the identification of an overarching organization of priests. However, neither in the long haul of Indian history, nor in its present context has such a structure, which would have been necessary to impose upon society not only the caste system but

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in James Mill, 1817: 410 ff.

<sup>27</sup> See Stephen Hay (ed.), 1963: 46 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in O. P. Kejariwal, 1988: 3.

<sup>29</sup> Abbé Dubois, 1816: 173-74.

<sup>30</sup> Horace Hayman Wilson, 1840: 49.

<sup>31</sup> Abbé Dubois, 1816: 15.

<sup>32</sup> On the strong attachment to 'caste-rules' in the so-called 'impure castes' as compared to the clear moderation of so-called higher classes, see as well Monier Monier Williams, 1891: 49.

also any social organization whatsoever, been identified. In addition, the identification of the concept 'Brahmins' so as to refer to the institution of a pan-Indian priesthood, albeit theoretically, becomes, therefore, rather debatable.

The examples of ambiguities and contradictions above suggest that postcolonial scholarship will only provide a satisfactory explanation of colonial scholarship regarding India's religion of caste and its alleged crafty priesthood once it starts to give full credit to the background that shaped this understanding. The assessment and collection of land revenue might have required considerably detailed knowledge of the structure of Indian society. However, due to the presuppositions, ambiguities and plain contradictions mentioned above, the prominence of Brahmins as a crafty priesthood in colonial scholarship had to derive its coherence from a framework that consistently structured that understanding. As I will propose below, both Judeo-Christian historiography and Protestant theology were called upon to account for the socio-religious landscape of the non-Semitic culture prevalent in South Asian civilization. That means to say, our colonial conception derived its coherence and intelligibility from *a Christian-theological understanding of religion and of priesthood.*

## Seven

### RELIGIOUS DEPRIVATION AND ITS REFORMATION

#### Their Stories and their Fables

While illuminating a ritualistic society and its ceremony, colonial scholarship suggested the sacerdotal corruption of a pure monotheistic religion. Brahmin priests had corrupted the original scriptures through the insertion of fables and mythology. However, the framework colonial writers adhered to so as to understand several of the facts they were confronted with did not lack some fables of its own. Dubois, for instance, could refer to Noah's son, Japheth, to identify the origin of the seven Hindu Penitents – the alleged forefathers of the Brahmin tribe. After all, if *Genesis*, the first book of the Pentateuch that talked about the Flood, could 'explain' the history of the human race with reference to Adam and Eve, alongside the language families that came into being through divine intervention at the Tower of Babel, why would it not be able to explain the genealogy of a priesthood in colonial India?<sup>33</sup> Other colonial authors were not unfamiliar with the tribal identity of the Indian priesthood either. From Dow and Holwell to Dubois, Jones and Grant, all referred to a tribe of priests – a reference directly extracted from the second book of the Pentateuch – *Exodus*.

In traditional Biblical historiography the Levites among the Jews are considered to be one of the twelve tribes of Israel. *Exodus* narrates the prodigious adventures of these tribes in Egypt and their lingering journeys through the desert. Once Moses had liberated the Israelites from enslavement, split the Red Sea with his magic staff and guided them from Egypt to Mount Sinai or the Mountain of God, he transpired to be the ancient legislator for subsequent Jews and Christians: Moses received the Ten Commandments along with a vast corpus of religious and civil laws, straight from the One and Only.<sup>34</sup> Similar to Aaron, Moses belonged to the priestly tribe of Levi. When the ancient lawgiver raged against idolatry and the worship of the golden calf, of all the tribes gathered at Mount Sinai the Levites were the ones that stayed at his side. For their loyalty to God the tribe of Levi was granted the function of priesthood and, henceforward, was commanded to protect the laws of the Heavens and of the Earth.<sup>35</sup>

The twelve tribes were endogamous – besides the Levite tribe of priests, there was Judah's tribe of kings and princes. The division of labour was hereditary: priestly skills were learned from father to son. The Levites would come to decide what was sacred and what was profane. They

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<sup>33</sup> See Genesis 1; Genesis 11.

<sup>34</sup> Exodus 20-31.

<sup>35</sup> Exodus 32: 26-29.

decided what was pure and what was impure.<sup>36</sup> If the *Manusmriti* was said to contain a painstaking collection of sacred rules and detailed duties, the third book of the Pentateuch, *Leviticus*, presents a most conscientious outline of all possible rules ranging from ritual purity to sacrifice, nativity, marriage and funeral, to notions about clean and unclean food.<sup>37</sup> Hence, colonial anthropology was well aware of the ancient connection between a tribe of priests and a divine law that was said to outline the socio-religious customs of human societies.

As a matter of fact, the Jews at the time of Christ were bounded by rules of untouchability that would hardly surprise postcolonial scholarship: the Jews of Judea would never touch a Samaritan, neither was a Samaritan allowed to drink from the tanks and wells of the Jews. As must be clear, when Dubois arrived in India it was not difficult for him to understand the salient features assigned to India's grand religion of caste. Neither must it have been difficult for Dubois to have a clear understanding of the Brahmin informant when the latter expounded the *varna*-theory. Jewish *manners, customs and ceremonies* formed a framework of reference from within which colonial writers understood their native informant's illuminations. Consequently, in a colonial understanding of the *varna*-theory, Brahmins were, by definition, like the Levites among the Jews; the Kshatrya tribe must have been remarkably similar to the tribe of Judah. The only point I want to make here is that the work of colonial writers was imbued with theological and culturally defined preconceptions when the *varna*-theory and the *Purusha Shukta* story increasingly came to be canonized explanations of socio-religious practices and social identities in a non-Semitic culture. *It should not come as a surprise then if their understanding of religion that structured their identification of a priestly class in order to explain the condition of Indian religion and society was itself derived from religious beliefs.*

The hedging and the contradictions in colonial scholarship mentioned above did not change this picture of a class of priests that dominated the religious and the civil realm via the imposition of false beliefs. This notion had been essential to Christianity because it structured its understanding of religion. That is to say: the notions of 'priestcraft' and 'priesthood' had a very specific meaning within Christian theology. Early Brahmin informants might have started to refer to 'priestcraft' and to 'priesthood,' yet it would be rather surprising that they unambiguously understood what these concepts meant in the sophisticated and elaborate tenets of Christian theology. In the argument that follows I will suggest that this explanatory conception of 'Brahmin priesthood' could retain its coherence and status in colonial scholarship *because the religious notion of 'religion' as well as the notion of 'priesthood' that structured this conception were deeply ingrained in the cultural experience of colonial administrators.*

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<sup>36</sup> See Baruch A. Levine, *Encyclopaedia of Religion* Vol. 8, 1987: 528.

<sup>37</sup> See *Leviticus* 1-27.

## A Sense of the Divine

As the Old Testament recounts, God has given mankind true religion upon creation – as Abbé Dubois reiterated this idea: *‘For who can doubt that our blessed religion was originally that of the whole world.’*<sup>38</sup> The Holy Book continued that, ever since, this divine gift had been corrupted due to the labours of the Devil. When God revealed Himself and chose to make his first Covenant with the Israelites, even the Jews, so the early Christians explained, were led astray by the multitude of laws and empty regulations that departed from the true religion. Again, Dubois has put the matter as follows:

The whole world was ... plunged at that time in the same error; and truth, though known to a few, remained captive and dared not appear in the light of day. Those who knew and believed in the true God thought it sufficient to worship Him in secret, and held that there was no harm in paying outward respect to idols with the rest of the world. *Revelation had not yet purified their ideas on this subject.* The truth was known only in one very small corner of the world. The worshippers of the true God were only to be seen in small numbers in the temple of Jerusalem.<sup>39</sup>

Consequently to the coming of Christ, God restored His original alliance *with humanity* by means of a New Covenant. Yet again, the new contract was not safe from corruptions either. Fifteen hundred years after God had uniquely revealed Himself in the figure of Christ, Protestant theology argued that Christianity had gone through yet another period of disintegration. Again a connection with the true religion had to be restored by means of a direct access to the Word of God – the sacred scripture that contained the original and pure beliefs.

Throughout the first few centuries this Biblical theme of religious degradation not only structured the relationship of Christianity with Judaism, it also structured its relationship with the pagan traditions of the Roman world. The latter came to be transformed into nothing but corruptions of the ‘purer system of beliefs.’ As Balagangadhara summarized this brand of history writing:

There was once a religion, the true and universal one, which was the divine gift to all humankind. A sense or spark of divinity is installed in all races (and individuals) of humanity by the creator God himself. During the course of human history, this sense did not quite erode as it got corrupted. Idolatry, worship of the Devil (*i.e.*, of the false God and his minions) was to be the lot of humankind until God spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and led their tribe back onto the true path. I cannot tell you with any great certainty what has happened since then: the Jewish, the Christian and the Islamic religions are yet to arrive at a consensus.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Abbé Dubois, 1816: 10.

<sup>39</sup> Abbé Dubois, 1816: 298, emphasis mine.

<sup>40</sup> S. N. Balagangadhara, 1994: 59.

## The Religion of Priests

As religion was an affair of the priests only, 'priesthood' had been an essential concept to Christianity: the flock of believers was merely supposed to do what the priests told them to do. The latter, therefore, was part of religion too. As the Holy Book recounted, the tribe of Levi would come to decide what was sacred and what was profane:

They [the priests] are to teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the clean and the unclean. In any dispute, the priests are to serve as judges and decide it according to my ordinances. They are to keep my laws and my decrees for all my appointed feasts, and they are to keep my Sabbaths holy.<sup>41</sup>

Consequently, as the Christians see it, religion is exactly that which the priesthood entertains. The spokesmen of the Protestant Reformation would not alter this conception. On the contrary, Protestant critiques against the institutionalised Church strengthened its hold, albeit in a rather peculiar manner. In defiance of the Catholic Church that preserved priesthood exclusively to the selected few, Protestants referred to 'the priesthood of all believers,' and argued that *all* believers could be priests. Though they argued against priests, the importance of the connection between priesthood and religion came to be strengthened in sophisticated theological treatises: each member of the community had to be his own priest with a direct access to God.<sup>42</sup> They condemned the institutionalised Church as the necessary mediator between the laity and God: the Church had corrupted the divine alliance and hence, was nothing but an institute of the Devil. As no shepherd could lead us to God, each one of us was 'responsible' for his own salvation. Consequential to this religious understanding of religion, the mechanism of corruption was clearly brought to the fore as well. If religion was a priest-centred activity, it was also the priesthood that was responsible for its degeneration. However, with the Protestant Reformation and its assessment of the Catholic Church, critiques against the priesthood as an instrument of the Devil were not only of paramount importance, they increasingly gained theoretical depth and consistency.

The direct relation between man and God and the religious authority confined to the Holy Scriptures are also known as the tenets of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* respectively. According to Protestant theology, the machinations of the Antichrist, together with the arrogance of humanity, had given rise to the heretic illusion that human beings held the authority to be the judges of religion. This delusion that attributed the privileges of God to men, had induced the institution of a hierarchy of priests and bishops who falsely believed that they had the prerogative to mediate between God and

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<sup>41</sup> Ezekiel 44: 23-24.

<sup>42</sup> See Willard G. Oxtoby, *Encyclopaedia of Religion* Vol. 11, 1987: 528.



the flock of believers. In his work on *Temporal Authority* (1523), Martin Luther saw the issue as follows:

No one shall or can command the soul unless he is able to show it the way to heaven; but this no man can do, only God alone. Therefore, in matters which concern the salvation of souls *nothing but God's word shall be taught and accepted*. ... I think it is clear enough here that the soul is taken out of all human hands and is placed under the authority of God alone.<sup>43</sup>

To protect the Christian public from the intrigues of the Devil, according to the Catholic Church, the priesthood was supposed to preserve the Word of God. However, while interpreting the Bible, the priesthood had made into religion what formerly was not part of it. The tools these priests had used were many. Instead of preserving the purity of Revelation as it was recorded in the Bible, new creeds were added. Instead of keeping to the pure faith of the Bible, new prescriptions were made and new modes of worship promulgated. The cults of the saints and martyrs made human into the divine and multiplied religious feasts and festivals. The Church had enslaved the mind of the masses and had made the laity believe that salvation was consequential to the dogmas and laws it had contrived. Therefore, religion not only meant the preservation of God's Word: what the priesthood imposed upon the laity grew to be part of religion as well.

In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), John Calvin disparaged the commodities of the Catholic Church as clear-cut manifestations of the most savage tyranny. Again, Calvin himself would put the matter as follows: '[t]hey say the laws they make are 'spiritual,' pertaining to the soul, and declare them necessary for eternal life. But thus the Kingdom of Christ ... is invaded; thus the freedom given by him to the conscience of the believers is utterly oppressed and cast down.'<sup>44</sup> Consequently, the story told by the Protestants about the history of the Western Church was a straightforward narration of corruption and decline as well: the priesthood of the Catholic Church had surrendered to the Prince of Darkness and had used the true Word of God to turn Christianity into heathendom and to enchain the conscience of its believers. From now on, '*Catholic Christianity was merely 'Christian paganism'*.'<sup>45</sup>

Those who benefited from all this were the priests. In order to conceal their fraud, they kept the Bible secret behind the dark curtain of the Latin language. Instead of directing their attention to spiritual matters, they were interested in earthly wealth and honour. As the issue of indulgences unmistakably proved, the priesthood was said to exploit the people's wealth for their own well-being. The power of kings depended on the Pope's consent. With the Pope as the Vicar of Christ and his universal jurisdiction, spiritual authority transpired to be more important than any temporal power.

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<sup>43</sup> Martin Luther, 1520: 680, emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> John Calvin, 1559, Vol. 2: 1180.

<sup>45</sup> S. N. Balagangadhara, 1994: 85

The papacy was accused of usurping princely power by claiming to be the highest authority on earth and by installing social hierarchies both within and outside the Church. The yoke of sacerdotal despotism, as became abundantly clear throughout the history of Western Europe, encompassed the civil sphere of kings and empires.

### The Virtue of Revelation

When Christianity confronted the 'pagan world' a second time, the Judeo-Christian notion of an original true religion and its subsequent degeneration still structured Europe's historiographical sense of the religious elsewhere. In subsequent colonial scholarship, the religious territory of non-Semitic cultures was interpreted from within the Biblical framework that had structured the Christian experience of religion for the past fifteen hundred years. Non-Christian religions had, at the most, fragments of insights derived from *the true religion* which God had implanted in all of us. Lacking the Revelation God had transferred to the Jews they became false religions. Over a period of time they would increasingly come to be corrupted because the Devil freely reigned over these religions via the medium of pagan priests. As must be clear, this is exactly what colonial scholarship was arguing for. The Brahmins who performed and directed the rituals, who maintained temple complexes, etc., could only have been the priesthood of the Company's dominions, albeit of the Devil's false religion. What they imposed upon society as part of their religion must have been the work of the Devil as well. The moulding of multiple traditions into a Brahmin-centred 'religion of priests' was to be expected now.

The search for their carefully hidden 'religious texts' became one of Europe's obsessions. Alleged differences between the 'pure original' as embodied in those texts and what the priests imposed upon the laity confirmed that priesthood was a similar phenomenon all over the world. The Catholic Church knew of pilgrimages and indulgences; the Hindu religion displayed '*ceremonial and pecuniary atonements*'.<sup>46</sup> As the Catholic clergy imposed a system of false prescriptions in its quest for worldly power, Brahmins imposed a system of rules and prescriptions to preserve their temporal interests. They had their own secret language too, i.e. Sanskrit, and eagerly tried to conceal their fraud. As Alexander Dow saw it: '*[t]he Bedas are, by the Brahmins, held so sacred, that they permit no other sect to read them; and such is the influence of superstition and priestcraft over the minds of the other Casts in India, that they would deem it an unpardonable sin to satisfy their curiosity in that respect, were it even within the compass of their power.*'<sup>47</sup>

As Catholic priesthood was confined to the selected few, Brahmins dominated society through the institution of caste. As the priests of the Church of Rome were the only rightful administrators of the sacraments, Hinduism turned out to be a religion '*of which the Brahmins are the*

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<sup>46</sup> Charles Grant, 1792: 48.

<sup>47</sup> Alexander Dow, 1768: 109.

*exclusive depositories of its ordinances.*<sup>48</sup> The 'Brahmin Church' had installed hierarchies in the socio-religious landscape of South Asia. Therefore, the most salient feature of this grand religion became a Brahmin-centred caste system, imposed upon society as to preserve their religious and social privileges. '*Absolute empire over the civil state of the Hindus as over their minds*' was exactly what priesthood and its craft had given birth to in Europe as well.<sup>49</sup>

### About the Argument

1. So as to recapitulate the thrust of the argument: (1) different factions in the Orientalist-Anglicist debate agreed on a sacerdotal religion of caste. The centrality of Brahmins in a colonial explanation of traditional practices and the hierarchies in the subcontinent, in conjunction with the authority assigned to Brahmin testimonies, formed the sacred thread in colonial scholarship, both Orientalist and Anglicist. In addition, both colonial policies saw their conflicting projects of reform, at variance with a so-called Brahmin ideology and with the associated privileges of a ruling priestly elite. (2) As outlined in the sixth chapter, the colonial explanation of the religious and social territory of the subcontinent displayed hedging uncertainties and aberrations. The colonial mantras of anti-Brahminism that identified a pan-Indian priesthood responsible for the debauched state of Indian religion and society did not seem to fit the socio-religious landscape of the subcontinent. Nevertheless, their explanatory value was never challenged. (3) I have referred to the lack of explanatory value in postcolonial scholarship that simply refers to the rationale of power so as to understand 'colonial knowledge production' vis-à-vis the South Asian religion of caste. The prominence of a *priestly-centred* religion and a *priestly-centred* caste system in colonial anthropology cannot be simply explained by referring to the trendy tandem of knowledge and power. Moreover, the textuality of its sources cannot be its major predicament either, as that which those sources were supposed to explain was already assumed from the very beginning. (4) I have suggested that the work of colonial writers was imbued with *Biblical* preconceptions. Their *religious* understanding of religion reverberated the same propensity. Additionally, their *religious* understanding of religion could actually account for the prominence bestowed upon the Brahmins in colonial scholarship. Due to an enduring Biblical conception that structured Europe's experience of religion, colonial scholarship could simply not conceive non-Semitic traditions as not being the corruption of the pure religion that God, Yahweh or Allah had offered to humanity. Secondly, due to a clear-cut conception of the history of religion and its relationship with priestcraft, Europeans could simply not conceive of a non-Semitic

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<sup>48</sup> Charles Grant, 1792: 58.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*: 35.

tradition without a satanic priesthood. For these reasons, the remarkable and unchallenged ‘insight’ they had in the identity of a sub-group in a non-Semitic culture, which languages they still had to master and which socio-religious customs they still had to mould into well defined and predictable formats.

2. It is also clear now that the so-called differences between Anglicists and Orientalists are themselves based upon the same *religious* conception of religion and are, therefore, distinctions that are intelligible within a theological framework only. From the viewpoint of Judeo-Christian theology, Anglicists were right whilst saying that corruption was ubiquitous from the very beginning – after all, the religious in non-Semitic cultures was a pagan worship inspired by the Devil’s distortion of God’s Revelation, endorsed by his priestly minions. On the other hand, Orientalists, whilst theorizing within the same theological background, were also intelligible when they stressed that compared to the original books, in which sound conceptions of the divine could still be found, these insights were lost due to the mounting corruption of a crafty priesthood.<sup>50</sup>

3. If Christian religious concepts could structure the experience of the Europeans, how well could they capture the experience that the natives had of indigenous practices and customs? In both subsequent chapters I will seek to demonstrate that when Indian reformers wrote their own story, they did not start from those ambiguities and contradictions that did not fit the explanation colonial writers opted for. Neither did they try to make them intelligible: without any doubt, Indian religion, as they saw it, was a religion of crafty priests and the religion of caste was consequential to their sacerdotal despotism. Consequently, indigenous reformers, I will suggest, accepted those principles Orientalists and Anglicists agreed upon – a *Christian theological* understanding of religion and its relationship with priesthood. The next two chapters concern the emergence and establishment of this colonial understanding in indigenous debates in relation to two important individuals, Raja Rammohun Roy and Bhimrao Ambedkar. I will refer to the example of both reformers so as to suggest the acceptance of Christianity’s theological conception of religion and the dynamics of priestcraft by Indian intellectuals.

The new Cambridge historiography has clearly demonstrated the prevalence of indigenous debates on matters concerning religion and society long before the emergence of the colonial state.<sup>51</sup> However, when these debates came to be structured in clearly Judeo-Christian and sacerdotal terms the native elite unmistakably reiterated the theological conceptions of British administrators. They did not start from, neither did they reflect upon, the hedging in the priestly identity that came to be

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<sup>50</sup> Thanks to Willem Derde for this insight.

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, Christopher Bayly, 1996.

assigned to Brahmins. They turned out to be criticizing Brahmins as 'priests' and 'Hinduism' and 'caste' as a corrupted 'religion of the priests.' The indigenous debates, therefore, came to be structured by, and derived their coherence from, the same theological conception of religion – as a consequence of which the divide between 'tradition' and 'modernity' that, for instance, Christopher Bayly so eagerly tried to soften conspicuously became solidified.

## Part Three

### THE MANTRAS OF ANTI-BRAHMANISM — II

This was the theory, and to some extent it may be found elsewhere, as in Christendom in mediaeval Europe, when the Roman Church assumed the functions of leadership in all spiritual, ethical, and moral features, and even in the general principles underlying the conduct of the State. In practice Rome became intensely interested in temporal power, and the princes of the Church were rulers in their own right. In India, the Brahmin class, in addition to supplying the thinkers and the philosophers, became a powerful and entrenched priesthood, intent on preserving its vested interests.

— Jawaharlal Nehru, 1946: 86

## Eight

### AN OUTLINE OF AN INDIGENOUS DEBATE

#### 'At the Babel of India'

Many Bengali intellectuals take pride in the seminal role that a nineteenth-century Bengali class of civil servants, educators, translators and intellectuals played in the onset of an indigenous debate between 'tradition' and 'modernity.' Ranging from social and religious reform to the visualization of a nationalist movement, Bengali thought seems to have offered a considerable contribution to the lingering course of modern Indian history. With the ever-increasing spread of *Angrēzī Rāj*, Bengali intellectuals moved along the Indo-Gangetic Plain in search of jobs in the colonial bureaucracy. While bringing with them the modes of intellectual and social change already shaped in Bengal, these 'distinguished Bengali gentlemen' inspired the social and intellectual world of newly occupied areas.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary scholarship suggests that this traffic in ideas has to be understood within a dialogue between local signposts and colonial constructions of the indigenous society. As suggested above, the Orientalist-Anglicist polarization theory is more than often called upon to provide a framework of reference for the socio-economic, intellectual, and psychological changes that are said to characterize this avant-garde period in Indian history.<sup>2</sup> The highly educated community of North-Indian *munshis* was traditionally well versed in the Persian language which offered them considerable status and income under Muslim rule. With the substitution of the Persian language by English in matters of administration, the need for Western science and education became increasingly articulated in native pamphlets to manipulate colonial policy in favour of Anglicist dispositions. The establishment of the Calcutta Hindu College in 1816, for instance, was one of those landmarks in the progress of English thought and education. As mentioned above, its secular curriculum of English instruction is said to have differentiated itself from the Sanskrit College that engaged in indigenous learning. By the 1830s a new generation of thinkers, referred to as Young Bengal, trained in the Hindu College and preceded by the Anglo-Indian teacher Henry Derozio, came to imbibe wholeheartedly the radical approach of Anglicist reformers.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as pointed out above, in a seminal study on the Bengal Renaissance David Kopf suggested that the majority of Bengali intellectuals could not digest the Evangelical-cum-Anglicist denunciation of their entire cultural

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<sup>1</sup> On their influence on, for instance, Punjabi thought, see Kenneth W. Jones, 1976: 13-18.

<sup>2</sup> See Christopher Bayly, 1996; Penelope Carson, 1991; Nancy Cassels, 1991; Bernard Cohn, 1968, and 1996; Vasudha Dalmia, 1998; Nicholas Dirks, 2001; Robert Frykenberg, 1979; Kenneth W. Jones, 1976; O. P. Kejariwal, 1988; David Kopf, 1969, 1975, and 1991; Lynn Zastoupil and Martin Moir (eds.), 1999, etc.

<sup>3</sup> See David Kopf, 1969: 253-58; A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed, 1975: 98.

inheritance – hence, the tremendous success of an Orientalist golden-age theory that conceived of the rise and fall of ancient glory.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century that witnessed the emergence and development of the colonial state, the call for religious reform would permeate the talks in Calcutta bazaars and in the local *thanadar*'s office. Together with matters of educational reform, the question of *sati* and the legitimacy of widow-remarriage, the sensitive role of 'enlightened natives,' their literature and their furniture, etc. religious reform came to offer a wide range of topics for newfound indigenous journals – initiated when the native elite discovered the force of printed media in the wake of Christian missionaries.<sup>5</sup>

The multitude of *sampradāys* – those societies clustered into a Brahmin-centred 'Hinduism' throughout the course of colonialism – came under close scrutiny regarding traditional practices: *mūrtipūjā*, or the fallacious worship of idols, instigated by the Prince of Darkness himself, so the Christians claimed in the wake of Islamic sermons, came under rigorous attack. However, consequential to the labours of Orientalist scholars, indigenous reformers did not have to renounce the totality of their cultural past. They became familiar with the primary texts that are still said to represent a departed age of monotheistic virtue. Orientalist scholarship would come to form the benchmark in the visualization of a religious landscape liberated from the yoke of idol worship. Regarding the crux of the argument, about two related points have to be made here:

1. From the early 1820s onwards, questions pertaining to religious reform increasingly came to be prominent. In the subsequent sections I will suggest the lack of explanatory power of an Orientalist-Anglicist polarization theory in order to grapple with religious reform. I shall refer to the *English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, edited by Kalidas Nag and Debajyoti Burman, in order to suggest that neither of the above-mentioned attitudes can account for the actual explanation Rammohun Roy espoused of traditional practices – of *mūrtipūjā* in particular. The indigenous understanding of traditional practices, I will suggest, came to be centred on a *Christian-religious* understanding of religion that was actually shared by Orientalists, Evangelicals and Anglicists: the non-Semitic practices in the Indian subcontinent were said to be consequential to the priestcraft that had corrupted God's gift to humanity. It is essential to note that I will not argue that Roy came to be a newborn Protestant devotee. What I will argue, however, is that his conception of religion came to be centred on the same *Christian notions* as displayed in colonial scholarship. That is to say, *Raja Rammohun Roy elucidated traditional practices by the same ideas of sacerdotal corruption and religious decline.*

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<sup>4</sup> See David Kopf, 1969, and 1991. For a similar view, see, for instance, Zastoupil and Moir (eds.), 1999.

<sup>5</sup> See Christopher Bayly, 1996: 191. For an account of Rammohun Roy's influence on the development of the Bengali press, see Sophia Collett (ed.), 1913.



2. In harmony with the vogue at Cambridge, Christopher Bayly suggested that the continuity of such indigenous debates transcended a stiff historical boundary between eighteenth and nineteenth-century India.<sup>6</sup> The eighteenth century, for instance, had witnessed a considerable growth in 'religious' institutions all over the subcontinent. In a collection of essays on Swami Vivekananda, edited under the auspices of SOAS in London, Nita Kumar associated eighteenth-century political insecurity with an increase in the reconstruction of temples and *ghats* by the nobility from Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bengal, Rajasthan, the Punjab, Kashmir and Tamil Nadu, along with offices and trusts to maintain them and to support their Sanskrit scholars.<sup>7</sup>

These eighteenth-century communities were by no means part of a stagnated society. They knew of highly varied economic enterprises, ranging from settled agriculture to extensive craft production. Additionally, so-called political institutions of kingship were accompanied by legal institutions that were partly based on written law, by taxations and revenue collections, record keeping and military forces that were organized in much the same way as those in Europe. Simultaneously, the religious realm knew of highly specialized writers and thinkers, both Hindu and Muslim, and engaged in a century long and still ongoing debate.<sup>8</sup> As Bayly pointed out, for several centuries *Vaishnavas* had debated with Buddhists and with Jains, *bhaktis* are said to have debated with the so-called orthodox within the Hindu fold, *Advaita Vedantists* had been engaged in a discussion about the oneness of all possible creation, etc. Indeed, Bayly referred to the work edited by Kenneth W. Jones on *Religious Controversy in British India* (1992) in order to stress the fact that '[w]e need to soften the sharp break between tradition and nationalist modernity, and between East and West, which still impoverishes the historical literature. Excellent studies have shown that Indians passionately debated religion before the mid-nineteenth century.'<sup>9</sup>

However, if the example of Roy suggests that indigenous debates on 'religion' grew to be structured along the same *Christian-theological* understanding of religion that characterized both Orientalist and Anglicist scholarship, Bayly's intention to soften the divide between eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century thought turns out to be pretty contentious. It might well be true that Indian society knew of passionate debates before the so-called modern reformers took up the issue. However, if the example of Roy suggests that the indigenous understanding of traditional practices distinctively came to be centred on *religious* conceptions that were clearly *Christian* in nature, then, the

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<sup>6</sup> See Christopher Bayly, 1996: 180-211.

<sup>7</sup> See Nita Kumar, 1998: 36.

<sup>8</sup> See Bernard Cohn, 1968: 3.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Bayly, 1996: 180. In a critical introduction to a collection of essays on Rammohun Roy, edited by V. C. Joshi (1975), Rajat K. Ray argued along similar lines and pointed to the fluidity between eighteenth and nineteenth-century debates in order to bridge a 'tradition-modernization polarity.' (See Ray, 1975: 3-6.)

schism between 'tradition' and 'modernity' pertaining to an indigenous debate cannot be as easily softened as Bayly hoped it could. Furthermore, the orthodox critiques on Roy that surfaced in his writings provide a whole different point of view on the idol worship that Roy wanted to eradicate. These critiques, I will suggest below, offer a visualization of indigenous practices that was distinctively different from Roy's analysis. As a matter of fact, this suggests that indigenous participants might have been debating about something wholly different from that which Rammohun Roy was talking about.

### Tuhfat-UI Mawahiddin

It is not my intention in this essay to provide an outline of the vicissitudes and details of Roy's life. Many others, some already mentioned in footnotes above, have done this before me – better than I ever could. Roy's endeavours to reinterpret 'Hinduism' on the basis of *Upanishadic* rationalism set a pattern that would resurface time and again in the subcontinent.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, analyses of his career, his influence on Bengali and other intellectuals, his socio-religious and historical position in a so-called 'Bengali Renaissance,' etc., are all highly varied and have already been taken up by many others.<sup>11</sup>

Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) was born in a conservative Brahmin family in Radhanagore, Bengal. He went to Patna at the age of nine or ten where the religion in which he first received systematic instruction came to be Islam. He must have read the *Upanishads* in Persian before he went to Banaras in order to study Sanskrit. As A. K. Majumdar pointed out, even though Roy came from a firm *Vaishnava* background, his study of Sanskrit at the stronghold of *Advaitavadins* must have introduced him to the study of *Advaita-Vedanta*, allegedly arguing against the futility of all *mūrtipūjā*. Back home in 1790, most of his later work would be reminiscent of the *Vaishnava-Advaitavadin* dispute that was still unsettled at the time when Majumdar wrote his essay.<sup>12</sup> The influence of European thought on his conception of 'religion' and its connection with 'priesthood' was indubitably absent during those early years. Even though recent evidence suggests that he had been in Calcutta between 1797 and 1802, Roy only settled in Calcutta in 1815.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For an account of the seminal influence of Roy's methodology on Punjabi intellectuals and the *Arya Samāj*, see Kenneth W. Jones, 1976: 13-18.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed, 1975; Sophia Collett, 1930; Charles H. Heimsath, 1975; David Kopf, 1969, and 1975; Max Müller, 1970; Rajat K. Ray, 1975; Sumit Sarkar, 1975; Zastoupil and Moir, 1999; and so on and so forth.

<sup>12</sup> See A. K. Majumdar, 1975: 72-76.

<sup>13</sup> See David Kopf, 1969: 196.

His early conception of religion was well reflected in a Persian tract, *Tuhfat-Ul Murwabiddin*, published during his peripatetic years in Murshidabad in 1805.<sup>14</sup> The reading below is based on the first English translation by Moulavi Obaidullah (1883). The *Tuhfat-Ul Murwabiddin*, translated as a gift to the monotheists by some, as a gift to the deists by others, contained an introduction in Arabic and was written in highly arabicised Persian. Its form was *Mutazilism*, replete with technical terms of Islamic logic and scholastic Arabic notions.<sup>15</sup> The *Mutazilites* (ca. 800-900 AC) were free thinkers guided by reason and highly critical of the *Ulemma* – the transmitters and interpreters of Islamic sciences, doctrines and laws.<sup>16</sup> For the contention of this essay, it is more than interesting to distinguish the tone and the content of this early tract, addressed to the Muslim public, with Roy's later and more polemical writings at Calcutta.

The *Tuhfat* is said to have established the doctrine of monotheism as an assumed *natural disposition* of all humankind. Roy argued that humans have an innate skill to discern the One and Only in nature; that there exists a true sense of the divine in all of us:

Although each individual of mankind, without instruction and guiding of any one, simply by keen insight into, and deep observation of the mysteries of nature... has an innate faculty in him by which he can infer that there exists a Being Who (with His wisdom) governs the whole universe; yet it is also clear that every one in imitation of the individuals of the nation among whom he has been brought up, professes the existence of a particular Divinity ... and adopts certain tenets following that particular creed.<sup>17</sup>

In the wake of *Mutazilite* analyses, Roy had already identified the *Mujtahids*, or religious expounders, as those that introduced these additional creeds of a particular nation. The followers of such particular religions perceived any rational inquiry into their specific creeds as 'a result of satanic temptations.'<sup>18</sup> References to priests were as good as absent in this work – only twice were they invoked so as to account for deviations from the natural creed embodied in the particular creed of idolatry.<sup>19</sup> Regarding the subject matter, both references to priests did not refer to Brahmins.

The followers of particular creeds seemed to have argued against the falsity of such additional and particular creeds that deviated from the natural sense of religion:

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<sup>14</sup> See Rajat K. Ray, 1975: 7.

<sup>15</sup> A. K. Majumdar, 1975: 76. See as well Rajat K. Ray, 1975: 6-11. It is not my intention here to delve into the intricate relationship between Islamic thought and the indigenous debate pertaining to religion. I do most certainly agree that this relationship has to be acknowledged and more thoroughly investigated. As must be obvious, Islamic thought was based on *Semitic religious beliefs* in much the same way as colonial scholarship was: it was structured along the same *Biblical* conception of a pure religion and its subsequent corruption that structured the European understanding of religion.

<sup>16</sup> See S. N. Dasgupta, 1980: 102.

<sup>17</sup> Rammohun Roy, 1805: 8-9, emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 5

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*: 9

Some of the followers of religion argue that discrepancy in precepts of different religions, does not prove the falsehood of any religion. The discrepancies ought to be understood to be of the same nature as is found in the laws of ancient and modern rulers of the world ... So all these forms of religions, also were framed by God, according to different states of society in different times...<sup>20</sup>

Roy's second reply against this reflection is highly significant in contrast with his later interpretation: it differed distinctively from his later analysis of the role that Brahmins played in a nineteenth-century religion that would come to be considered in his later writings, yet again, as a grand 'religion of priests':

... the Brahmins have a tradition from God that they have strict orders from God to observe their ceremonies and hold their faith for ever. There are many injunctions about this from the Divine Authority in the Sanskrit language, and I, the humblest creature of God, having been born amongst them, have learnt the language and got those injunctions by heart, and this nation (the Brahmins) having confidence in such divine injunctions cannot give them up although they have been made subject to many troubles and persecutions and were threatened to be put to death by the followers of Islam. The followers of Islam, on the other hand ... quote authority from God [the Koran] that killing idolators and persecuting them in every case, are obligatory by Divine command. ... Now, are these contradictory precepts or orders consistent with the wisdom and mercy of the great, generous and disinterested Creator or are those the fabrications of the followers of religion?<sup>21</sup>

His answer confirmed the second option. It is important to emphasize some of the constitutive elements in the representation of Brahmins that is outlined here. If Roy considered the Brahmins as a nation without any reference whatsoever to the larger consortium of believers – or if he used the Persian concept that most probably could be translated as 'nation,' 'community,' or 'association' – he clearly did not discern them as a sub-group within a larger 'Hindu nation,' 'Hindu community,' or 'Hindu association.' Pace Roy, the Brahmins were a religious nation or a religious community of their own. What Brahmins did, i.e. uphold *their* ceremonies, was merely what Brahmins did, and was not interpreted as the priestly activities within a larger religious consortium. In short: if Brahmins were not a subgroup within a larger system, but were a 'nation' of their own and just did what *they* did, they could not constitute the former's priesthood either. As noted above, the two references to priests in this work never consigned the identity of priesthood to Brahmins either.

Despite the influence of the Islamic, or more specifically, the *Mutazilite* variety of Semitic thought that had identified the 'religious expounders' as the ones responsible for the creation of particular creeds, the more structured, and more polemical, notion of priestcraft, then, would only come to be of paramount importance in Roy's later writings – at a time when he had become well versed in English and distinctively influenced by Protestant theology.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.: 16.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: 16-17.

## The Indigenous Debate and its Crafty Priesthood

Roy had acquired his knowledge of English in the civil service as the private *munshi* of John Digby, one of the earliest College of Fort William students, mainly preoccupied with a Hindu renaissance. Digby must have informed Roy about the discoveries of Orientalist scholarship and of other achievements of Western thought.<sup>22</sup> As already noted above, Henry Colebrooke's essay *On the Vedas*, originally published in 1805, adumbrated the essence of later indigenous arguments concerning the corruption of Indian religion. Roy's personal acquaintance with Horace Hayman Wilson must have provided some additional links. In the works that Roy published from 1816 onwards, it became abundantly clear that the Biblical theme of religious degeneration, on which Protestant theology would come to build its priestcraft theory, did not only structure the colonial understanding of Indian religion and its relationship with priestcraft. But, more remarkably, Roy's work suggests that both threads would even come to structure the conceptualisation of traditional practices provided by native intellectuals in modern times.

In none of his works did Roy reflect upon the peculiarities that characterized colonial scholarship, both Orientalist and Anglicist. The hedging in these accounts, along with their plain aberrations, did not perturb an indigenous reformer who must have been highly familiar with the social identity of an alleged Brahmin 'priesthood.' In Roy's English works, 'Hinduism' came to be a religion of crafty Brahmin 'priests.' As we witnessed in colonial scholarship: the religious landscape of a traditional society was said to be saturated by a Brahmin-centred 'religion of priests.'

In accordance with the *Tuhfat*, his general argument would remain centred on the belief that all people in all societies and at all times had had a monotheistic sense of the divine. From his *Translation of an Abridgement of the Vedant* in 1816, to the establishment of the *Brahmo Sabha* in 1828, Roy was engaged in a continuous debate with Hindu reformers and orthodox Brahmins, with Christian missionaries that denounced the whole of 'Hindu theology,' and with Trinitarian interpretations of Christianity. His argument that all religions had a similar monotheistic tradition in spite of their additional creeds would turn into the universalistic credo of the *Brahmo Samāj*.

As a so-called 'Theistic Hindu,' Roy questioned all manifestations of religious corruption, be they Hindu, Christian or Muslim. From the 1820s onwards, his burden to enlighten the Hindu fold was enhanced by his address to the Christian public. 'Hinduism' had its idol worship, Christianity a false belief in the divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Both tasks found expression in the argument that all religions were essentially similar, yet differed in the superstructure that was erected in later times. As he wrote to the Christian public in *The Precepts of Jesus* (1820), their natural creed had been

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<sup>22</sup> See David Kopf, 1969: 197.

perverted by the addition of particular beliefs in '*miracles and fabricated tales*.'<sup>23</sup> Hence, it would be contentious to argue that Rammohun Roy merely tried to resuscitate the Indian religion on the basis of Orientalist and Christian conceptions – how ever much the English Dissenters in the Baptist Mission of Serampore may have liked to believe it. By the force of the same argument, Roy tried to modify Christianity on the basis of a pure 'Hindu Theism.'<sup>24</sup> It is in these English works, written while closely acquainted with colonial administrators, that Roy explicitly and highly polemically identified the Brahmins as a pan-Indian priesthood responsible for such corruptions. The different communities that practiced their traditions came to be clustered into a Brahmin-centred 'religion of priests.' As a matter of fact, Roy was very clear about the religious source of his inspiration. He wrote in a letter to Alexander Duff how we had read about

the rise and progress of Christianity in apostolic times, and its corruption in succeeding ages, and then of the Christian Reformation which shook off these corruptions... [and] that something similar might have taken place in India, and similar results might follow from a reformation of the popular idolatry.<sup>25</sup>

As regards his conceptualisation of traditional practices, three threads were to become crystallized in the structure of his later argument: (1) the question of scriptural authority to define a pure 'Hinduism,' (2) his identification of Brahmins as the guardians of these scriptures, and (3) their crafty influence upon religion and society.

1. Roy's education at Banaras had made him familiar with *Vedantic* thought as developed in the *Advaita* philosophy of Shankara<sup>26</sup> – a system of thought that was quite censorious of the *Vaishnava* background Roy himself had come from. The *Vedas*, or more specifically, the *Upanishadic* portion of the *Brahmanas*, were said to enclose the proper theology of a pan-Indian religion, practised from the west, east, central, north and south, and resonated a natural and monotheistic sense of the divine. In the introduction to his *Translation of an Abridgement of the Vedant* (1816) Roy put the matter as follows:

The whole body of the Hindoo Theology, Law and Literature, is contained in the Vedas ... These works are extremely voluminous, and being written in the most elevated and metaphorical style ... in many passages seemingly confused and contradictory. Upwards of two thousand years ago, the great Vyasa, reflecting on the perpetual difficulty arising from these sources, composed with great discrimination a complete and compendious abstract of the whole, and also reconciled those texts which appeared to stand at variance. This he termed the *Vedanta*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Rammohun Roy, 1820a: 116-117.

<sup>24</sup> See Rammohun Roy 1820b: 58-59, 1823b: 194, and 1823c: 58-59.

<sup>25</sup> Rammohun Roy cited in Sophia Collett, 1913: 280.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Vasudha Dalmia, 1998: 80.

<sup>27</sup> Rammohun Roy, 1816: 59.

Reminiscences of Roy's debate with orthodox *pundits* are available in his own English works. His earliest critic was Shankara Shastri, the head English Master at the College of Fort St. George, Madras. Even though his name might suggest otherwise, the latter was a firm *Vaishnavite*. Roy's major critic in Bengal would come to be Mrityunjaya Vidyalankar, the head *pundit* at the College of Fort William.<sup>28</sup> Shankara Shastri had criticized the introduction to Roy's *Translation of the Vedant* in the *Madras Courier*. The same conception of a pure Hinduism resonated throughout Roy's reply, *A Defence of Hindu Theism* (1817):

The doctrine of the unity of God [is] real Hindooism, as that religion was practised by our ancestors, and as it is well-known even at the present age to many learned Brahmans ... The real spirit of the Hindoo scriptures ... is but the declaration of the unity of God ... Many learned Brahmins are well informed of the nature of the pure mode of divine worship.<sup>29</sup>

2. His understanding of Brahmans as a priesthood within a much larger Hindu fold already came to be expressed in the subtitle of this work: the *Vedant* was a *Resolution of all the Vedas; The Most Celebrated and Revered Work of Brahmunicipal Theology etc.* Brahmans were not merely following their own traditions as reflected in the *Tuhfat*: their 'Brahmunicipal Theology' was central to understand the practices of the rest of the Indian public. The crafty Brahmans had concealed the *Vedanta*

within the dark curtain of the Sanskrit language, and the Brahmans permitting themselves alone to interpret, or even to touch any book of the kind, the *Vedanta*, although perpetually quoted, is little known to the public...<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, Brahmans did not merely believe in the divine command to uphold their idolatrous practices, as was explained in the *Tuhfat*. This particular creed also deviated from what their theology actually said. The rest of the larger Hindu fold did not know that the *Vedanta* prohibited those ceremonies and rituals that Brahmans entertained because the Brahmans had firmly kept the 'Brahmin Bible' secret, 'within the dark curtain of the Sanskrit language.' As a consequence of which, 'the practice of few Hindoos indeed bears the least accordance with its precepts.'<sup>31</sup>

3. Roy continued his reply to Shankara Shastri and stated that although the *Vedas* had not been previously translated into any vernacular language, the *Shastras* had been. Yet the Brahmin emphasis on the *Shastras*

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<sup>28</sup> See A. K. Majumdar, 1975: 82.

<sup>29</sup> Rammohun Roy, 1817a: 84.

<sup>30</sup> Rammohun Roy, 1816: 59.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*: 59.

leads to severe reflections on the selfishness which must actuate those Brahmanical teachers who, notwithstanding the unanimous authority of the Sastras for the adoption of pure worship, yet, with the view of maintaining the title of God which they arrogate to themselves and of deriving pecuniary and other advantages from the numerous rites and festivals and idol worship, constantly advance and encourage idolatry to the utmost of their power.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, in a preface to his translation of the *Kuth-Opanishud* (1819), Roy formulated his goal to demonstrate that the originals proved that Indians had been familiar with true conceptions of the One and Only. Where in the *Tuhfat* Roy acknowledged that he was a member of a Brahmin-nation that suffered from a Muslim crusade against idolatry, this inhibited and more sympathetic voice was conspicuously absent in his English works. The Brahmins had not only emphasised that which served their own interests: the sacred texts were also written in an obscure language of allegory. His reading had to allow the Europeans to make their own judgement of the Indian religion instead of deriving it from 'the superstitious rites and habits daily encouraged and fostered by their self-interested leaders.'<sup>33</sup> As his public already knew by then, this was an imposed Brahmin-centred system of faith, added upon an original and pure religion, 'which destroys, to the utmost degree, the natural texture of society' – all by and for their self-interested leaders.<sup>34</sup>

The hedging and peculiarities displayed in colonial scholarship were clearly absent in the response of orthodox Brahmins. Roy's opponent in the *Madras Courier* never referred to Brahmins as the ones responsible for all-Indian practices, neither did he refer to a secret language, nor did he put an emphasis on their sacred books. In *A Second Defence of the Monotheistic System of the Vedas* (1817), Roy restated the counter argument of 'a learned Brahmin' as nothing but irrational and solely based on ancestral authority.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, Roy had already stated in the preface to his translation of the abridged *Vedanta* that 'in place of adducing reasonable arguments in support of their conduct, they [the greater part of Brahmins] conceive it fully sufficient to quote their ancestors as positive authorities.'<sup>36</sup> To explain their customs, Roy's indigenous opponents in an early nineteenth-century debate only referred to tradition and to ancestral practices. Rammohun Roy, on the other hand, adopted all the hedging features that characterized colonial scholarship. As Max Müller summarized it on the fiftieth anniversary of Roy's death: when Rammohun Roy published the first of his English works he 'appealed to the Sacred Books... as bearing witness against the idolatry of the priest-ridden masses.'<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Rammohun Roy, 1817a: 85. For a similar conception of Brahmin priestcraft, see as well Roy, 1817b.

<sup>33</sup> Rammohun Roy, 1819: 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.: 23.

<sup>35</sup> See Rammohun Roy, 1817b: 102.

<sup>36</sup> Rammohun Roy, 1816: 59. The same orthodox argument was elaborated upon at length in an 1820 tract, *Dialogue between a Theist and an Idolater*.

<sup>37</sup> Max Müller cited in Mookerjee 1970: 32.



That this explanation of traditional practices by reference to sacerdotal Brahmin influences was not merely an argument crafted especially for the English reading public became clear in an 1820 tract, *Dialogue between a Theist and an Idolater*, printed under a pseudonym in both Bengali and its English translation. The Bengali version was widely discussed and reprinted several times up to the middle of the nineteenth-century. Stephen Hay's edition (1963) is the most recent reprint. Roy's conceptualisation of religion and its relationship with priesthood was not merely an idiomatic tool to address the European community. Both the Bengali and the English public were informed that the Hindus

cannot have become liable to eternal salvation by playing with images; for self-interested pundits, seeing that they could derive much profit from inculcating the worship of images, excited them continually to the practice of such image worship, and neglecting to make them acquainted with the Oopenishads, or any other Shasters in which the way of obtaining salvation is taught, they made them believe that they could become perfect through the worship of images.<sup>38</sup>

### In Retrospect

In previous chapters I have argued that even though the Orientalist-Anglicist controversy has been called upon to explain colonial moods, policies and scholarship pertaining to Indian religion and society, both camps agreed with Evangelical accounts of the socio-religious practices that confronted the colonial administration. All participants in a colonial debate agreed on the identification of Brahmins as India's 'priesthood,' responsible for the religious and social status quo. I have argued that due to considerable presuppositions, ambiguities and contradictions that characterized these accounts, the centrality of Brahmins as a crafty priesthood had to derive its coherence from a framework that consistently structured that understanding: both Semitic historiography and Protestant theology were called upon to account for a socio-religious landscape constituted by non-Semitic practices. For some explicitly in references to the Bible, for others as a *de-christianised* understanding that continued to be a framework of reference, this conception of religion could provide coherence to colonial scholarship pertaining to India's religion and its social organization. The colonial explanation of the practices entertained by different *sampradāys*, as well as its explanation of a multitude of *jātis*, derived its coherence and intelligibility from a *Christian-theological understanding of religion and its connection with priesthood that came to be part of the cultural experience of the West*.

Secondly, I have shown that Roy's later analysis of indigenous practices was fundamentally based upon this *religious* understanding of religion that structured Europe's conceptualisation of religion: contemporary practices embodied a corruption of the original and natural sense of the divine

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<sup>38</sup> Roy in Stephen Hay (ed.) (1963): 89.

– a Biblical notion that Muslims and Christians agreed upon. Roy's identification of the cause of this corruption was clearly structured by the more developed theory of priestcraft that Protestant theology had built upon this theological understanding of religion.

Firstly, there were several instances that suggest that this presupposed religious understanding of religion, and its connection with priesthood, was in fact simply inappropriate to account for traditions in the Indian subcontinent. However, as an indigenous reformer, Roy never referred to these problems that characterised the colonial understanding of his own traditional practices. Secondly, Roy's early native opponents did not take recourse to this understanding in order to explain their practices. Thirdly, the tone and content of the *Tuhfat* differed clearly in its assessment of Brahmins compared to Roy's later and English works. Nevertheless, in these later works his analysis not only came to be structured in clearly Semitic terms: the dynamics of a sacerdotal faction, prominent in Europe's conceptualisation of religion, came to the fore as well. Roy unmistakably reiterated the theological accounts of British administrators and ended up criticizing Brahmins as 'priests' and 'Hinduism' as a degenerated 'religion of the priests.' The Brahmin identity grew to be consonant with a pan-Indian priesthood within a larger Hindu fold, responsible for the corruption of the masses by means of its religious authority. The multitude of practices came to be clustered, yet again, into a Brahmin-centred system that displayed all the characteristics of the 'religion of priests' identified in colonial scholarship. The difference between theory and praxis others have discerned in Roy's sustained personal adherence to Brahmin practices – i.e. the restricted admittance of only Brahmins to the *Brahmo Sabha*, Roy's continued acceptance of the sacred thread, the Brahmin cook he took along on the boat to England, etc.<sup>39</sup> – does not refute my analysis of Roy's understanding of traditional practices, albeit merely as his theoretical argument for religious reform.

Therefore, a sustained emphasis on the Orientalist-Anglicist polarization theory obscures a profound understanding of so-called acculturation in Bengali society: in his evaluation and explanation of traditional practices, Roy shared precisely those Biblical and Protestant principles that Orientalists and Anglicists agreed upon. Consequently, a serious understanding of the colonial conception of religion will not only provide a promising analysis of colonial theory construction regarding non-Semitic practices and their alleged 'priesthood.' But as long as critical scholarship fails to grapple with the religious background that shaped Europe's understanding of religion, it will also fail to grasp the indigenous response that came to be structured along the same theological lines. In addition, this suggests that the difference between 'tradition' and 'modernity' that recent scholarship has so eagerly tried to soften has to be interpreted within the theological terms that increasingly came

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<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, Sumit Sarkar, 1975.

to structure, I conjecture, the argument of subsequent participants in a nineteenth-century indigenous debate.

In the following section I will refer to a second reformer in order to demonstrate the long-lasting and profound influence of this religious understanding of religion, its assumed universal relationship with priesthood, and the latter's influence upon society. Where the works of Roy referred to above focussed on religious reform, Bhimrao Ambedkar is known for his zealous attempts at social reform. Both Orientalist and Anglicist scholarship clearly elucidated the religious and social landscape of the subcontinent by means of Christian theological beliefs that structured their accounts. They identified a class of avaricious priests in order to account for India's corrupted 'religion of priests.' After hope had already forsaken the lands of the South Asian subcontinent, the Brahmin industry worked hard to establish the religious and civil authority of this priesthood in perpetuity. Friends and foes alike, none was safe from the dynamics of satanic priestcraft. The example of Ambedkar will suggest the perpetuated sway of this *religious tale* over twentieth-century social reformers: also the social hierarchies in the subcontinent were said to be the ramification of a pan-Indian Brahmin-centred sacerdotal force.

## Nine

### BRAHMINVAD HO BARBAD: THE LANGUAGE OF CORRUPTION

#### Mantras of Anti-Brahmanism

Though questions of social reform had already troubled some reformers in Bengal, from the middle of the nineteenth century a much wider movement came to construct harsh pontificates against the 'priestly' Brahmins and their suspected religious and civil authority. The colonial emphasis in the decennial census on a Brahmin-centred *varna*-structure had a profound influence on local politics and caste identities all over the subcontinent. Accordingly, Nicholas Dirks drew attention to the fact that fixed caste identities increasingly had begun to form the basis of political mobilization: the colonial understanding of caste had brought about a growth in social tensions and a claim for higher caste identities by the so-called lower caste groups.<sup>40</sup> In Maharashtra, Jotirao Phule started to write his acrimonious tracts against a virtual Brahmin-centred religion of caste. From the 1850s onwards, Phule argued adamantly against the process of sanskritization in order to break away from a prevailing 'Brahmin ideology.' He was particularly negative about the embracement of Brahmin customs, dress and parlance by upward moving groups in search for a higher social ranking. Though most upper-caste reformers tried to establish caste as socially acceptable and just by attempts to modify its 'ideology,' for Phule, caste had to be abolished in its entirety.<sup>41</sup>

As a matter of fact, such straightforward repudiation of so-called 'Brahmin principles,' it has been said, was not an altogether completely new phenomenon. Advocates of subaltern consciousnesses have argued for the prevalence of immanent critiques of caste centred on a subaltern rejection of the supposedly dominant 'ideology.' Partha Chatterjee, for instance, has argued at length that non-Brahmin groups in Indian society, which he himself calls 'subordinate caste groups,' had their own ideas and practices that deviated from 'Brahmin principles.'<sup>42</sup> While Chatterjee infused the theory of Antonio Gramsci in studies of the Indian subcontinent so as to illuminate this empirical fact, this idea should not surprise us any longer: the assumed generality and supremacy of Brahmin customs was entirely structured from within a colonial understanding of Brahmin and non-Brahmin practices, pigeonholed into a Brahmin-centred 'religion of priests.'<sup>43</sup> Other groups, thus, entertained different 'ideologies' and are said to have expressed these in arguments contrary to the 'Brahmin

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<sup>40</sup> See Nicholas Dirks, 2001: 235-36.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.: 237.

<sup>42</sup> See Partha Chatterjee, 1989, and 1993: 173-199.

<sup>43</sup> See Partha Chatterjee, 1989: 169-72. It is interesting to note that in the passages Chatterjee quotes from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* the latter is talking about dominant and subordinate factions within the Catholic fold.

ideology.’ As the eighteenth and earlier centuries had already witnessed passionate debates about ‘religious practices’ before the modern reformers took up the issue, Chatterjee illustrated how between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century ‘minor religious sects’ in Bengal had differentiated themselves from an imperious ‘Brahmin ideology of caste’ – presumably the *varna*-theory and its parameters of purity and pollution.

Regarding the nineteenth century, Chatterjee narrated the story of Balaram Hadi, the founder of the Balarami or Balahadi sect, born sometime around 1780.<sup>44</sup> Although Balaram was illiterate, he was well known for his sharp and humorous arguments against Brahmin rituals. He emerged as a religious leader for lowest castes in the 1830s and the sect is known for its clear-cut hatred against Brahmins, conspicuously embodied in its origin story in which Brahmins came to be posited among the polluted natural species. Hence, the Balahadis continued ‘*to undertake the classification of social groups in terms of a natural division into species ... by overturning the hierarchical order of the Puranic creation myths...*’<sup>45</sup> For Chatterjee, then, the Balahadis were arguing against caste from within the parameters that were set up by the dominant Brahmin ‘ideology of caste.’ Yet, as must be obvious from the above, if the Balahadis merely inverted an alleged Brahmin-centred order, they were clearly not arguing against the principle of social hierarchies at all.<sup>46</sup>

Such so-called immanent critiques of caste, previous to and different from the external critique based on the liberal ideology of Europe, are said to constitute an indigenous debate in defiance of ‘Brahmin principles.’ Of all the acrimonious analyses offered, however, I conjecture that there was no argument directed against ‘priestly’ Brahmins as the agents to account for the varied practices that different sects and schools of thought entertained. That means to say, neither was their argument directed against Brahmins as the corrupters of an original religion embodied in sacred scriptures, nor was their argument directed against a priesthood that had installed the prominence of such social hierarchies.<sup>47</sup>

As already argued above, this conception of Brahmin accountability was a direct offshoot of their granted identity of priesthood. The canonization of the *Manu Dharm a Shāstras* and the colonial interpretation of a fourfold *varna*-theory, alongside a forced reading of the *Purusha Shuketa* story, had

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<sup>44</sup> See Partha Chatterjee, 1989: 195-200.

<sup>45</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 1989: 203.

<sup>46</sup> This seems to correspond with the observation in colonial scholarship referred to above: social hierarchies and ‘caste rules’ were most ubiquitous among the lowest social strata.

<sup>47</sup> The same anti-Brahmin dynamics have been identified in the *Veerashaiva* movement, predominantly prevalent in Karnataka. However, in a recent conference in Hegodu, Shimoga district, January 2003, the conventional understanding that the works of twelfth-century *Shaiva* thinkers were in actual fact a reaction against Brahmins and their alleged ‘ideology of caste’ has been more than substantially challenged. It is also interesting to note that seventy percent of the literature in Kannada was most certainly not produced by a Brahmin community that is said to have controlled the resources of literary production.

rendered the Brahmins indispensable to explain the social landscape of the subcontinent. As outlined above, a multitude of *jātis* came to be clustered into a *Brahmin-centred* social organization. All the hierarchies that might have been present in the Indian context were nothing but ramifications of the Brahmin industry. I have argued above that this understanding is only intelligible provided we accept the extraordinary fact that Christian theology imparts valuable truth claims about non-Semitic practices and about the social identity of a community in the Indian subcontinent. The identification of Brahmins as an imperious priesthood responsible for the social and religious status quo derived its structure and coherence from a Christian understanding of religion in which priests stood central and were accountable for social hierarchies inside and outside the Church. As I will demonstrate below, the indigenous debate, then, came to be structured around a Brahmin-centred religion of caste. Jotirao Phule and those that followed in his footsteps were engaged in criticizing Brahmins as India's crafty priesthood: Brahmins were said to have used a religious authority in order to cast socio-religious hierarchies for the benefit of their nearest and dearest.

In the wake of Phule's rejection of caste, anti-Brahmin movements emerged in the West and in the South. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar) and Bhimrao Ambedkar continued this tradition. In the following section I shall refer to Ambedkar's collected *Writings and Speeches*, edited by Vasant Moon, to suggest that indigenous social reformers had started to reiterate the religious tale that had come to be the canonical explanation of social hierarchies in the subcontinent. I have suggested that even though earlier debates might have been directed towards Brahmins, they were structured along different lines. As a matter of fact, none of the criticisms Chatterjee presented seem to have been directed against Brahmins as an Indian 'priesthood.' Consequently, the indigenous debate changed, once again: native social reformers ended up criticizing Brahmins as 'priests' and social hierarchies as consequential to a 'religion of the priests.'

### The Fundamentals of Bhimrao Ambedkar

It was the 1911 Census that revealed for the first time the considerable proportion of the diverse communities that had been depicted thus far as the 'Scheduled Castes.' In the twentieth century, however, the term 'Dalit' came to substitute other concepts such as '*harijan*' and 'untouchables' in order to designate the members of these 'Scheduled Castes.' When in the 1920s these communities started to organize themselves as an independent political movement in search for social and economic emancipation, Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956) emerged as one of its most dedicated leaders.<sup>48</sup> The Dalit movement raised its voice against the injustice and inequalities that are said to be

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<sup>48</sup> See Valerian Rodrigues, 2002: 6.

consequential to a Brahmin-centred religion of caste. Once again, it is not my intention to delve into all the personal and political details of Ambedkar's troubled life – others have already done this with a good amount of enthusiasm, some more critically than others.<sup>49</sup>

Born as a Mahar in Maharashtra, Ambedkar would have suffered in perpetuity from the yoke of untouchability. Nevertheless, after completing his B.A. in English and Persian in 1912 at the Elphinstone College, Bombay, Ambedkar was granted a scholarship for 'backward caste' students by the Maharaja of Baroda and continued his education at Columbia University. His M.A. dissertation on the *Administration and Finance of the East India Company*, along with his Ph.D. on *National Dividend*, was supplemented at the London School of Economics with a doctorate thesis on *The Problem of the Indian Rupee* (1923).<sup>50</sup> Having started his legal practice at Bombay in 1923, he emerged as a guide in the activist movements that have made him renowned till the present day. In 1927, Ambedkar, who would afterwards transpire to be the Father of the Constitution, was nominated as one of two representatives for the 'Scheduled Castes' to the Legislative Assembly of Bombay Province.<sup>51</sup> At that time his public reputation initially came to be made with the movement for temple entry, piloted by Periyar in the South. In addition to his epic brawl with Gandhi in the 1930s and his conversion to Buddhism at the end of his life, two of his most dramatic acts in those early days were drinking water from a high-caste tank after a rally in 1927 and his burning of the *Manusmriti* in December that same year.<sup>52</sup>

Ambedkar's first systematic critique of caste came to be embodied in his article *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1917), presented at an anthropology seminar at Columbia University in 1916. Ambedkar argued that the *Vedic* society knew of a class system consisting of four *varnas*: *varna* had been class, so Ambedkar said. Caste, then, was predominantly based on the imposition of endogamy. The Brahmins were the ones who originated its exclusivity and, owing to the prestige that Hinduism had bestowed upon the Brahmins, the other classes merely imitated them. As he put the matter himself: '*At some time in the history of the Hindus, the priestly class socially detached itself from the rest of the body of people and through a closed-door policy became a caste by itself.*'<sup>53</sup> Brahmins had set the ball of social reorganization rolling to suit their own interests. The subsequent religious justification in the *Manusmriti* settled the matter once and for all: the Brahmin priesthood was responsible for the transformation of a class system into a system of closed castes. To put the finishing touches to this

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<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, K. S. Bharati, 1990; Nicholas Dirks, 2001: 266-71; Dhanajay Keer, 1992; Gail Omvedt, 1994, and 1995; Valerian Rodrigues, 2002: 1-43; Arun Shourie: 1997.

<sup>50</sup> See Valerian Rodrigues, 2002: 21.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*: 10.

<sup>52</sup> See Nicholas Dirks, 2001: 266.

<sup>53</sup> Bhimrao Ambedkar, 1917: 18.

conversion from the north to the south and from the east to the west, they relied heavily on their socio-religious authority:

These customs in all their strictness are obtainable only in once caste, namely, the Brahmins, who occupy the highest place in the social hierarchy in the Hindu society ... [T]he strict observance of these customs and the social superiority arrogated by the priestly class in all ancient civilizations *are sufficient to prove* that they were the originators of this 'unnatural institution' ... <sup>54</sup>

Ambedkar's writings, so the story goes, need to be interpreted from within the political expedience of the moment. However, the thrust of this argument to explain social hierarchies in the subcontinent was not merely a singular idea, crafted for the occasion: time and again, Ambedkar explained the caste system by identifying the Brahmins as India's crafty priesthood, solely responsible for all kinds of hierarchies and calamities.

Four years after Gandhi had forced the Poona Pact (1932) in defiance of Ambedkar's call for separate electorates, Ambedkar translated this academic argument into an explosive tract, published as the undelivered speech for a conference on social reform in Lahore. His exceedingly polemical *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) constituted one of his most ardent pleas for an abolishment of the caste system. Again, the Brahmin priesthood constituted the force behind transforming the *Vedic* concept of class into the contemporary system of castes. The caste system was '*a social system which embodies the arrogance and selfishness of a perverse section of the Hindus who were superior enough in social status to set it in fashion and who had the authority to force it on their inferiors.*'<sup>55</sup> Hence, the priestly Brahmins had already been hierarchically superior before the caste system grew to be standardized. They invested their authority in perpetuity for the obvious reasons that they were *arrogant, mercenary, and perverted*. They were the ones who originated the exclusivity of class and the other classes merely imitated them.

Ambedkar was particularly critical of racial theories of caste, associated with an Aryan invasion theory. In his *Castes in India* he referred to the sociologist Ketkar who had noticed that '*[w]hether a tribe or a family was racially Aryan or Dravidian was a question which never troubled the people of India, until foreign scholars came in and began to draw the line.*'<sup>56</sup> In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar himself stated that the racial relationship between a Brahmin from Madras and a *harijan* from Madras was stronger than the affinity between the former and a Brahmin from the Punjab. Therefore, the '*Caste System is a social division of people of the same race.*'<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.: 15, emphasis mine.

<sup>55</sup> Bhimrao Ambedkar, 1936: 50.

<sup>56</sup> S. V. Ketkar, cited in Ambedkar, 1917: 15.

<sup>57</sup> Bhimrao Ambedkar, 1936: 49.



That Ambedkar eventually merely accepted European authority and adopted polemical slogans might well be reflected in his belief in the prodigious explanatory power of this social organization, supported by a grand 'religion of priests.' Caste explained the *anti-social* and *selfish spirit* of the Hindus and their *unwillingness to forgive*. It accounted for the *timidity* and *cowardice* that distinguished the Hindu from the Muslim and the Sikh – even though they are also said to be organised into a system of social stratification – and all this resulted in the Hindu's low ways of *treachery* and *cunning*. Caste impeded *public spirit*, *public charity*, and *public opinion*.<sup>58</sup> Taking into account the many horror stories Ambedkar provided his audience with, we might well conclude that caste as *deus ex machina* was the embodiment of moral corruption, based on prejudices and sacred books, instilled by a perfidious section of the Indian population.

Only the notion of inter-marriage could be a feasible solution to annihilate this social organization.<sup>59</sup> However, merely eradicating endogamy would not solve the central problem. Inter-marriage could only be effective after the religious dogma's that could prevent it had been abolished: '*The real enemy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras [that] mould the beliefs and opinions of the people.*'<sup>60</sup> However, once again, the problem did not merely consist in what the *Shāstras* actually said or did not say: it consisted in the manner in which those who controlled the laity had understood them. The fold of believers was imitative and followed the intellectual class in matters as these: the 'Hindu' was not free to follow his reason in the interpretation of religion but was subordinated to the crafty priesthood that translated the scriptures. Priesthood was central: the collection of practices that was encapsulated by an Indian religion was what the priests had imposed upon the laity. Ambedkar saw their influence as follows: '*the Brahmins form ... not only an intellectual class but it is a class which is held in great reverence by the rest of the Hindus. The Hindus are taught that the Brahmins are Bhū-devas (Gods on earth).*'<sup>61</sup> The legislative measures he proposed to abolish this system should '*help to kill Brahminism and will help to kill Caste which is nothing but Brahminism incarnate.*'<sup>62</sup>

The connection between sacerdotal scriptures and the social organization was central throughout his entire oeuvre with reference to the caste system. Ambedkar is said to have changed his strategy to combat the caste system, culminating in his drastic decision to leave the Hindu fold. Nevertheless, his fundamental understanding of caste remained constant. At a time when he was

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.: 51-56.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.: 67.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.: 68.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.: 71. In *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* one of the sources used to represent the 'priestly' Brahmins as '*Bhū-devas*' was, among other reports, Ludovico Di Varthema's sixteenth-century travelling account of Hindu 'priests' paid to 'deflower' the kings' bride during their first night. See Bhimrao Ambedkar, 1945: 205. See as well Bhimrao Ambedkar, 1987.

<sup>62</sup> Bhimrao Ambedkar, 1936: 77.

highly engaged in the Constituent Assembly Debates and was arguing for constitutional safeguards regarding the Dalit community, despite the fact that Gandhi and Congress only recognized Muslims and Sikhs as constituting distinct identities, Ambedkar published two subsequent books: *Who Were the Shudras* (1946), in memory of Jotirao Phule, and *The Untouchables* (1947). He devoted the introduction of both works to elucidate the Brahmin laws and their literary system of *varnas* in order to argue for the religious basis of caste. His work on the Shudras started with a canonical outline of the *Purusha Shukta* story, reading social hierarchies in a hymn that never mentioned them.<sup>63</sup> Caste practices were laid down in books and explained what the colonial administrators also saw: a corrupted society. Disregarding his opponents, Ambedkar would continue ‘*the exposure of the Sacred books so that the Hindus may know that it is the doctrines contained in their Sacred Books which are responsible for the decline and fall of their country and their society ...*’<sup>64</sup> That all this was consequential to a ‘religion of priests’ was again clear from the beginning onwards. The books were ‘*almost entirely the creation of the Brahmins ... to sustain the superiority and privileges of the Brahmins as against the non-Brahmins.*’<sup>65</sup> Yet Ambedkar didn’t seem to wonder how Brahmins managed to realize this supremacy when they kept the books devised for this purpose secret from the general public. Be this as it may, that his opponents didn’t like to admit their fraud suggested that ‘*they are more selfish than any other set of beings in the world ...*’<sup>66</sup> Therefore, Ambedkar recommended that Brahmin scholars had better not take part in this kind of study. Only researchers like himself, *free from passion and all political prejudices*, were suited for this job. Hence, the tremendous insight into India’s social organization by the father of its constitution.

### Where the Emperor has no Clothes

I have argued above that the identification of a Brahmin ‘priesthood,’ central in colonial scholarship on the socio-religious territory of the Company’s dominions, had to derive its coherence from a Christian understanding of religion in which it was nothing but ordinary that priesthood was a universal phenomenon, responsible for social hierarchies all over the world. I have suggested above that the early indigenous debate that might have been directed towards Brahmins – were it structured on Buddhist, *Advaitavadin*, *Veerashaiva* or *Bhakti* lines, or were it embodied in the poetry of *Kabir-pantis* – was under no circumstances directed against the Brahmins as India’s ‘priesthood,’ being responsible for the hierarchies that characterized the social life in local settings. Nevertheless, the example of

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<sup>63</sup> See Bhimrao Ambedkar, 1946: 26. In both subsequent works, as well, Ambedkar devoted an entire chapter to an argument in defiance of the Aryan race theory of caste. See Bhimrao Ambedkar, 1946: Ch. 4, and 1947: Ch. 7.

<sup>64</sup> Bhimrao Ambedkar, 1946: 15.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*: 16.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*: 14. See as well Bhimrao Ambedkar, 1947.

Ambedkar suggests that the debate had distinctively changed through the unconditional acceptance of a religious account, as well as its interpretation of the Brahmin identity, by indigenous reformers of the social realm.

Both Rammohun Roy and Bhimrao Ambedkar were divided by a century of changing socio-political circumstances. Each had its own political and/or religious agenda. Yet it is clear that the difference between Orientalists and Anglicists or Evangelicals others find so important in the context of modern Indian intellectual movement is of no relevance when it comes to an understanding of Indian religion and society among Indian intellectuals. Both saw the social identity of Brahmins to correspond with 'priesthood.' Both criticized the Brahmins as crafty priests, responsible for the religious degeneration or social organization identified in colonial scholarship. An educated guess might suggest that for subsequent modern Indian intellectuals, the socio-religious landscape of the Indian subcontinent came to be shaped as a direct consequence of the hard work of a Brahmin-centred 'religion of priests.'

## Ten

### CONCLUSION

The explanatory identification of a corrupted religion of priests in South Asian civilization has been presented from within the historical context of the formative Orientalist-Anglicist debate. I have initially presented a reading of two eighteenth-century proto-Orientalist writers, the first one highly censorious of missionary accounts, and the second one a missionary himself. The outline served as a starting point to discuss some key concepts and methods of Orientalist indological research. I have centred the subsequent overview on accounts of Europeans from different sociological, ideological and historical backgrounds. I have also sought to compare missionary writings with secular research before and after, inside and outside the Asiatic Society of Bengal. In addition, and where this could illuminate the contention of this essay, limited reference has been made to the continuity with early representations of Brahmins in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. From the introduction to this essay onwards, I have given attention to two facets of colonial scholarship: the political interests within which it operated and the socio-political, historical, and, most importantly, cultural surroundings that shaped its explanatory understanding.

The coincidences in colonial explanations of traditional practices and social customs served as the first part to the contention of this essay: with reference to a fundamental understanding of Indian religion and society, the Orientalist-Anglicist debate was a pseudo-debate. Both missionary and so-called secular research, Orientalist and Evangelical-cum-Anglicist accounts, all relied entirely on the centrality of Brahmins and the granted identity of their 'priesthood.' Brahmins were said to have constituted a closed community or endogamous tribe of priests, responsible for the corruption of religion and the social hierarchies that were said to saturate the entire landscape of the subcontinent. Additionally, any programme of religious or social reform saw its labour in opposition to the alleged privileges of a Brahmin priesthood. In colonial historiography and anthropology, then, traditional local practices could be understood from within a Brahmin-centred 'religion of priests.' On the other hand, a multitude of local identities, expressed in *jātis* and other significant units of social existence, came to be interpreted from within a Brahmin-centred religion of caste, consequential to a grand 'religion of priests.'

Secondly, in the sixth chapter I have provided an overview of several aberrations and problems in colonial scholarship that relied on notions such as a 'religion of priests' in order to understand Indian religion and society. Nevertheless, the veracity of its understanding remained unchallenged: the religious assumptions on which different factions in a colonial debate based their accounts were never questioned. On the contrary, the Brahmin authority and their social identity of priesthood became

standard concepts in an explanation of traditional practices and social hierarchies in a non-Semitic culture. I have argued that such a canonization implied the acceptance of a religious and Semitic understanding of religion, supplemented by purely Christian theology. This does not mean that secular writers were actively engaged in Protestant theology. However, it does entail that their understanding of religion was fundamentally based on *de-christianised* Christian notions that had come to be essential to Europe's understanding of religion. Consequently, when contemporary scholars take the Orientalist-Anglicist divide as a valuable explanatory framework to describe modern Indian history, *they transpire to be theologians in a secular guise*. That this framework makes sense after all can only be elucidated by reference to *de-christianised* Christian conceptions as being part of the intellectual history of the West, and, hence, as being constitutive of the Western cultural and religious experience.

Recent avalanches of postcolonial writings have referred to the sacred alliance between governance and knowledge production in order to theorize colonial scholarship. However, in the introduction to this essay I have set myself the goal to argue, amongst other things, that critical postcolonial theory does not provide an answer to colonial historiography and anthropology that has tried to explain the customs of a traditional society by reference to the Brahmin industry. The latest work of Nicholas Dirks served as one of the finest examples, providing interesting insights into the colonial propensity to focus on Brahmin ideas and Brahmin testimonies, yet unable to explain this tendency adequately. The insights into the politics of representation Dirks adhered to could not account for the specific narrative of colonial scholarship. In order to provide an alternative explanation I have elaborated in more detail upon the *religious* experience of colonial administrators that could actually account for these interesting facts. Consequently, postcolonial scholarship will continue in its failure to grasp our colonial understanding concerning Indian religion and society as long as it fails to grapple with the Western experience of religion that structured that understanding. Any explanatory approach towards colonial discourse analysis will have to take into consideration the cultural and religious transformations in the Christian world between the thirteenth and seventeenth century.

Thirdly, the examples of both Rammohun Roy and Bhimrao Ambedkar provided the opportunity to argue for a sharpened divide between traditional and modern indigenous debates as the latter came to be structured along the same *religious* lines. The *Tuhfat-ul Muwahiddin* differed distinctively from his later works in its reference to Brahmins. Secondly, his later native adversaries did not take recourse to a theory of priestcraft in order to explain indigenous practices. Thirdly, in his English works, as well as in a Bengali tract with its English translation, Rammohun Roy not even faintly considered the problems that characterised the colonial explanation of traditional practices. These later works have

shown how Rammohun Roy came to interpret traditional practices via the religious notions that characterized colonial scholarship.

Consonant with earlier indigenous debates on religion, previous debates supposedly directed against a Brahmin 'ideology of caste' did not refer to the central concepts that constituted Europe's understanding. Bhimrao Ambedkar, however, came to explain the social hierarchies in the continent exclusively by reference to a priestly Brahmin industry. Therefore, whenever Roy, Ambedkar or those who are inspired by them accept Europe's understanding of religion and its connection with priesthood, they do not criticize their cultural inheritance at all: they merely reiterate Christianity's vacuous critiques against the pagan 'priesthood.' Consequently, the Orientalist-Anglicist divide does not provide a sufficient understanding of acculturation in Indian society: indigenous reformers came to share those principles that both schools of thought agreed upon.

As a result, postcolonial analyses of an indigenous debate on religion and society, long before and during the influx of colonial thought, will have to take into consideration the transformations that occurred during a process of cultural dialogue between the colonizer and the colonized. I have argued that both the indigenous debate on religion and the indigenous debate supposedly directed towards a Brahmin 'ideology of caste' altered their line of reasoning throughout the lingering course of colonialism. Therefore, the recent Cambridge propensity to soften the entrenched consequences of colonialism in the traffic of ideas is shown to be highly contentious.

## Eleven

### CODA: THE POSTCOLONIAL PREDICAMENT.

At the end of this essay, I hope to have justified three additional conclusions. First of all, salient reminiscences of the religious beliefs that colonial administrators brought into the subcontinent are still discernable in Indian academia nowadays. If a salient feature of the colonial experience resides in the acceptance of a Christian religious conception of religion and its theological connection with priesthood, then, the post-colonial experience should come to display the emancipation from such religious understandings. Though post-colonials have claimed to put the colonial past behind them, do they answer to this criterion that discerns them from their colonized predecessors? For the moment, a random selection might do, extracted from a recent collection of essays on *Secularism and Its Critics*, edited by Rajeev Bhargava (1998). Both extracts speak for themselves. Whilst contemplating on the ideology of secularism, Ashis Nandy, these days mentioned as an ardent criticaster of Western imports, conspicuously assessed the Brahmins within the language of Christian theology:

to many Indians today, secularism comes as a part of a larger package consisting of a set of standardized ideological products and social processes... This package often plays the same role vis-à-vis the people of the society – *sanctioning or justifying violence against the weak and the dissenting – that the church, the ulema, the sangha, or the Brahmins played in earlier times.*<sup>67</sup>

In the same collection of essays, Akeel Bilgrami explained that

[t]he idea of a monolithic, majoritarian, pseudo-unifying Hinduism is, as we tend to say today, a 'construct' ... But as construction often will, the process goes back long way into the recesses of Indian history and has helped to perpetuate the most remarkably *resilient inegalitarian social formation in the world*. It is the product of a sustained effort over centuries on the part of the upper castes to sustain their hold not only on the bases of political power but also *on the Hindu psyche*. Brahmanical ascendancy had its ancient origins in a priesthood that shaped alliances with kings and their officials as well as with the landed gentry. Through the control of religious ritual and the language of ritual – Sanskrit – and with the force of the Kshatriyas ... behind them, it gradually created a nationwide hegemony for the upper castes.<sup>68</sup>

When did all this happen? *'Much before the onset of modernity,'* Bilgrami continued. Therefore, Nandy's proposal to search for indigenous heuristics of peaceful co-existence within a traditional society was rather imprudent. As must be clear, the interpretation of the Brahmin identity and their supposedly

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<sup>67</sup> Ashis Nandy, 1998: 333, emphasis mine.

<sup>68</sup> Akeel Bilgrami, 1998: 388, emphasis mine.

central influence upon religious and social processes has not changed much since the revolutionary insights of postcolonial theory have started to become accepted as commonsense.

### **Towards a Science of non-Semitic Practices**

Neither our colonial understanding of Indian religion and society, nor our postcolonial assessment of that understanding has managed to surpass the confines of Protestant theology, constructed upon a Semitic notion of religion. Consequently, we still lack a scientific, non-theological understanding of the traditions and practices that were delineated into a Brahmin-centred 'religion of priests.' The Prince of Darkness and his priestly minions instigated rituals of fire, sacrifices and ceremonies and mantras, alongside the fallacious 'worship' of idols – so it has been said.<sup>69</sup> A non-religious understanding of all these practices that were and are still performed in the Indian subcontinent needs, first of all, to dispose of the religious notion of religion and its theological link with priesthood upon which such explanations were constructed. As argued above, besides its theological origin, the explanatory framework constituted by such religious beliefs was, as a matter of fact, rather fuzzy and inconsistent. Therefore, a non-religious understanding of these practices will have to discard the conceptualisation of these practices as sacerdotal corruptions of an original and pure religion.

Consequently, a scientific understanding of the practices in a non-Semitic culture cannot take recourse to the unconditional acceptance of Semitic and specific Christian religious thought. In a thought provoking study, S. N. Balagangadhara has made a decisive step in the construction of a non-religious understanding of religion that, first of all, identified the religious notions in previous 'scientific' theories and, secondly, developed a sound theory of religion freed from such theological assumptions.<sup>70</sup> Any scientific understanding of the practices in the Indian subcontinent has to be based on this methodology. The highly suggestive attempts by Frits Staal to arrive at a scientific theory of ritual can certainly serve as an example.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> That this notion of satanic authority was not merely a metaphor in a specific historical encounter has been argued above by reference to the religious notion of religion that structured Europe's understanding (and the Islamic understanding) of non-Semitic practices for much longer than just a few centuries. Moreover, the identification of a Brahmin priesthood responsible for religious corruption and the investment of ideological hierarchies inside and outside the 'Brahmin Church' was dependent upon the notion of satanic priestcraft.

<sup>70</sup> See S. N. Balagangadhara, 1994.

<sup>71</sup> See Frits Staal, 1990.



## Towards a Science of the Social

I have also shown how the colonial-cum-theological explanation of social hierarchies in the subcontinent displayed similar problems. Any non-religious and scientific understanding of so-called notions of purity and impurity, 'untouchability,' as well as of the notion of *varna*, has to be based on an understanding that, first of all, does not presuppose the validity of a religious conception of religion and a theological connection with priesthood.

Secondly, every scientific understanding of social hierarchies in the subcontinent has to be based on a methodology that will discard the religious beliefs that constituted colonial scholarship. Nonetheless, sociological and anthropological surveys of the Brahmin identity of 'priesthood,' along with synthetic theories of caste centred on the notion of an over-arching and uniform ideology, are both derived from this religious understanding. To arrive at a theory of India's so-called socio-religious hierarchies in a non-religious manner, then, social sciences are minimally compelled to give up the belief in a Brahmin 'priesthood' responsible for the organization that is said to encapsulate these hierarchies.

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