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Hearing Hindu Stories

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Abstract

This article presses on some of the key insights from Mack's seminal essay on Christianity vis-à-vis scholarship on a different religion, namely Hinduism. I suggest some extensions of Mack's argument to the academic study of Hindu traditions, such as identifying the harms posed by the soft inclusion of Christian theology within the discipline of Religious Studies. I argue that this is a structural problem in the modern academy that sidelines scholars of non-Christian, especially non-Abrahamic, religions and creates a model for uncritical influence from ideological and political sources. Following on Mack's analysis of the pressures of Christian theology, I identify specific non-academic threats to critical studies of Hinduism, namely the political commitments of Hindu nationalists and the embrace of orientalist ideas by scholars and practitioners. I argue it is imperative to counter both harmful trends, while recognizing significant challenges to doing so. I also draw on insights from scholarship on Hinduism to point to strategies potentially beneficial to scholars of Christianity keen to pursue Mack's ideas, such as a milder interest in questions of origins that embraces multiplicity. I conclude that scholars of Hinduism are ready to tell our stories – based on critical analyses of a diverse and complicated religious tradition – but whether our academic peers in Religious Studies are ready to hear and incorporate our insights is another matter.

Keywords

Hinduism – Christianity – theology – religious studies – Hindu nationalism – diversity

Origins are a generative or absent subject, depending on one's perspective, in Hindu thought. On the one hand, premodern Hindu texts offer countless creation stories – of the world, specific deities, and key practices such as icon-focused veneration – that embody Hinduism's general embrace of plurality. An unspoken Hindu mantra is: Why have one story, when you can have many? On the other hand, none of the reams of premodern Hindu stories concern the origins of "Hinduism," strictly speaking. The term "Hinduism" was coined by a Baptist missionary around 1800, based on the Persian term "Hindu," for which there is no equivalent in Sanskrit or Tamil, the two oldest languages used for Hindu texts (Lorenzen 1999; Oddie 2003). There is scant evidence that any premodern Hindus conceptualized their tradition in the broad-based sense definitional to Hinduism today. Instead, premodern formulations of Hindu traditions tend to focus on discrete sects, regional communities, or caste groups. And so, arguably, nobody thought about the origins of Hinduism, as such, until the eighteenth century.¹ The possibilities and limits of Hindu plurality regarding origins are one set of issues I confronted in thinking with, through, and against Burton Mack's seminal essay on a tradition, namely Christianity, whose practitioners have often demonstrated a marked preference for neater, even singular narratives. In what follows, I consider how further development of some of Mack's insights – especially on the pressures of Christian theology, telling good stories, and de-centering Christianity – might help scholars to better analyze the histories of diverse religions and integrate insights from the critical study of non-Christian traditions.

1 Our Christian-Centric Academy

Mack argued that scholars ought to separate Religious Studies and Theology, two projects that structurally overlap in the modern academy vis-à-vis Christianity. For Mack, the project to advance the academic study of Christian traditions was at risk of being hampered – to some extent outrightly blocked – by theological presuppositions:

Let's be honest. Interpreting the New Testament as a quest for contemporary theological relevance is a sophisticated form of mythic thinking.

1 For an argument on some unity among second-millennium elite Brahminical philosophers, see Nicholson 2010 and, separately, among seventeenth-century Tamil communities, see Fisher 2017.

Its pursuit is not appropriate within the academy. We shall not be able to redescribe Christian origins if our ultimate goal is a Christian hermeneutic instead of a contribution to humanistic understanding. (1996: 251)

Many scholars have concurred with the need to separate out critics from caretakers, to borrow Russell McCutcheon's phrasing (2001). In his book on the subject, McCutcheon opens by observing the structural challenges to this separation given that the American Academy of Religion (AAR) counts among its members "scholars of religion *and* theologians alike" (2001: ix). In this formulation, "Christian" is implicit for theologians, and we must make it explicit to understand the position of scholars of all other religious traditions within a still woefully Christian-centric discipline.

All scholars within or adjacent to the field of Religious Studies must find ways to survive in an academy shaped, to some degree, by Christian theology, but different challenges manifest for those who work on non-Christian traditions. Consider, for example, that Dr. Mack was on faculty at the Claremont School of Theology, which is affiliated with the United Methodist Church and bestows M.A. degrees alongside M.Div. degrees and Ph.D. degrees in, separately, Religion and Theology. And so, Mack's professional context embodied the very fuzziness between academic and confessional approaches to Christianity that he identified as an intellectual detraction. In contrast, Western academic institutions have not traditionally offered Hindu theological training, and I know of no Religious Studies department – much less university – affiliated with a Hindu denomination.² A few scholars of Hinduism have found intellectual stimulation in Christian theology. One example is Anantanand Rambachan, professor emeritus at St. Olaf's College (a Lutheran institution), and widely respected for his interfaith work with Christian communities. Dr. Rambachan's book titled *A Hindu Theology of Liberation* (2015) consciously borrows its framing from Christian liberation theology.³ Such successful convergences between scholars of Hinduism and Christian theology are wonderful, but they are the exception.

In many ways, the dominance of Christianity within the discipline of Religious Studies poses robust structural problems of sidelining scholars of

2 The Hindu University of America is a Hindu nationalist project in Florida that is not accredited; I do not include it here. At least one accredited Muslim college is currently operating in America, namely Zaytuna College in California; it considered focusing on the theological training but ultimately decided to prioritize providing a liberal arts education (Jalalzai 2016: 9).

3 This point is explicitly addressed in the book's introduction.

Hindu traditions. Take, for instance, the annual AAR conference that is held jointly with the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), a group strongly focused on Christian texts and welcoming of many Christian theologians. Both aspects are problematic. The inclusion of SBL creates a Christian dominance at the annual conference that results in a disproportionate emphasis on a single religion. In the 2021 program book for the AAR conference, the term “Christianity” is mentioned nearly twice as often as the following four traditions combined: Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism.⁴ Also, the SBL hosts scholarship that “often reproduces the myths, categories, and ideologies of its sources” (Young 2020: 329). As a result, work on Christianity presented at the major annual conference for Religious Studies is more granular than work on other religions and overlaps heavily with Christian theology, with sessions on the “Gospel of Luke” and “Practical Theology” (Christian is, once again, implied rather than stated) (AAR and SBL 2021). Our academic institutions reflect our collective values, emphases, and hierarchies as a discipline.⁵ Scholars of non-Christian, especially non-Abrahamic, traditions very much work within a Christian-centric academic world.

Since Mack wrote his seminal article in 1996, three things have changed at the annual AAR conference that augur ill for the project of critically studying religion. First, as of the mid-1990s, the annual AAR-SBL conference had been held for more than two decades concomitantly with a third association: the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR), which focuses on ancient near east archaeology.⁶ Throughout the 1990s, SBL had been taking decisions designed to push ASOR out of the alliance, perhaps for reasons of financial gain (Shanks 2000). In 1996, ASOR withdrew from the joint annual meeting and holds its own annual conference to this day, thus leaving the AAR with one predominantly Christian and theologically inflected partner.

Second, for a brief period in the first decade of the 2000s, the AAR and SBL held separate conferences, but it did not last. The split was characterized by some as “the AAR is kicking out the [Christian] theologians in order to legitimate themselves” (quoted in Howard 2007). Sounds like a good idea, especially if we want to diversify our subjects of study. After all, part of what Mack identified as an obstacle to overcoming the presumed specialness of Christianity is

4 By my count, there are 148 mentions of Christianity, 26 mentions of Hinduism, 48 of Buddhism, and two each of Jainism and Sikhism.

5 E.g., Morgenstein Fuerst (2020) argues that problematic disciplinary values are encoded in job advertisements in Islamic studies.

6 The organization’s name was changed in 2021 to American Society of Overseas Research; the acronym ASOR remains unchanged.

that this one tradition tends to be at the center of Religious Studies analyses, even when comparative. He criticized theories of religion based on Christianity, including by Mircea Eliade, as inadequate because they privilege theological claims of Christian uniqueness (1996: 253). One critical step towards changing this tired approach is to de-center Christianity. At present, the AAR is doing the opposite by giving a Christian-focused group with theological leanings special status at its annual academic meeting.

Third, the Dharma Association of North America (DANAM) was founded in 2000 and today continues to hold meetings concurrently with the AAR and SBL. DANAM seeks to create a space for soft and supportive – as opposed to critical and incisive – approaches to Hinduism and other Indian-origin religions.⁷ In so doing, DANAM repeats the mistakes of the SBL by conflating Theology and Religious Studies to the detriment of the latter. It has platformed a great deal of discussion about “authenticity and normativity” in Hinduism (Sippy 2012: 36–37) that promotes protectionism within the discipline and thereby prevents critical analyses. In so doing, a group like DANAM is actively doing the kind of intellectually-stunting work that Christian-centric thinking authorizes and prioritizes.

I can imagine that some readers might object to my digression into the organizational details of modern scholarly associations as low brow, but it is hubris to think that the life of the mind exists anywhere except in quotidian reality. Our intellectual ideas are circumscribed and inflected by the social structures we inhabit and vice-versa, sometimes in disturbing ways. As the Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective has observed (2021: 2): “Scholars constantly reproduce the very relations of power that marginalize and oppress.” The blunt truth is that Religious Studies is strongly Christian-focused and willing to tolerate epistemological bleed over from theology, assumed to be Christian to such a degree that we need not even specify. To allow the ongoing infringement of Christian theology on the academic study of religion is detrimental to understanding Christian origins, as per Mack. It is harmful in different ways to the study of non-Christian religious traditions, preventing diversification of the discipline and enabling the platforming of other essentializing projects.

7 The group is known today as the Dharma Academy of North America; the acronym DANAM remains unchanged. The group structurally omits Islam and Christianity as Indian religions, which is another glaring problem.

2 Disinvesting from Origins and Countering Bad Ideas

People like good stories, and while Mack recognizes this fact, he offers no solution to the narrative challenge that academics often tell less compelling stories than theologians. To quote Mack (1996: 248):

And yet, the older picture of Christian origins according to the gospel story, largely Lukan, is still in everyone's mind. It is as if the emergence of Christianity cannot be accounted for any other way. It is as if the accumulation of critical information within the discipline of New Testament studies cannot compete with the gospel's mystique.

Mack describes this situation as “odd” because it leaves information produced through scholarly inquiry aloof, without integration into our broader understanding of Christianity (248). But that situation makes good sense if one is looking for a compelling story, and who among us is not, even if we would rather not admit it? Half a century ago, Hayden White made a powerful argument for the centrality of literary narrative in historical writing (1973). Still, many historians have been reluctant to confront the storytelling aspect of their discipline (Spiegel 2013). Historians face competition on this front from popular writers, whose works, especially of biography, often far outsell their academic counterparts. It seems to me that Religious Studies scholars face narrative competition from those they study, as religious practitioners promote their own, often quite rhetorically attractive, origin stories.

One possible solution for overcoming the narrative power of the Lukan gospel story of Christian origins – a key issue for Mack – might be to disinvest from the question of origins. Here, the historiography of Hinduism is helpful. There is academic consensus on the earliest origin point of Hinduism, namely with the composition of the earliest parts of the Rig Veda, our oldest Hindu text, around 3,200 years ago by the descendants of migrants into the northwestern Indian subcontinent (largely parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan today). This is the most common point at which textbooks and courses on Hinduism begin. But there is little continuity between the religious practices of Vedic communities – who were limited to parts of northern India, had no temples, and sacrificed animals – and modern Hindus. Even today's most popular Hindu gods were minor figures in the Vedas or later innovations entirely. To capture this utter historical break, some scholars refer to Vedic religion or Brahminism (also spelled Brahmanism), rather than Hinduism, for the early period. But debates about these nomenclatures are mild among academics. As Romila

Thapar has put it: “Origins and identities are investigated, but these are not questions avidly chased by scholars” (Thapar, *et al.*, 2019: xi). In a sense, this follows from premodern Hindu texts that are often diffident and playful – and always multiple – concerning origins. Arguably, this relative non-interest in origins has been healthy for the study of Hinduism, dispersing scholarly interest to consider specific instantiations of Hindu traditions and developmental trends over time.

When scholars of Hinduism consider questions about origins, it is most often within the context of political pressure from Hindu nationalists. Hindu nationalists – who follow a far-right supremacist political ideology known as *Hindutva* – often try to control academic discourse on Hinduism. Gaining the ability to muzzle scholars is important to Hindu nationalists for numerous reasons. Perhaps the one most pertinent to mention here is that Hindu nationalists are invested in pushing a myth about their own origins as the indigenous people of India (Baviskar 2007; Truschke 2022). This prompts Hindu nationalists to deny an avalanche of evidence concerning ancient migrations to India by the ancestors of those who composed the *Rig Veda*. Hindu nationalists have put an immense amount of effort into churning out disinformation – often via social media and right-wing Indian publications – regarding these migrations around 1500 BCE. But it is a house of cards that the merest breeze of scholarly criticism can demolish, and so Hindu nationalists – like many other members of the global far right (Gandhi 2022) – seek to silence scholars. Critically, *Hindutva* is a violent ideology (Chaturvedi 2022), and so Hindu nationalist pressure on scholars has often involved threats of violence to advance their origin myth and other political ideas.

Hindu Right individuals and organizations have launched attacks on North America-based scholars for nearly three decades. The assaults have targeted dozens of scholars and institutions over the years and have become more aggressive and more centered on South Asian-descent academics in recent years (SASAC 2022). Perhaps the most structurally-focused assault was an attempt in the 2010s by the Dharma Civilization Foundation – a Hindu nationalist organization – to endow four chairs at the University of California-Irvine in Vedic and Indic, Sikh, Jain, and Modern India studies, respectively. The gifts for the chairs included language requiring practitioners in each position that many construed, based on other statements by the Dharma Civilization Foundation, as an intention to ideologically screen applicants (Redden 2016). The University of California-Irvine returned the money for the Vedic and Indic and Modern India chairs in the wake of bad press on their violation of academic integrity. But the episode stands as a harsh reminder of what we stand to lose if we allow non-scholarly commitments – in this case ideological in nature and backed by big money – to constrict academic discourse.

Scholars have responded to the Hindu nationalist obsession regarding the origins of the Vedic peoples in three main ways. Most have ignored it, and a select few have engaged with it (e.g., Bryant and Patton 2005). Especially more recently, some scholars have elected to write about the modern implications of Hindu nationalists' fierce political denial of banal facts of ancient Indian history (e.g., Etter 2020; Truschke 2022). In this last approach, the quest for origins is turned on its head and becomes an investigation into why contemporary Hindu nationalists are keen to push new mythologies. The Hindutva quest for origins can never tell us about premodern Hindus – or really anything about the realities of ancient Indian life – owing to the ahistorical commitments of Hindu nationalists. But this political agenda can provide the raw material for changing the subject of inquiry to modern Hindutva's thirst for a narrow kind of imagined ancient roots. This approach has much merit, but it also takes us away from analyses of early Hinduism.

For those who want to know about premodern versions of specific religious traditions, the only viable option is to work through bad ideas that restrain academic thinking, and regarding Hinduism, Orientalism remains a pervasive problem. Orientalism is stereotypical, often reified and static depictions of eastern societies (Said 1978). For example, a recurrent notion is that Hinduism is a “timeless tradition” (Johnsen 2009), a position which denies historical development to Hindu traditions and instead posits the religion and its practitioners as locked in amber, always the same. Notably, Hinduism's alleged ahistorical essence is a notion commonly repeated in popular publications on Hindu traditions and is embraced by many within the tradition as what sets it apart. For example, the right-leaning publication *Hinduism Today* describes Hinduism on its website as the “Eternal Way” and “our planet's original and oldest living religion” (2020). Such a view is absurd historically. And yet, who wants to be the villain that breaks the magic? Against the backdrop of such a prizing of mythological timelessness, scholars of Hinduism are positioned similarly to the many scholars of Christianity who, as per Mack (1996: 250), prefer to “not explain the gospels away” and instead cling to something inflexible and unique about Christianity.

Orientalism operates, to some degree, in a roughly parallel manner to the constricting pressures of Christian theology in that both are espoused by scholars and practitioners alike. A good, brief example is how Westerner practitioners of yoga and some Hindus have projected a sanctified meaning onto “namaste,” the Hindi word for “hello.” Liz Bucar addresses this in her recent book on cultural appropriations of religion, where she uses the concepts of internalized orientalism on the part of religious communities and muddled orientalism, a “careless mixing” of Orientalist tropes (2022). Bucar notes, “Muddled orientalism is how ‘namaste’ gets infused with liturgical meaning in a US yoga

studio when, in a South Asian context, the word is a simple greeting” (2022: 195). And yet, many practicing Hindus who seek to represent their tradition to broad Western audiences endorse this orientalist trope, such as Varun Soni, Dean of Religious Life at the University of Southern California, who told Oprah viewers in 2015 that namaste “literally means the divinity within me acknowledges and salutes the divinity within you” and encodes “a core Hindu theological belief” (Winfrey 2015).⁸ Such a view constructs Hinduism as a unique and calcified spiritual tradition in ways that leave no room for academic inquiry into the religion as a “thoughtful human construction” (Mack 1996: 254).

We can uphold the inscrutable charisma of Hinduism or explain how specific elements of the tradition came to be, but we cannot do both. From an academic perspective, Orientalist tropes sell short Hindu traditions and their diverse practitioners over time. Hinduism is a dynamic part of social and religious life for many, and we do justice to the tradition’s depth and dynamism by analyzing it. Scholarly approaches to Hinduism also have the potential to produce knowledge that can be integrated into broader academic conversations, such as concerning the definition of “religion” or comparative studies of traditions. Although here, we again face structural problems.

3 Changing the Subject

Towards the end of his essay, Mack asks provocatively (1996: 263): “What if we found a way to wriggle free from the gospel’s mystique and change the subject?” But that goal is not so easily achieved within current frameworks. One roughly comparable example – of something difficult to achieve – comes from scholarship on Hinduism that attempts to rethink the definition of religion. All scholars of Hinduism have struggled with the basic issue that “religion” is a category forged by people thinking about western Christianity and so Hinduism, often, seems an ill fit. The result is to put ourselves in a bind. As Will Sweetman has put it, the theoretically corrective idea that “Hinduism is not a religion” is “an axiom of research into the religious beliefs and practices of the Hindus” whose very formulation depends on a Christian conception of “religion” as a category (2003: 329). As another scholar explains regarding religious traditions generally, the question of whether to apply the Western category of “religion” to other traditions is a choice between two bad options:

8 Soni also stated that India is the “only Hindu majority country in the world,” which is false. Nepal has a slightly stronger Hindu majority, percentage-wise, than India.

We seem then to be faced with a choice between two violences: on the one hand, the violence of imposing the category “religion” on practices (and perhaps also beliefs) even though those practices and beliefs do not readily fit the model of religion and are thereby distorted, misjudged, and found wanting in the process, and on the other hand, the violence of refusing the term religion to such practices because that denial can also be regarded as demeaning so long as the still dominant framework of the Western tradition remains intact.

BERNASCONI 2009: 222

Perhaps there is a third option that is a slight twist on Mack’s call to “change the subject.” Perhaps the discipline might support deep, sustained, intellectual inquiry into non-Christian traditions such that we have more knowledge about them to reform our dominant frameworks. Put more bluntly and specifically, perhaps robust study of “Hinduism” might, slowly, expand our definition of “religion.” And yet, I wonder, are we prepared to create the conditions under which such change is possible?

I would like to end with a flourish à la Mack and declare that there are so many Hindu stories, waiting to be told in the modern academy. There are, but the issue is not so much telling them as hearing them. If non-Christian stories, whether about origins or other subjects, are to be heard beyond specialist circles, we need a changed academy. We require the full integration of scholars of non-Abrahamic religions, not only on the margins of a Christian-centered discipline. We require an academic discipline that is based on critical inquiry and is willing to stand against the constricting imposition of non-intellectual ideas, whether theological or political. I see a long road but no reason not to begin.

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