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HINDU VIEWS OF RELIGIOUS OTHERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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[Classical Hindu thinkers perfected their orthodoxy and orthopraxis in part by critiquing alternatives. Relying on hierarchies in knowledge, education, morality, and even human nature, they judged other positions defective versions of their own. Theists additionally found God implicitly present in other incomplete, misguided beliefs providentially permitted by God for a time. Likewise, Hindu theorists of the 20th century, in the light of colonialism and missionary critique, ranked Hinduism's spiritual practice above externalist, historicist, and doctrine-oriented Western religiosity. While none of these Hindu views is identical to dominant Catholic ones, a comparison illumines what is and what is not unique in similar Christian claims.]

IN IMPORTANT WAYS it makes good sense to compare Catholic and Hindu positions on religious pluralism just as on a wide range of other issues.[1] Differences notwithstanding, many Catholics and Hindus have much in common regarding important religious and theological truths: the world is real and intelligible; material realities must be understood in the context of larger spiritual realities; there is an ultimate goal that, when attained, offers a liberation that involves radical transformation. Many theistic Hindus share with Christians even more specific views about God: there is an omnipotent and omniscient divine person who is compassionate

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[1] For some primary materials and summations of Hindu attitudes to other religions, see the works by Coward, Griffiths, Halbfass, and Henderson cited in my introduction (p. 217–18) to this issue of *Theological Studies*. See also Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (New York: Oxford University, 2001).

as well as just; God and not humans takes the initiative in the divine-human encounter; God decides to become involved in the world even to the point of speaking in human words and becoming embodied in human form(s); God liberates humans.

Nonetheless, the idea of illumining Catholic views of other religions by attention to "Hindu views of religious others" is problematic, for the simple reason that it is difficult to state the nature of the "Hinduism" involved in the comparisons. James Fredericks's skillful introductory article has shown major features of Catholic teaching, while pointing out at the same time some of the problems incumbent upon those who would attempt to define certain definitive modern Catholic positions. The problems are all the more vexing with respect to Hinduism, with its dispersed centers of authority and communal loyalties. Hinduism can be assessed as a label foreign to the Indian traditions and originally simply a reference to the geographical area of India and the beliefs and customs of the people living there, and perpetuated in part due to the dubious presupposition that each culture must have its own religion.[2] One need not agree entirely with those who suggest that Hinduism is a label without a real referent that one ought not to use, but from the start we should remember that there are many traditions grouped under Hinduism, and that, in a fuller study, one would have to see as the actual counterpart to Hinduism not Catholicism as a single separable Church, but rather the entire array of Christian communities, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—and perhaps even Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But such sensitivities can also be exaggerated and should not be allowed to subvert entirely the idea of comparisons between specific traditions that can adequately be labeled Hindu and Christian as I use them in what follows.[3]

In the central sections of my article I illustrate some of the strategies taken by a cross section of Hindus in their reflection on some religious others, in India and in relation to the West. I give preference to positions possessing more evident theological force. First, I take up traditional Hindu views of "the other" as exemplified in the orthodox brahmanical theology of the eighth-century theologian Kumarila Bhatta. Second, I address the (mono)theistic Srivaisnava theology of the eleventh-century theologian Ramanuja and his successors. (While other views are perhaps better known—for example, the nondualist system of the eighth-century theolo-

[2] See for instance Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East"* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[3] For a fuller argument in favor of the use of "Hinduism" and "Hindu theology," see my essay, "Restoring 'Hindu Theology' as a Category in Indian Intellectual Discourse," in *Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003) 447-77. Toward the end of this article I address the question of the differing authority structures of Hinduism and Catholicism.

gian Sankara—Kumarila and Ramanuja are, in my judgment, better examples for the comparison with Catholic thought.) I then turn to the colonial context during which Hindu thinkers were challenged, perhaps even compelled, to spell out positions regarding Christianity and, to some extent, Islam. My third example is the well-known Mohandas K. Gandhi, the most famous modern Hindu, whose view of interreligious collaboration was pragmatic. My fourth example is the late-19th-century charismatic Hindu leader Swami Vivekananda who accepted all religions as attempting the achievement of interiority, a goal in his view most perfectly accomplished in Vedanta. In a fifth and last example I examine the judgment on Christian particularity argued by the recently deceased journalist and scholar Ram Swarup.

If one were to borrow the theological terminology popular in the West today, one might describe these five positions as tending respectively toward (1) exclusivism (Kumarila); (2) inclusivism (Ramanuja); (3) pragmatic interreligious collaboration in search of truth and nonviolence (Gandhi); (4) hierarchical inclusivism (Vivekananda); and (5) oppositional inclusivism (Swarup). In the final section of my article I review how this material may prompt Catholics to think anew about official Catholic teachings on Christianity and world religions.[4]

FIVE HINDU VIEWS OF THE OTHER

Brahmanical Orthopraxis and Orthodoxy

To discuss classical or even modern Hindu attitudes toward other religions—or indeed, any topic related to Hinduism as an intellectual tradition—is difficult without paying special attention to Brahminism, the classical orthodox thought, practice, and social theory developed in the first millennium B.C.E. and further elaborated and defended over subsequent

[4] Two further observations. First, unlike several of the authors writing in this issue, I write about a tradition of which I am not a member. Although I have spent more than half my life studying Hinduism, and although it has had a profound effect on how I think as Christian and scholar, but I am not a Hindu. As I see it, "not being a Hindu" is a ramification of "being a Christian" but not the result of a negative judgment on Hinduism. But still there is no question of my speaking as an insider. I also admit freely that an insider brings special insights to bear in a discussion of what a tradition under discussion intends, but I also insist that any tradition, Catholic and Hindu included, is accessible to fruitful interpretations from outside as well as inside. Second, readers may find my treatment of Catholicism remarkably unnuanced—despite its many forms, and despite arguments about who speaks for Catholics. This seems to be necessary in this limited context. My article is to be read against the background of Fredericks's article. Readers are encouraged to add further nuances of their own.

centuries. Brahminism is not the original religion of India but rather a religious and theological system that overlays and reorganizes older traditions of ritual practice and polytheistic worship. But it successfully articulated positions about the universe, religion, and human life that have endured (as admired or detested) even today. Key to Brahminism are certain enduring values: the obligatory, regular performance of Vedic rituals; extreme reverence for the Vedic texts that authorize those rituals and are used in them.

Primary too is a commitment to a process of "sanskritization" whereby ordinary realities—actions, things, gods, human agents, language—are perfected and made suitable for use in ritually powerful and effective ways. Conceived on a sacral model, the brahmanical world is divided into a privileged, consecrated inner realm and an outer, lesser realm of ordinary things and activities. Natural realities are for the most part neutral and not religiously important but, when sanskritized, they take on religious meaning. Brahminism accepts a ritual polytheism which allows for the worship of numerous deities (of fire, wind, sky, cosmic functions) who have certain roles and specific areas of importance. These deities fill ritual functions—they are invoked, they are designated recipients of offerings—and continue to fill such roles even when their actual existence is doubted. But it is also true that Brahminism was elastic enough to have allowed a few major deities, such as Visnu and Siva, to be sanskritized and to gain prominence as all-encompassing and inclusive deities of great popularity and importance. What did not fit the linguistic/religious framework was translated and domesticated in the brahmanical tradition's ongoing discourse about itself.

The brahmanical theorists honored the Veda as indisputably true, but they did not claim that its truth was accessible or relevant for all people. Their goals were limited; they had no reason to expect everyone to be or become capable of understanding the Veda and performing rites properly in accord with it. Some kinds of people were entirely excluded from access to the Veda, and only a few were welcomed actually to hear its texts and perform its obligatory rites. The audience capable of recognizing and performing the truth was elite; unprepared—inappropriate, uninterested, illiterate—listeners were not capable of a proper, active response, and were not going to become ready during their current birth. For the most part nothing need be said about such persons, provided they do not interfere with the lives of those who are ready, educated in accord with revelation and capable of enacting it. The capacities of individuals is what matters most in practice, more than the doctrines or overall identities of their communities. Even within the bounds of the orthodox community, not all persons are in fact competent for all the religious acts important to the community. Judgments must be made in each case, individually, although

such judgments were also generalized to predict the worth of entire social groups. In the ritual context, but then too with respect to the learning of texts (in recitation) and the acquisition of knowledge (by way of meditation), it is necessary to assess which persons are capable of which acts of worship or acts of realization. What lesser persons say and do matters much less than the views and practices of superior people. More formally, caste distinctions (regulating occupation, marriage, and other fundamental social and religious functions) are integral to the sanskritized ordering of reality. In this hierarchical but decentered world, standards are established less in terms of doctrinal claims—though there are such—than according to the values of refined Sanskritic speech and behavior, the right things said and done by the right people.

The brahmanical judgment on religions can be conceived as beginning with the problem of religious diversity within the orthodox fold. Brahmanical practices and texts are ideally everywhere uniform and unvarying, but in fact there is a diversity of local traditions unaccounted for by any available Vedic text. The brahmanical theologians developed the category of "what is remembered" (*smrti*)—as distinct from "what is heard" or directly revealed (*sruti*)—in order to acknowledge the fact of moral and ritual activities that, though not adequately documented in the Veda, were practiced and promoted by respectable people who otherwise observed the Veda. Such practices lack the authoritative weight of the Veda, but cannot be simply dismissed, since "Vedic people" practice them. They serve as precedents and honored customs according to which the right order of things is affirmed while nonetheless being expanded to accommodate novel traditions and practices.

Kumarila Bhata

The criteria for this inclusion are stated in section I.3 of the *Mimamsa Sutras* (2nd century B.C.E.) of Jaimini and elaborated by his commentator Sabara (2nd century C.E.) and in particular by Kumarila Bhatta in his eighth-century commentaries on Jaimini and Sabara, the *Slokavartika* and the *Tantravartika*, particularly (for our purposes) the latter.[5] Although Kumarila resolutely defines reality within the limits of revelation, his definition is generous. Possible or presumed Vedic connection, good behavior, and the apparent lack of contradiction to the Veda may suffice to occasion a positive evaluation of hitherto unfamiliar and not clearly warranted practices. According to Kumarila, traditions must be disregarded when they

[5] The following characterization of Kumarila's views are drawn largely from *Tantravartika* I.3.4. See the text in *Tantravartika: A Commentary on Sabara's Bhasya on the Purvamimamsa Sutras of Jaimini by Kumarila Bhatta*, trans. Ganganatha Jha, 2 vols. (Sri Satguru Publications, 1983).

truly conflict with the Veda, since the Veda always takes precedence. But one should presume that there is no conflict if good people are engaged in the practices, since the customs of good people can presumably be traced back to either extant or currently unavailable Vedic texts; practices are to be rejected only if it is clear that they are prompted by base motives or malicious intent. He decides in favor of connections and defends the possibility of indirect and implicit legitimization. If words have contradictory Vedic and non-Vedic meanings, Vedic meanings take precedence; words and customs with foreign origins are to be interpreted as having the same meanings as their Vedic counterparts and need not be excluded merely because they are not found in the Veda—unless, again, some contradiction is evident. Accessory traditions with practical value, such as secondary ritual texts, popular custom, and grammatical treatises, are likewise to be respected as authoritative insofar as they are compatible with the Veda and are useful.

We can best understand the limits of Kumarila's brahmanical elasticity by noting where it can stretch no more. In the *Tantravartika* (section I.3), Kumarila denies orthodox standing to writings and customs considered false and dangerous, including the philosophical and practical Samkhya and Yoga systems, and the devotional theistic Vaisnava Pañcaratra and Saiva Pasupata religions. These are to be rejected because their ideas are judged unsound in some way or another, and because their proponents deceitfully conceal personal ambition behind a veneer of orthodoxy. They pretend virtue, but in fact are only pandering to popular opinion and enriching themselves. Some religious practices, even if they are cloaked with a bit of Vedic orthodoxy so as to appear reputable, are no better than magic. So too one sees and can hardly approve the reported practices of foreigners who engage in offensive customs, such as indiscriminate shared dining with all kinds of people.

The Buddhists are those who suffer the fiercest criticism, since their views and practices were denounced as explicitly contrary to the Veda. Certainly, the Buddhists at least violated revered social conventions and formalities counted as crucial by Brahmins. Kumarila highlights four criticisms (at I.3.4).[6] First, attractive virtues notwithstanding, the Buddha's teachings on many practical points such as gift-giving, sacrifices, caste restrictions, acts of worship, etc., in fact contradict the Veda. Second, by becoming a teacher the Buddha, a ksatriya and not a Brahmin, violated the rules of caste; he did not show proper deference to the Brahmins and their values, and even took for himself honors due to them; he taught everyone, indiscriminately. The views of someone who so casually violates the rules of society cannot be taken seriously. Third, Buddhists themselves praise

[6] See *Tantravartika* I.3.4 (167-68).

the Buddha for preaching indiscriminately to everyone; in that way they condemn him by the words of their own mouths, for it makes no sense to present the more refined truths to people without education. Fourth, Buddhist teachings are suspect because they have no basis in any Vedic tradition and can be explained as motivated by other, ignoble motivations. Doctrinal issues aside, one further and quite striking argument is included: it was a sign of the Buddha's weakness that he appealed to ordinary experience and simple reasoning instead of to revelation, since this strategy demonstrates that his positions lacked authority beyond resources available to everyone. The conclusion is clear: Buddhists should not be respected, and their religious beliefs and practices should be criticized and disregarded. By contrast, as will be noted, the more recent Swami Vivekananda and Ram Swarup favor appeals to experience as primary in the assessment of religious traditions.

Kumarila's brahmanical orthodoxy therefore proposes strong standards and is in principle exclusivist, even if in practice more elastic. Most deficiencies can be ignored, since most people are not religiously significant enough to matter; in practice one handles competing religious movements by ignoring them. When necessary, one can easily show the rational and moral contradictions inherent in their views. Traditions threatening brahmanical orthopraxis are the most dangerous; these are excluded for various reasons, but judgments about moral deficiency lie at the core of the critique.[7] None of the Catholic positions presented by Fredericks matches Kumarila's, and perhaps one would have to look to other Catholic theologians (such as Hans Urs von Balthasar) or, better, to Karl Barth to find a proper analogue with respect to whom one might begin to build a plausible comparison.

Theistic Inclusivism in the Srivaisnava Tradition

For a second example of brahmanical thought I turn to the theistic Srivaisnava tradition of South India, an orthodox tradition devoted to the deity Narayana (Visnu, Krishna), eternally accompanied by the goddess Sri, as the supreme Lord. Srivaisnavism also accepts brahmanical positions on ritual, the world, and tradition, while yet modifying and reorganizing these according to the new and higher values of knowledge of and devotion to God. This tradition, though elastic in new ways due to its insistence that divine grace is universal and decisive, holds strict views about Narayana's supremacy: Narayana is the sole Lord of the universe; he is eternally accompanied by the Goddess Sri; he saves the world by graciously entering it in forms such as Krishna and Rama; his grace alone liberates humans

[7] See also Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, chap. 5.

from rebirth; he is truly and fully known in the Srivaisnava scriptures and traditions; other beliefs and other forms of worship are deficient in light of scripture, reason, and efficacy toward salvation; other gods are inferior and dependent beings who cannot offer liberation on their own.

To understand how Srivaisnavas rank religions as hierarchical and inclusive, it is useful to recall a key teaching of the divine Krishna in the vastly influential *Bhagavad Gita* (ca. 2nd century B.C.E.), a text honored by Vaisnavas of all local traditions and articulating a basic rule governing religious pluralism:

> In whatsoever way men come near to me, in that same way do I share with them; men follow my path, Arjuna, everywhere . . . Even those who lovingly devote themselves to other gods and sacrifice to them, full filled with faith, do really worship me, though the rite may differ from the norm. For it is I who of all sacrifices am the recipient and lord, but they do not know me as I really am, so they fall back. To the gods go the gods' devotees, to the ancestors their votaries, to disembodied spirits go the worshippers of these, but those who worship me shall come to me (9.11, 23–25).[8]

The higher reality is that of Krishna, but the lower, incomplete, and ill-understood realities of other pathways are taken into account and made efficacious in relation to Krishna. Krishna is not only everywhere present, even in the religious texts and practices of people who know nothing about him, but he is constantly improvising new responses to people, according to their desires and imagination. The other gods and religions need not be dismissed, since they are constructs envisioned by the divine plan; for the same reason neither are they taken seriously as viable rivals.

Ramanuja

Ramanuja (1017–1137) is honored as the foremost theologian of the Srivaisnava tradition that builds in part on the heritage of the *Gita*. He reads the Upanisads not according to absolute nonduality (as did some then and now) but according to a preference for the distinctive existence of conscious and material beings within the divine reality. He defends the Srivaisnava faith on scriptural and philosophical grounds and constructs a theology explaining how all humans are by nature dependent on God, how all words refer ultimately to God, and how religions—offering other goals and saying other things—are to be ranked according to their intellectual and spiritual proximity to Srivaisnavism. At the beginning of his *Sri-Bhashya,*[9] Ramanuja insists that Brahman, the highest reality declared in the

[8] *Hindu Scriptures*, trans. R. C. Zaehner (New York: Oxford University, 1969).

[9] The *Sri Bhasya* is Ramanuja's commentary on the *Uttara Mimamsa Sutras*, the systematization of Upanisadic teaching, ca. 500 C.E. Here and later I use Georg Thibaut's translation of the *Sribhasya*: *The Vedanta-sutras with the Commentary of*

authoritative Upanisadic scriptures, is actually Narayana, the source of the universe: "[t]hat highest Person who is the ruler of all; whose nature is antagonistic to all evil; whose purposes come true; who possesses infinite auspicious qualities such as knowledge, blessedness, and so on; who is omniscient, omnipotent, supremely merciful; from whom the creation, subsistence, and reabsorption of the world proceed—that Person is Brahman."[10] God is as it were the inner self of each human self, informing and enlivening selves just as those individual selves inform and enliven individual bodies. Accordingly, because everything refers to God, all names, understood in their full signification, refer ultimately to Narayana. Lesser worship is indeed lesser, but it can be rehabilitated by realigning it as pointing in the right direction, toward Narayana.[11]

Srivaisnava theology, before and after Ramanuja, draws not only on the brahmanical and Upanisadic traditions, but also on the tradition of the alvars, south Indian religious poets of all castes who wrote passionate devotional songs in the Tamil language; here we find the more passionate and experiential side of the tradition. Key among the alvar texts are the 1102 verses of Satakopan's *Tiruvaymoli* (c. 900 C.E.), which even today is esteemed as revelation, in theory equal to—in practice superior to—the Veda. Satakopan is firm on the nature and name of the true God, as for example in the eleven verses of *Tiruvaymoli* 4.10 (honoring the poet's home town, Kuruhur) that urge the worship of Narayana as the original, single, true God who alone saves:

> Then, when there were no gods, no worlds, no life, when there was nothing, he created Brahma, the gods and the worlds, he created life. So, when this primordial God stands in holy Kuruhur, where jeweled terraces rise like mountains, can you worship anyone else? (IV.10.1)[12]

Narayana has always been the first and, in effect, sole God, despite the

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Ramanuja (Motilal Banarsidass, 1962) found in vol. 48 of *The Sacred Books of the East*.

[10] Adapted from Thibaut's translation of the *Sribhasya* at *Uttara Mimamsa Sutra I.1.2*, (156).

[11] Sudarsana Suri, an important commentator on Ramanuja, explains how respect for Vedic texts clearly speaking of many gods is to be combined with the truth that all references to their power and glory are to be understood as references to Narayana. The mention of such deities in the Veda does not intend to stop there; rather, they intend only Narayana in whom the values indicated by those names are fulfilled. Thus, references to the god Siva, known also as Sambhu, are actually reminding us that Narayana is auspicious (*siva*) and beneficent (*sambhu*). Ultimately, "Narayana" alone is God's proper name.

[12] My translation; see also the English version of the whole song in John Carman and Vasudha Narayanan, *The Tamil Veda: Pillan's Interpretation of the Tiruvaymoli*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989).

numerous alternative deities familiar from the Vedas, Upanisads, and mythology. It is due to human confusion that one still notices the cult of other deities, worshipped by people who think them to be reliable protectors and abodes of refuge. Satakopan's song reminds people that Narayana alone protects, and that they should turn to him alone.

But Narayana purposefully creates other deities, lesser beings with delegated jurisdiction who can be invoked for lesser goals, by lesser people. Satakopan writes: "He manifests himself so that some can praise other deities, but only some he makes understand; were all to gain freedom, there would be no more world" (4.10.6). Traditional commentators pondered how the existence of other gods is permitted by Narayana, who seems actually to tolerate the worship of those gods. Pillan, a 12th-century commentator and disciple of Ramanuja, asks, "If Narayana is the controller of all, why should he make us take refuge with other gods instead of with him alone?" He then answers his own question in accord with the verse:

> If all were liberated, then this earth, where people who do good or evil deeds can experience the fruits of their karma, would cease to function. To ensure the continuation of the world, the omnipotent supreme Lord himself graciously brought it about that you who have done evil deeds will, as a result of your demerit, resort to other gods and accordingly repeat births and deaths. "But understand this now," says the alvar, "and immediately take refuge in him so that you can end your involvement in this world and lovingly serve the supreme person."[13]

Other gods and other cults thus have a limited place and function in God's providential plan for the world. Devotion to them is the fruit of the actions of the individuals who worship them; it is also the occasion for burning off the fruits of that action. Had knowledge of the true God led immediately to the cessation of polytheistic worship, before the consumption of the fruits of deeds and before the arising of a devotion adequate to the new knowledge, the devotees of those other gods would have been unprepared for the higher truth and worse off than previously. They might know what is real, but still remain unable to act accordingly. Narayana veils these people's minds so that they will perform the worship of which they are capable; eventually, however, they will understand how provisional is the salvific economy underlying the connection between their deeds and their worship, the inferiority of their gods as well as Narayana's supremacy, and so will escape the trap of those lesser religions. The major point, however, is the comprehensive nature of the Srivaisnava claim as the entirety of the world is read in light of the community's view of the divine plan. Both Daniélou and Rahner, described by Fredericks, are kindred spirits to Ramanuja and his heirs, though perhaps Daniélou shows greater affinity.

[13] As translated in Carman and Narayana, *The Tamil Veda* 208.

On the whole, this Srivaisnava tradition is forcefully inclusivist, confident of the overarching care of Narayana for the world, the reliability of scriptural language about God, and the conformity of reason to revelation. Accordingly, it shapes a theory about other, lesser religions, their worship and scriptures. Like Kumarila, Ramanuja and his heirs depend heavily on reason, scripture, and the judgments of the proper, right people. Unlike Kumarila, they are prepared to theorize about the limited but real religious meaning of the wider world, since it too must be accounted for in light of the positive universal plan of Narayana for the world.

The Srivaisnava faith-positions are deeply rooted in tradition, scriptural exegesis, and temple worship, but it is worth noting that they were undergirded by a strong rationalist program aimed at demonstrating their logical rigor as well as the inadequacy of alternatives. That belief in Narayana is conformed to reason while divergent views are defective in that regard was thought to be a view that would be apparent to every person able to think honestly. For example, Vedanta Desika (14th century) was a key defender of the logical and argumentative side of Srivaisnavism. In the "Definition of the Meaning of 'Lord' ") section of his *Nyaya Siddhañjana* (*Healing of Logic*) he took up a number of controverted issues regarding the nature of God and God's explanatory role in relation to the world. Defending the truth of scripture with concise reasonable arguments, he highlighted the rational rigor underlying Srivaisnava positions.[14] There is a Lord, who can be named; scripture tells us that this Lord is Narayana; though known by revelation, this is also the most reasonable of claims. Although such truths are known from scripture and conformed to the community's faith positions, they also conform to the best proper reasoning available, leaving neither room nor need for alternatives. No sensible person can think differently with full consistency. As we read Desika, some of the sharper apologetic tones in *Dominus Iesus* come to mind.

Particularly pertinent is Desika's rejection of a nondualist Vedanta defense of pluralism based on the view that of necessity the ultimate reality (Brahman, "God") is beyond any particular name proposed by worshippers. Either this reality has an endless number of provisional names or (better, from a nondualist view) no name at all. Desika denies that the logical cogency of this view. The idea of "divine fullness" does not require us to imagine that it can never be communicated in any enduring and successful speech act, nor that it can appear only in multiple, incomplete

[14] The *Nyaya Siddhañjana* is a Sanskrit-language defense of the Vaisnava religion according to the Ramanuja school's interpretation of Vedanta. See also Clooney, "Vedanta Desika's 'Definition of the Lord' (Isvarapariccheda) and the Hindu Argument about Ultimate Reality," in *Ultimate Realities*, ed. Robert Neville (Albany: State University of New York, 2000) 95-123, and *Hindu God, Christian God*, chap. 3.

modes. Nothing about ultimate reality requires thinking that it can appear only in partial forms, as gods or symbols useful primarily to lesser people who cannot imagine the full and ineffable truth. That there are limitations governing time, space, and human perception does not mean that there are limitations on God, who is not constricted by the limitations of those who would know him. According to Desika then, it is wrong to relativize and harmonize differing claims about ultimate reality as multiple representations of the same truth.

I now take a considerable leap in time and circumstance, to the 19th and 20th centuries. During the colonial period, Western domination, Christian mission, and incipient modernity dramatically changed India, put traditional values on the defensive, and challenged Hindu intellectuals to formulate responses to the wide variety of claims about Western and Christian superiority. Already in the 18th century, but more so in the 19th and 20th centuries, Hindu apologists learned to defend indigenous religious traditions and criticized the West, in new styles beyond those of the older traditions examined above and in part adapting Christian styles and premises in order to engage missionaries in debate.[15] For instance, some promoted as real Hinduism doctrines and practices "purified" of superstition and idolatry, arguing that whatever had been presented as biblical values were in fact the same as the most ancient Vedic values. Others, faced with charges about inconsistencies in Hindu scriptures, scrutinized the Bible for the same, and also pointed out discrepancies between the Bible and the lives of Christians. Still others took seriously the claims of Christian historicity but then argued the superiority of Hindu universalism over that historical Christian particularism. In the process they had to become more expansive in articulating views on religion and religions relevant to the new context; they could not afford the traditional orthodox tendency to ignore outsiders and their ideas rather than take them seriously.

The literature on the development of modern Hinduism is considerable.[16] Here I take up two famous examples, Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda. These are "modern" figures by a chronological measure—

[15] Unfortunately, a great deal of the early arguments between Hindus and Christians survives only through missionary records and without any corresponding Hindu accounts. On some of the evidence we have for 19th and 20th-century Hindu apologetics, see the works of Richard Young.

[16] See *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. Harold Coward (Albany: SUNY, 1987) and *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths. (Maryknoll: N.Y.: Orbis, 1990). Monographs include Wilhelm Halbfass's *India and Europe* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988) and, on the issue of apologetics, Richard F. Young, *Resistant Hinduism : Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India*, Publications of the De Nobili Research Institute (Vienna: University of Vienna, 1981).

both born in the 1860s, though Vivekananda died in 1902 and Gandhi only in 1948—and also in the sense that the larger global context, contact with the West, colonialism and Christian mission were operative features in their thinking about Hinduism and religions. They are of course more widely known than Kumarila and Ramanuja, and their writings more accessible; even today, long after Indian independence, the Hindu argument with the West includes elements brought to the fore by Gandhi and Vivekananda. After considering them I look at just one more recent figure, Ram Swarup.[17]

Mohandas Gandhi: God, Truth, and Non Violence

Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948) was not a theologian, but a deeply spiritual person, a wise and astute observer, eloquent in his writing, and surely the most influential Indian of the 20th century. His views on religions were well known, widely reported and influential, even among those who vehemently disagreed with him.[18] In the difficult context of two world wars, the fight for Indian rights in South Africa, the campaign against British colonial rule, and as India and Pakistan emerged as nations with varying responses to religious differences, Gandhi developed a form of spiritual pragmatism that brought key features of the Hindu pragmatic tradition to the fore; it was broadly accepted, though never without its critics in more modern or more traditional circles. Here it must suffice to highlight a few key features of his spiritual pragmatism.

Though not strongly interested in devotional religion, Gandhi could still describe his political and moral program as God-oriented, as illustrated by this opening passage from his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*:

> What I want to achieve—what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years—is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksa [liberation]. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end.[19]

[17] Regarding all three, as we consider them we can also begin to imagine more specific comparisons between Catholic and Hindu positions; despite enduring gaps, errors, and deficiencies in their understanding, the 20th-century Christian and Hindu positions gradually include greater awareness of one other. Vivekananda, Gandhi, and Swarup are certainly aware of missionary Christian theology and apologetics and, more minimally, theologians such as Daniélou, Rahner, and Pope John Paul II formulated some ideas about India and the Hindu traditions.

[18] See Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi's Religious Thought* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983).

[19] Ibid. viii.

But this striving to see God is just as easily expressed as a search for truth:

> I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found God, but I am seeking after God . . . . Often in my progress I have faint glimpses of the Absolute Truth, God; daily the conviction is growing upon me that He alone is real and all else unreal.[20]

At the end of the *Experiments* Gandhi reaffirms that his goal has been simply to tell the truth, to speak of God, and thus to live nonviolently:

> My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth. And if every page of these chapters does not proclaim to the reader that the only means for the realization of Truth is Nonviolence, I shall deem all my labor in writing these chapters to have been in vain.[21]

This powerful spiritual equation—God is Truth, Truth is God, both are enacted in nonviolence—also represents religion in a way designed to overcome religious divisions, sectarianism, and violence. Accordingly, Gandhi draws this conclusion about religious diversity:

> After a study of those religions to the extent that it was possible for me, I have come to the conclusion that, if it is proper and necessary to discover an underlying unity among all religions, a master-key is needed. That master-key is that of truth and non-violence. When I unlock the chest of a religion with this master-key, I do not find it difficult to discover its likeness with other religions.[22]

Such a view practically alleviates the problem of religious diversity by establishing a "deep" equation of God, truth, and nonviolence; neither of the first two is permitted to function in a religiously exclusive fashion, while the third, along with other allied virtues and beliefs, becomes a measure of the authenticity of the first two. Particular religious views that happen to be more closely wedded to truth claims or to particular positions about God are judged too narrow; those who pass judgments miss the real point of religion, which should be about ways of acting and not about doctrinal claims dependent upon a revelation. Ironically, he is picking up on Kumarila's practical assessment of religion, even if without the latter's Vedic restrictions. Gandhi was a master at finding the good in other religious traditions and making his points against Christian mission by *not* isolating himself from Christian values: whatever is of real value in a religion is also available to all, and in Gandhi's view such cannot be restricted only to those willing to pay the price of membership.

In the same way he can develop a unifying perspective on religions that obviates the need to defend one or criticize another:

[20] Ibid. ix.

[21] Ibid. 453–54.

[22] *Collected Works, Gandhi* (Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1958-1984) 72.254.

When I was turning over the pages of sacred books of different faiths for my own satisfaction, I became sufficiently familiar for my purpose with Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Hinduism. In reading these texts, I can say that I felt the same regard for all these faiths although, perhaps, I was not then conscious of it. Reviewing my memory of those days I do not find I ever had the slightest desire to criticize any of these religions merely because they were not my own, but read each sacred book in a spirit of reverence and found the same fundamental morality in each.[23]

In words that will later on find a striking echo in *Nostra aetate*, Gandhi pragmatically affirms an openness to new ideas wherever they may be found, even if in his view this openness obviates the need for conversion:

I do not want you to become a Hindu. But I do want you to become a better Christian by absorbing all that may be good in Hinduism and that you may not find in the same measure or not at all in the Christian teaching.[24]

Swami Vivekananda and Hindu Universalism

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), born Narendranath Datta, was a disciple of the holy man and teacher Ramakrishna (1836–1886) who, though extremely influential and universalist in some of his teachings, did not write books, travel extensively, or interact much with foreigners. Vivekananda is by contrast one of the most well-known and influential of Hindu teachers during the past 100 years. Although he too was neither a professor nor an academic, he was eloquent and prolific. His collected works, comprised primarily of lectures recorded by followers, fill at least eight volumes. He was one of the very first Hindu teachers to travel to the West, surely the first to make a major impact on Western consciousness. In important ways he has shaped how Indians think of other religions and how Westerners think of India.

Vivekananda's teachings overlap with Gandhi's although his ideas are more philosophical and more confrontative. In his travels to the West (the context for most of his published writings), Vivekananda connected select Western values to important Indian concepts and values. Most importantly, he noted the Western appreciation of the individual and connected this to the Upanisadic view that the self is the ultimate reality, prized over all lesser realities. To know oneself is to be free. Downplaying the brahmanical exclusory tendency—the self is known by the right people who are learned in the right texts and skilled in the right practices—Vivekananda stressed rather that religions are best conceived of as multiple paths leading to a single goal, even if some do so more efficiently than others. There are

[23] Ibid. 44.190.

[24] Ibid. 37.224. This and the preceding two passages are cited by J. F. T. Jordens in "Gandhi and Religions Pluralism," 3-17 in Coward, *Modern Indian Responses* 3–17.

multiple true prophets of humankind such as the Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and, in modern times, Ramakrishna. At a deep level they all offer the same message. Worshiping familiar deities may be helpful to some. But there is no reason either to criticize or to require such worship. Religions are rather to be judged in terms of their contribution to the self-realization of their members. The self is simple and non-sectarian, distinctions and differences being superficial, and all efficacious religions head toward the same goal. But religions that stress the inward path are more efficacious, and in that sense superior. These are unencumbered by accounts of divine activities, complicated rituals, and divisive doctrinal claims. Once self-knowledge is brought to the fore as the real core of religion, there is no longer any place for conflict or competition among religions. In all cases, tolerance, a key feature of traditional Indian religion, is the proper response to religious differences, since such differences matter little from a higher perspective.

Vivekananda sharply contrasted Indian and Western religious views in broad strokes, often seeming to argue with aggressive proponents of Christianity. His views are stated clearly in a lecture entitled "Is Vedanta the Future Religion?" which he delivered in San Francisco on April 8, 1900.[25] After proposing what might seem to be essential characteristics of religions—a sacred text, a divine leader, a confidence of possessing the highest truth –he discarded these very characteristics:

> First, [Vedanta] does not believe in a book . . . . It denies emphatically that any one book can contain all the truths about God, soul, and the ultimate reality . . . . Second, it finds veneration for some particular person still more difficult to uphold. By contrast, students of Vedanta glimpse the truth within each person and not exclusively in the deity: What does Vedanta teach us? . . . It teaches that you need not even go out of yourself to know the truth. All the past and future are here in the present . . . . This present is all that there is. There is only the One. All is here right now. . . . Let anyone try to imagine anything outside of it—he will not succeed.[26]

At the end of that same lecture he reversed the scale of values commonly put forward by missionaries. Linking himself to Ramakrishna (the "man who has passed away"), he commented on Jesus and other religious founders:

> I am the servant of a man who has passed away. I am only the messenger. I want to make the experiment. The teachings of Vedanta I have told you about were never really experimented with before. Although Vedanta is the oldest philosophy in the world, it has always become mixed up with superstitions and everything else.

[25] *The Complete Works of Vivekananda,* 14th ed. (Advaita Ashrama, 1972) 8.122–41.

[26] Ibid. 8.124–28, and passim.

Christ said, "I and my Father are one," and you repeat it. Yet it has not helped mankind. For nineteen hundred years men have not understood that saying. They make Christ the savior of men. He is God and we are worms! Similarly in India. In every country, this sort of belief is the background of every sect.

Indeed, this is a universal pattern:

For thousands of years millions and millions all over the world have been taught to worship the Lord of the world, the Incarnations, the saviors, the prophets. They have been taught to consider themselves helpless, miserable creatures and to depend upon the mercy of some person or persons for salvation. . . . However, there are some strong souls who get over that illusion. The hour comes when great men shall arise and cast off these kindergartens of religion and shall make vivid and powerful the true religion, the worship of the spirit by spirit.[27]

Only people who do not properly understand religion cling to its externals and insist that religions be compared in order to decide which is the best. Still it is true that whoever understands the importance of self-knowledge will also recognize that the quest for effective religion is manifest most clearly in the perennial religious wisdom of India, the wisdom of the Upanisads; reality and Vedanta cohere closely. Ultimately only this insight-beyond-religion offers the comprehensive vantage point from which religions can be viewed harmoniously. Those burdened with partial and distorted perspectives will cling to narrower views—and thereafter argue the truth of their views over against the truth of other views. In another lecture, "The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion," delivered in Pasadena, California, on January 28, 1900,[28] Vivekananda asked how religions are complementary with respect to the real core value, interiority:

Are all the religions of the world really contradictory? I do not mean the external forms in which great thoughts are clad. I do not mean the different buildings, languages, rituals, books, etc., employed in various religions, but I mean the internal soul of every religion. Every religion has a soul behind it, and that soul may differ from the soul of another religion. But are they contradictory? Do they contradict or supplement each other?—that is the question.[29]

He answered his own question from the perspective of a Vedanta that perfects the science of religion. Religions "are not contradictory but are supplementary. Each religion takes up, as it were, one part of the great universal truth and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth."[30] Only the wisest of people, however, are capable of facing this reality fearlessly. Lesser people see contradictions and a competition among religions. Ironically, then, proponents of this Vedanta

[27] Ibid. 8.141.
[28] Ibid. 2.359–74.
[29] Ibid. 2.365.
[30] Ibid.

view are inclined to dismiss texts such as *Dominus Iesus* while yet mimicking the same superior position.

Ram Swarup's New Hindu Apologetics

Indian intellectual discourse, in general and regarding other religions, did not stop with Gandhi and Vivekananda. Our final example takes us up nearly to the present, while extending and sharpening themes already present in Vivekananda's work.[31] Ram Swarup (1920-1998) was a prolific journalist and independent scholar who wrote a number of books on Hinduism in relation to Christianity and Islam. Swarup worked toward a renewed sense of Hindu identity as interpreted by Hindus in light of Hindu tradition, and accordingly he responded vigorously to Christian and Western critiques of and "improvements" on the religions of India. His writings, striking in part for his study of church documents and papal pronouncements, seek to uncover and restore Hindu values in the face of the hegemonic rhetoric of Christian and Islamic missionaries, in the tradition of which he includes the theorizing of recent Vatican statements. In much of this writing Swarup turns Christian particularity against itself, just as one often sees "Buddhist emptiness" or "Hindu monism" turned into charges against the respective traditions. Swarup argues that Christian claims are indeed deeply historical, but as such must unfortunately depend on uncertain and unconvincing historical evidence, and not on that deep interiority which humans really value most. Christianity stresses doctrine and proper public worship and so, instead of being the possessor and preacher of liberation, remains attached to externals and in need of guidance from a culture more comfortable with interiority.

I illustrate the nature of Swarup's work with reference to two essays: "Semitic Religions and Yogic Spirituality" and "Yogic and Non-Yogic Religions."[32] Near the beginning of the first essay, one finds this deliberately provocative claim about the biblical God:

> What forcibly strikes a discriminating student of the Bible is that its god lacks interiority. Though the Bible exhorts its followers to love their god with all their heart, yet throughout its long career there is nothing to show that it knows of a "god or gods in the heart;" it shares this lack of interiority with the Quran too, its

[31] See also Sita Ram Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1996); Arun Shourie, *Harvesting Our Souls: Missionaries, Their Design, Their Claims* (ASA Publications, 2000); and journals such as *Hinduism Today*.

[32] The first citation is found in *Hindu View of Christianity and Islam* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1992), the second in *Pope John Paul II on Eastern Religions and Yoga: A Hindu-Buddhist Rejoinder* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1995).

successor. Both however speak of a "god in heaven," showing that he enjoys an elevated status among his followers.[33]

Swarup elaborates his point by listing and commenting on features he says are central to the Semitic traditions: an exterior deity; messiah; savior; prophet; exclusive revelation; worship (material pieties such as the cult of relics); spiritual practice (that is, divine election makes serious practice unnecessary, replaced rather by somewhat piecemeal efforts); iconoclasm and a hatred of images; idols; mission and jihad; ethics. In each case he traces objectionable attitudes and behavior to basic perspectives, particularly the Semitic traditions' inability to adopt interior and spiritual criteria for truth and value. The claim to Christian uniqueness is actually an admission of inferiority.

In his essay's final sections Swarup contrasts this externality with the interiority inherent in the Indian spiritual tradition, that is, in "yogic spirituality," a tradition emphasizing interiority and spiritual development. He discusses yogic practice along with its psychological and spiritual dimensions, in order to contrast this interiority with the values prized by Christians:

> The truths of the initial dhyanas (truths of inner spiritual development) are not secure unless they are fortified by a higher vision. But in the biblical case we are discussing, these truths had no support from a higher prajna [wisdom]; on the other hand, they were under the gravitational pull of a different kind of vision, the vision that derived from monolatry and prophetism. No wonder that the Church lost those truths so soon and they turned into their own caricatures. Almost from the beginning, the Church's zeal turned into zealotry and became persecutory, its faith became narrow and dogmatic, its confidence arrogant and sectarian. In India's spiritual tradition, a faulty vision (prajna-aparadha) is considered a great poisoner. Thus in the absence of a true science of interiority, Christianity took to an ideology of physical and outward expansion. It holds good for Islam too. They both have faced an inner problem—the problem of an undeveloped spirituality. This has constituted danger to the rest of the humanity as well.[34]

Swarup concludes by appealing to Hindu readers to rediscover the inner logic of their own tradition, to value it, and on that basis to reassess other traditions more soberly. While some of Swarup's assessments are obviously controversial and may strike readers as at best partial or misleading, he is clearly attempting a broad characterization of traditions that for once favors the Hindu over the Western; in his view, gone forever is the age when Christian and Western interpreters decide how religions are to be discussed in the global context.

In "Yogic and non-Yogic Religions," Swarup critiques selected passages

[33] Swarup, "Semitic Religions" 57

[34] Ibid. 110

about other religions from Pope John Paul II's *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*.[35] Here too he returns to the theme of interiority—and the lack of it in Christianity. For example, Pope John Paul II admits that India is a land where meditation, technique, and interiority are prized, but then judges these to be inferior to the historical and external features put forward so prominently in the Christian tradition. Swarup quotes the pope:

It is not inappropriate to caution those Christians who enthusiastically welcome certain ideas originating in the religious traditions of the Far East—for example, techniques and methods of meditation . . . In some quarters these have become fashionable . . . . First one should know one's own spiritual heritage well and consider whether it is right to set it aside lightly.[36]

In Swarup's view, the pope is really worried lest young people, interested in interior and spiritual values, might discover in the East more integral and mature spiritual paths absent in their own Christian tradition where contemplative techniques and concepts of pagan and Greek origin, grudgingly conceded a place, have nonetheless remained uncomfortably marginal and suspect. Swarup suggests that the simplest response is to reverse the pope's judgment by forthrightly giving priority to the way of interiority over the external practices and positivist claims so prized by the pope.

Similarly, Swarup finds symptomatic the pope's denigration of Buddhist mysticism as "purely negative enlightenment."[37] The Christian tradition lacks an adequate spiritual vocabulary and disposition toward spiritual advancement, and cannot deal properly with traditions rich in mystical interiority. As Christians marginalize their own mystical traditions, accordingly they also feel compelled to portray as inferior and incomplete the Buddhist and Yogic paths. Near the end of the essay he offers this sharp contrast:

[Yoga] derives from its basic intuition that there is a vast life hidden in man's inner being—Gods, worlds and realities; that here is also the source of his true life. In the normal course, a man is not aware of them and they cannot be known by a sense-bound mind. But they are known in a purified state of consciousness, by a mind deepened raised, uplifted and illumined . . .

But Christianity believes differently. It says that man is a sinner and he is saved (redeemed and justified are two other words used in this context) by the death or blood of Jesus. Man sinned vicariously through Adam, the first man, and was also saved vicariously by Jesus, the last Adam, who offered his life to propitiate a wrathful God. The whole things is taken literally and historically and any attempt to explain it figuratively or as a parable or moral is stoutly resisted. It is obvious that

[35] He also refers occasionally to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's 1989 letter warning against Eastern practices of meditation.

[36] *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994) 89-90, cited by Swarup at 13.

[37] Swarup, "Yogic and non-Yogic Religions" 20.

such a doctrine needs no Yoga; there is nothing hidden, nothing more to know either about God, or about oneself. All is already known. The only thing is to believe . . . It is also obvious that such a doctrine needs none of those qualities of the soul which Yoga values and which it feels are necessary for raising the level of consciousness . . . There is a ready-made God, and a ready-made savior, a ready-made deputy of him on the earth, and a Church to take care of all your spiritual concerns. You believe and obey and the rest is automatic.

Swarup's critical conclusion states his judgment sharply:

Thus Christianity, doctrinally speaking, has no elements of mysticism, though it is another matter that in practice it could not do without them altogether. Man is a worshipper and he must worship. He may not have a developed system of Yoga, but he must believe and worship. Belief and faith are important truths of the spirit. But let us not become their merchants.[38]

Many contemporary Hindus are less pointed in their judgments than Swarup. Nonetheless he does effectively present some attitudes and themes widely shared in the contemporary Hindu self-understanding. In his appeal to interiority, he stands firmly in the tradition of Gandhi and especially Vivekananda, who had likewise represented Hinduism as the religion of interiority. Swarup's particular contribution is to engage in argument with Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, and other Vatican writers (even if they declined to respond). He analyzed their positions by his own criteria for authentic religion and spirituality, arguing that by their own admission Christian theologians conceded the exteriority and immaturity of the Christian way of life.

Readers of this journal (while benefiting from a reminder how apologetics can misrepresent and distort) may be put off by Swarup's rather partial and aggressive reading of Catholic teaching. But it is important not to dismiss his insights on that basis. Fredericks has reminded us of the richer array of current papal teachings and inclines toward a balanced rendering of the pope's position. It is still relevant to hear how the outsider, particularly a thoughtful and insightful one such as Swarup, decides what is present and what is missing in 20th-century Catholic doctrine and practice. His critique is well attuned to the contemporary conversation among Christian theologians of religions. It reminds them, as they write about other traditions, how scholars in other traditions are theologizing about what has been written regarding various Christian claims.

HINDU AND CATHOLIC AUTHORITY STRUCTURES

Before turning to my general conclusions about what Catholics might learn from reflection on these Hindu examples, I turn again to a basic

[38] Ibid. 26-27.

concern affecting the entirety of this Hindu-Catholic comparison. Both Hindu and Catholic thinkers theologize about religions, and their theologies can be compared and contrasted. Authority is carefully delineated in both traditions, and so too in each the opinions of individual teachers are defined and magnified by appeals to scripture, tradition, the example of prior teachers, and, to some extent, direct experience. Authority and authorization go together, and in neither tradition are individual voices either to be entirely ignored or naively taken as representative. (Thus James Fredericks too settles on a few characteristic voices to describe standard Catholic positions.) Few accolades are accorded to the individual who says something new on his or her own. Similarities aside, however, it may nonetheless be misleading to compare what might be generally described as "the Roman Catholic position" with the positions of individual teachers such as Kumarila, Ramanuja, Gandhi, Vivekananda, and Swarup. None occupied a position quite like that of the pope in Catholicism. Although Hindu communities certainly do have authority structures, there is no single unified central authority comparable to the papacy with its Vatican support structure; in part this is due to the fact, discussed earlier, that "Hinduism" is not a single, unified whole. Hindus do not attempt to speak in a single voice with (even ideally) unquestioned authority, and indeed do not see complete centralization of teaching authority as a desirable goal.

Rather, Hindu traditions have identified kinds of persons who are religiously exemplary, and among those, a few who are capable of speaking for the tradition. Competence is crucial: truths, however universal, are received according to the objective and subjective capacities of the recipients, and then enunciated again by individuals according to their own competence and that of their audience. Individual capacity is paramount, and one must teach different people differently. By this view the dynamics of reception are privileged, and innate dispositions and social constructions are judged in terms of how they affect the capacity to receive the truth about God or self or right practice. While objectivity is not denied—the same thinkers willingly engage in apologetics—the tendency is to see strong claims to objectivity simply as less useful.

Although figures such as Kumarila Bhatta, Ramanuja, Gandhi, Vivekananda, and Swarup did not possess the status of a pope or papal delegate in Catholicism, and did not speak officially for Hinduism, neither were they simply individuals speaking on their own, as if subordinate to some other, central voice of authority. As is the case in most religious traditions and in most Christian communities, authority and the capacity to speak with authority are and have been more widely diffused, emerging in the writings of individuals such as those I have considered. They are individuals speaking for their tradition because people think they do; they stand as a measure by which other, later teachers and their teachings are to be judged. Earlier

teachers live on insofar as later ones remember and repeat their teachings. Those later teachers are in turn respected insofar as they think and teach in accord with what had already been taught. A tradition's wisdom is personalized, just as key persons are traditionalized as the tradition's contemporary voice.

Kumarila sought to embody the teachings of his tradition and was a respected advocate for the whole brahmanical community, speaking consciously in harmony with past teachers; in turn, he himself became a norm for many future ones, even those disagreeing with him. Precisely because there was no other, central body with the real or claimed authority to speak for all, Kumarila stood in no one else's shadow, and could in practice speak with authority. In the Srivaisnava tradition, authority functions similarly.[39] Here too there is no single central authority, yet here too individual teachers such as Ramanuja and Vedanta Desika are not merely individuals voicing their own opinions. Srivaisnavas very much cherish the memory of these teachers, highlighting both the wisdom of their teachings and just as importantly a lineage unbroken over generations. Satakopan, Ramanuja, Sudarsana Suri, or Vedanta Desika are revered for speaking the deepest insights and sentiments of their community, from its heart.[40]

In more recent times the situation is different again, as new complications have attenuated the force of tradition and made it more difficult for anyone to presume to speak for all. Figures such as Gandhi, Vivekananda, and Swarup did speak as individuals, yet one would miss the point of their teachings were one to reduce them to the mere opinions of individuals. Gandhi has been a very widely influential spokesperson for Hindus of all backgrounds, even if his views and their implications were also sometimes severely criticized. Even today Vivekananda remains very influential, remembered and revered not only by members of the Ramakrishna Order which he founded, but also among a much wider community of Hindus who see him embodying the best of their tradition, the wisdom of the Upanisads, the Vedanta, and his teacher Ramakrishna; his teaching is taken as beyond criticism, not because it is his, but because it is time-honored and true, and because there is no one with the experience and insight to refute him. Although Ram Swarup was a journalist, somewhat controversial, and neither a pandit nor an academician, he was a respected Hindu intellectual who evidently spoke for an important sector of Hindus, voicing accepted

[39] On general background on this tradition of teachers, see for example Vasudha Narayanan, *The Way and the Goal: Expressions of Devotion in the Early Sri Vaisnava Traditions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, 1987).

[40] On more contemporary Vaisnava responses, see Klostermaier's essay in Coward, *Modern Indian Responses.*

opinions on Hindu spiritual values and the deficiencies of Western counterpositions.

Although one must concede that it is difficult to align exactly Hindu and Catholic attitudes toward other religions—the comparative study of authority structures must be on the scholarly agenda—and although one may still have to bring into the conversation a wider array of non-official Catholic teachings and other Christian views, nonetheless moderate and nuanced comparisons can be useful contributions. These are influential and representative figures, even if they are not speaking for a centralized authority. Indeed, it may be rather the idea that the Catholic traditions successfully teaches with a single voice that is extraordinary and ever in need of explanation.

CHALLENGING CATHOLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD RELIGIONS

In my article I have drawn upon two premodern and three more recent examples in order to illustrate several Hindu perspectives on religious others not only with respect to religions per se, but also with respect to practices, spiritual paths, claims about truth, and norms for right behavior. Readers familiar with Hinduism may think of numerous other examples that would expand or modify the impressions given here, and indeed it is not really possible to deduce definitive conclusions from so small a sample. Nonetheless these examples illustrate key features of the Hindu tradition's attitudes toward other religions, and in this final section I highlight several ways in which this material might aid Catholics in thinking somewhat differently about the Catholic teachings on religious others.

Just as Catholic theologians, brahmanical theorists have long been confident that convincing judgments can be made about the world if one relies on reliable means of knowledge and clear criteria. However settled, even static, the Brahmins' cosmos might have been in the abstract, their management of the boundaries of religious truth was dynamic in practice, as has been the Catholic worldview. Truth's borders are negotiable; both traditions aim at comprehensiveness, but the price of this is having to account for the other and the outsider by some plausible extension of the values interior to the tradition. While the Christian and theistic Hindu explanatory narratives differ, underlying differences is the conviction that plurality can be fundamentally accounted in accord with some divine plan for the world. Such fundamental accounts are in practice difficult to dispute, even if scriptural warrants and reasoned arguments rarely succeed in changing the minds of outsiders.

Hindu theorists, like their Catholic counterparts, have often been apologists who characterize—caricature—other religions in ways suited to defending and favoring their own religious views. They deal with other reli-

gions in a priori terms, abstracted, apart from their own proper context. Such ideas are bereft of the delicate system of safeguards and balances that make particular positions valuable and useful in their own religious contexts. Re-read in an alien context, many of those ideas no longer make sense and cannot stand the critique of the dominant orthodoxy. Thus, Hindus like Kumarila have reduced Buddhism to a rather unappealing and artificial shadow of Brahminism, while Vivekananda and Swarup portray the Christian concern for historical particularity in a singularly unattractive light. Much about Christianity makes sense to Gandhi but, having extracted mission and evangelization from their biblical and theological contexts, he finds that he can then make no spiritual or ethical sense of such religious energies. Similarly, Catholic attention to other traditions, in early modern missionary treatises and in recent Church documents, presents those traditions as pale imitations or defective alternatives to the rich fullness of the Catholic faith. History trumps interiority, the desire to convert others is read as a sign of a truer religion. Neither tradition has been particularly kind to its others, and neither has been reticent in its judgments. What kindness there has often been mingled with a great deal of condescension, and ill-founded on shaky knowledge of the other. Hindu and Christian scholars have frequently shown themselves unable to learn from each other in any profound way. As a result, many of the judgments about other traditions seem empirically deficient and inept when it comes to actually persuading those others, who cannot recognize themselves in what is said about them, to change their minds.

This is true among theists in particular. We saw that in the Srivaisnava commentaries on *Tiruvaymoli* IV.10, God is portrayed as using plurality to accommodate people in accord with their capacity and prior actions, and at the same time to prepare them for higher and more intimate knowledge of God. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to dispute the Vaisnava belief that divine providence is on the Vaisnava side, that religious diversity is part of God's plan for the world. Contrary evidence—the popularity of other religions, the prominence of other gods, criticisms of one's own tradition—are explained as part of God's plan. One can similarly believe or stand perplexed before the Christian narrative of salvation history, God's work in creation, in the Old and New Testaments, and in the Church, with little expectation that one might actually verify or disprove what believers say about themselves and others. Both narratives with their supporting arguments are powerful, successfully explanatory, insulated against argument and, for such reasons, more convincing to insiders than outsiders.

Even claims to direct religious experience are more than private confessions. They are claims that in part serve to decide which experiences count, and to what end, and so reason matters even when experience is privileged over theory and scripture. One has to present ideas in an informed manner,

reasonably, and convincingly; this training requires reliance on scripture, but it also requires expertise in exegesis and a reliable tradition of learning. Vedanta Desika insisted that one can profitably argue on rational grounds, since the correct faith positions are also the positions most coherent with honest and straightforward religious reasoning. Similarly, a Catholic argument might be based in appeals to the natural law read according to neo-Thomistic axioms: Christian truths, though revealed, are conformed to nature; whoever pays attention to his or her own human nature, even without the benefits of revelation and the sacraments, will be closer to recognizing the truth of our claims. In both cases, the superiority that comes with mature self-appropriation cannot effectively be countered, except by way of merely competing claims that one way, rather than another, is more balanced, more mature.

I have noted that Kumarila, Ramanuja, and their heirs appeal to the notion that people properly educated within the proper religious tradition are better able to understand reality properly. Religion "sanskritizes" people to good effect, and they become superior persons who see reality more clearly and accurately. Such people cannot really argue with most outsiders, despite shared reason and other common ground, since those outsiders cannot see reality properly, and are not really in a position to appreciate the subtleties of the insiders' positions. Vivekananda was speaking to outsiders, Europeans and Americans, and he wanted to share with them the wisdom of his tradition on the basis of appeals to the authority of the self—conceived according to universalist terms such as interiority, freedom, truth. He found it necessary to condescend to those who disagreed with him, since the very fact of disagreement indicated a lack of readiness for the higher wisdom. Vivekananda and Swarup are the clearest in arguing that the key, powerful measure against which new or contrary ideas are to be judged is the self—self as the highest and best reality, the goal of right practice and authentic religion. Interiority is privileged, because it is by an inner path, and not an outer one, that one is able to discover the true spiritual values that endure. Similarly, the historicity of Jesus' life and death is highly prized by Christians, and serves as the measure of what is lacking in other traditions. For Catholics too, a mark of the outsider lacking the benefits of the Catholic faith is that such a person is unable to appreciate why the criteria so prized by Catholics are the most telling criteria by which religions are to be judged.

Appeals to right practice, most clearly represented here by Gandhi, though seen in Kumarila's writing too, have the advantage of disarming doctrinal disputes and pushing aside claims that doctrine matters spiritually. Persons who act rightly are granted a superior position religiously, while those who stress religious doctrine and difference appear alienated from practice and obsessed with doctrine: the other religion is the one

which is defective in its practices, even in its morality. The more difficult it is to convince others of claims about religious truth, the more tempting it is to argue on more widely acceptable moral grounds. Gandhi also exemplifies most clearly the power that lies in taking another tradition seriously in a selective way, so as to assume and appropriate some of its key features, while arguing that such features are detachable from other, more objectionable features. Religious boundaries are crossed selectively. One can admire the nonviolence of Jesus, for instance, without seeing any necessity of baptism. The Christian commitment to service is exemplary, to be sure, but one can learn from it without conceding some unique status to Christian community. Like Christians from St. Paul to the Council Fathers gathered at Vatican II, Gandhi felt that he could pick and choose from other religions what impressed him as embodying spiritual and intellectual value, in accord with what he already believed to be religiously essential. This echoes the view articulated in *Nostra aetate*: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. she has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men" (no. 5). Gandhi would applaud this sentiment, but of course he had distinctive standards by which to approve, reject, or ignore aspects of other religious traditions.

Underlying all the preceding insider judgments is first of all the tendency in both traditions to universalize features prized in their own tradition—"right practice," "interiority," "self-knowledge," "freedom," "divine providence," "historicity," "revelation," "God's saving will"—so as to make those features broadly applicable in a comparative context. In a second move, these universalized features are interpreted so as to retain their special, privileged resonance with the home tradition. The conclusion seems almost invariable, as if to say: "By an honest appreciation of universal spiritual values recognizable in all great traditions, one can see that while your tradition is adequate in many respects, ours contains the complete and integral representation of all these values. So, for the sake of the very values you hold dear, should you not leave behind your tradition and join ours?" While one cannot rule out that one or another claimant in actually correct in such statements, it seems undeniable that we will all be better off if we see how strikingly similar our unique claims are to those cherished in the very traditions from which we distinguish ourselves.

My reflections on the Hindu and Catholic contexts, along with the other articles in this thematic issue of *Theological Studies*, contribute to the possibility of a new broader scenario for reflection on various Catholic teachings on religions by members of the hierarchy or by theologians, as we recognize more systemically that it is neither a unique virtue nor solitary vice of Catholicism that its self-representation includes judgments on other

religious traditions. Fredericks is correct in urging us to move beyond "attempts to force the square peg of Buddhism or Islam into the round hole of Christian theology," but also in admitting soberly that the old questions will remain. Comparison confirms that the 21st century will still include narrow, less informed, a priori judgments. Such is what religious people tend to do. Fredericks is also correct in indicating that new, more specific comparisons will make possible better theologies of religions in the future. Here I would add only that one will also do well to recollect how one's attitudes toward religious others are now being analyzed and judged by members of the traditions that one is analyzing and judging. Christianity has also been theologized by others, its positions accounted for in the complex theologies about religious pluralism that are still developing in Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other traditions. Henceforth, I hope, an intellectual mirror will be an essential item in the equipment of theologians and religious leaders who venture to explain what other people's religions mean religiously.