CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: What It Means to Inhabit a Hindu World

There is not one Hindu-Christian dialogue. There are scores of them.

Raimundo Panikkar[1]

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1. Raimundo Panikkar, Foreword, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters,* ed. Harold Howard (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p. xii.

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Part I
Hinduism or Hinduisms?

There is no monolithic entity, one single religious tradition, that we can safely call Hinduism. It is now generally agreed by scholars that Hinduism is a rather unsatisfactory term to describe the cluster of traditions that the word represents. One can even argue that, unlike the term 'Hindu', which has ancient origins, 'Hinduism' is an artificial construct, a post-eighteenth century Western invention and should be abandoned. Yet we need a term, however unsatisfactory, to describe the religion of a people called Hindus and therefore I shall stay with it, with the caveat that whenever I speak of Hinduism, I mean a variety of religious beliefs and practices attributed to a people called Hindus.

What Makes a Hindu 'Hindu'?

The answer to this question is so problematic that the Constitution of the Republic of India came up with a clause that is somewhat coercive in what it includes and definitive in what it excludes. Article 25 (2) of the Constitution, which explains the term 'Hindu', says, 'the expression "Hindu" includes the followers of the Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh religions' . . . and 'any other person who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsee or Jew'. What counts as the criterion for being a Hindu is solely the territory of origin – not of the people who are believers, but of their religion.[1] The Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs might well protest at being classed as Hindus, but what this Article does is indicate that these religions are offshoots of Hinduism, even though they are religions in their own right.

1. Cited in *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Tradition and National Identity,* ed. Vasudha Dalmia and H. Von Stietencron (New Delhi, London: Sage, 1995), p. 20.

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The Great Banyan Tree

The great banyan tree provides an image that captures the symbiotic relationship between the multifarious religious beliefs that have developed over centuries and which claim the right to be called 'Hindu'.[1] A banyan tree is an impressive sight: it has a sturdy main trunk of great girth and it puts out a large number of huge branches that droop down to form adventitious roots; this process in effect creates subsidiary trees, which feed off as well as feeding the main tree. My own encounter with a banyan tree was in the grounds of the Theosophical Society, Adyar, in Chennai (Madras). Alas, the Adyar banyan is now in a somewhat denuded shape as the tree's main trunk collapsed a few years ago, but the adventitious roots still flourish and the tree has been fenced off to help it survive, and even revive.

Unlike the Adyar banyan tree, Hinduism is in no danger as yet of collapsing at the centre. The sap continues to flow through. The core traditions comprising sacred texts, rituals, patterns of worship and beliefs which go back three thousand years or more continue to thrive; and so do the countless cults and counter-cults that have sprung up in and around it and which flourish under its vast canopy. You can believe in God or not believe in God, you can believe in gods or reject them as fantasies, you can worship one God or many gods, or not worship at all, you can perform rituals or repudiate them: in short, you can be a non-theist, theist, agnostic, sceptic, and even atheist, and still be a Hindu. The sheer variety, richness, the continuing transformations and the contradictions that constitute the Hindu religious world mean that anyone engaging in an interfaith dialogue needs to be wary of falling into the trap of reductionism and of committing that heresy of 'essentialism' so abhorred by post-modernists. Delving into the complex world of Hindu religious beliefs, one soon begins to appreciate the validity of Raimundo Panikkar's remark: 'There is not one Hindu-Christian dialogue. There are scores of them.'[2]

The 'Three-Ring Circuses'

One may perceive an underlying unity in Hindu traditions, yet they co-exist in a highly dynamic, at times giddy interplay of competition and even subversion. A.K. Ramanujan, a renowned scholar and translator of Hindu sacred hymns, presents a compelling if somewhat provocative image to express this situation:

1. Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 6-7.
2. Panikkar, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, p. xii.

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> I would like to suggest the obvious: that cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organized through at least two principles (a) context-sensitivity and (b) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones. What we call brahmanism, bhakti traditions, Buddhism, Jainism, tantra, tribal traditions and folklore, and lastly, modernity itself, are the most prominent of these systems. They are responses to previous and surrounding traditions; they invert, subvert, and convert their neighbours. Furthermore, each of these terms, like what we call India itself, is 'a verbal tent with three-ring circuses' going on inside them. Further dialogic divisions are continually in progress. They look like single entities, like neat little tents, only from a distance.[1]

Just to give an example of the conundrums that arise out of the interweaving and inter-reaction of traditions, let us take *bhakti. Bhakti* can be translated as 'devotional love', and it covers a wide spectrum of emotional and intellectual responses to a personal God. *Bhakti* is often juxtaposed with *jñāna*, knowledge, and to *karma*, 'works'; yet its presence is by no means excluded from these other spiritual pathways. *Vedānta,* which tends to be highly abstract, is still underpinned by *bhakti*; while *bhakti*, regarded as simple, practical and emotive, is by no means free from doctrinal expressions, often derived from *vedānta.* Likewise, one can cite examples from Hindu iconography: idols in certain celebrated Tamil temples act as visual aids for prayer and petition, but they have also inspired rhapsodic theological reflections. (I shall be dealing with this theme, which resonates with Orthodox Christian patterns of worship, more fully later.) For the moment, suffice it to say that, in the interest of clarity, I have chosen to treat each theme separately, but the constantly unsettling dynamics of Ramanujan's 'three-ring circuses' has to be borne in mind all the time.

1. A.K. Ramanujan, 'Where Mirrors are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections', *The Collected Essays,* ed. Vinay Dharwadkar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 8.

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Part II
Sacred Texts and Sacred Traditions

It is often asserted, somewhat glibly, that Hinduism is a 'way of life', not a religion determined by dogmas and doctrines. This description is meant to distinguish Hindus from Christians who are perceived to be bound to such cumbersome rigidity as is apparently demanded by a commitment to dogmas and doctrines. Apart from the fact that Christianity can equally well present itself as a way of life (after all, it was initially known as 'The Way'), one needs to be aware that the Hindu 'way of life' is, more often than not, shaped by key metaphysical concepts, theological motifs embodied in sacred texts and promulgated by learned scholars and savants down the centuries up to the present. Equally, revered commentators on the sacred texts were as meticulous and fastidious in their handling of issues relating to textual, grammatical and interpretative methods as were the Church Fathers. I am sure that Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva and others of that ilk would have agreed with St Basil when he defended close attention to grammar in theological discourse by comparing theologians' preoccupation with words and syllables to a craftsman having to learn the basics of his craft.[1] Just as in Orthodox Christianity, where the writings of the Church Fathers have had and continue to have a lasting influence on all aspects of Christian life – belief, practice, worship, understanding

1. 'Those who are idle in the pursuit of righteousness count theological terminology as secondary, together with attempts to search out the hidden meaning in this phrase or that syllable, but those conscious of the goal of our calling realize that we are to become like God, as far as this is possible for human nature. But we cannot become like God unless we have knowledge of Him. Instruction begins with the proper use of speech, and syllables and words are the elements of speech. Therefore to scrutinize syllables is not a superfluous task. . . . Learning truth is like learning a trade: apprentices grow in experience little by little, provided they do not despise any opportunity to increase their knowledge. If a man spurns fundamental elements as insignificant trifles, he will never embrace the fullness of wisdom.' St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit,* translated by David Anderson (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), p. 16.

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of life on earth and life beyond, and also modes of encountering and experiencing the divine – so in Hinduism the ancient sacred texts and traditions continue to play an important part in the ways of being Hindu.

I do not propose to give a detailed account of how this is so: there are many excellent studies of Hinduism that one can consult to get acquainted with the 'great banyan tree' and the 'three-ringed circuses'.[1] Instead, I shall give a brief account of the key Hindu religious beliefs, their sources and the contemporary response, drawing on my personal experiences before I became a Christian, and, for the present, on a retrospective understanding of the Hindu religious world I once inhabited. My aim is to attune the reader to the Hindu religious ethos, to give some idea of what it *feels* like to live the Hindu 'way'. I have selected those aspects of Hinduism that can be said to be foundational, as they deal with perennial existential questions which will be explored in subsequent chapters.

The Vedas and the Upaniṣads

Hindus may not be regarded by non-Hindus (or even by themselves) as 'People of the Book', as Jews, Christians and Muslims are held to be; yet a plethora of sacred texts, along with 'commentaries' written on those texts, play a key role in the life of Hindus.[2] Among most

1. My personal choices would be: Julius Lipner's *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices,* Gavin Flood's *Introduction to Hinduism (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
2. See Francis Clooney, S.J., *Theology after Vedānta: an Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1993), pp. 20-2. Citing Amalānanda's introduction to his commentary on Śaṅkara, *Vedāntakalpataru,* Clooney reflects on a justification that could be equally applied to the Orthodox understanding of tradition, especially as seen in the writings of the Church Fathers even to the present day:

> Commentaries are stagnant if taken as independent treatises, but become purifying waters when they lead us to Śaṅkara; like the holy guide who leads the pilgrim to the Ganges, good commentaries guide to the source the reader previously lost in mere words and mere debates . . . commentaries are not signs of the decay or decline of the original genius of a tradition, its reduction to words, mere scholasticism: they are the blossoming and fruition of that original genius. The "later" is the fruition, the brilliance, of the "earlier", not its deterioration. The later does not supersede the earlier, but what comes after grows out of what comes before. To skip over commentaries in order to read older texts on their own is not to strip away the encrustment of centuries; rather, it is to examine a gem in a totally dark room, to appreciate a tree by cutting away everything but its roots. The proper way to understand Śaṅkara is to read him as (a distinct) part of a long, rich tradition.

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ancient of all 'sacred texts', and in continual use for well over three thousand years, are the Vedas. These collections of hymns, incantations, and instructions for rituals not only form the primordial chords of Hinduism but continue to shape the rhythm of Hindu religious life, whether it is manifest in worship or in a philosophical quest for truth. Though these ancient texts are now available in print and on the web, they were primarily transmitted by oral tradition. They are still taught in specialised *Vedic* schools (*pātasālas*) where male candidates who aspire to be ritual-priests or scholar-pundits start their training from as early as five or six years old. In the past these schools were financially supported by kings and monasteries; now, especially in South India, they enjoy a revival, supported not only by monasteries but also by the Tamil Nādu government and pious sponsors.

Like many other Hindus, I encountered the Vedas on key celebratory occasions, such as those related to pregnancy, naming of a child, initiation, marriage, funerals and monthly and annual commemoration of ancestors, when priests conducted rituals whilst chanting verses from the Vedas. Though the four Vedas (*Ṛg, Yajur, Sāma,* and *Atharva*) may be of equal interest to scholars, they were not equally used. In the rituals of a Brahmin household such as ours, the middle two of the four Vedas, *Yajur and Sāma*, featured prominently, while the *Ṛg* and *Atharva* rarely appeared. The *Atharva* was consigned to the fringes, since it deals with the magic, spells, charms and such that comprised ancient medicine. (My grandmother, with her gross anti-Muslim prejudice, would brand *Atharva* as the 'Muslim Veda'.) In contrast, the *Ṛg Veda* enjoys a high status but is more or less defunct in practical terms. *Ṛg Vedic* hymns are admired for their poetic beauty and valued as the seed-bed of subsequent Hindu religious beliefs; but they are vibrant echoes from a distant past, rather than part of a functioning tradition. Few of the gods of the *Ṛg* have survived intact: they tended to metamorphose or were superseded by later, subtler versions of themselves: for example, the god Rudra, fierce, destructive and also auspicious, is believed to have evolved into Śiva, who has inspired rich devotional traditions and a complex theology that continues to fascinate and empower Hindus.

Yajur and *Sāma Vedas* can be described as representing the 'functional' and 'meditative' aspects of rituals. Interestingly, *Yajur Veda* lays down practical instructions for conducting specific rituals in a somewhat prosaic manner, while *Sāma Veda* is totally dedicated to an ethereal musicality. Listening to the majestic, labyrinthine chanting of *Sāma Vedic* verses during a ritual (as I often did, since my family belonged to a *Sāma Vedic* clan*)* is comparable to experiencing Byzantine or Gregorian chants.

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The practice of *Vedic* rituals is primarily oriented towards material well-being. In ancient times, it was to ensure all that makes for a good life: progeny, health, prosperity (measured in terms of cattle), a good harvest, seasonable weather, protection from enemies, blessing of the ancestors and so forth. The 'wish-list' of the performer today may be somewhat modified in its terms, but the basic thrust remains the same. One could say, by and large, that the aim of the *Vedic* rituals was and is to ensure a smooth pathway to obtaining the three worldly goals: law and order (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*), and sexual/erotic love (*kāma*). These goals are to be pursued not just for one's own well-being but for the benefit of society at large. However, it is tacitly understood that even while one fulfils one's 'worldly' obligations, one should set one's sights beyond material well-being, towards spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*).

The Upaniṣads

The priest-centred, ritualistic and unabashedly 'this-worldly' religion of the Vedas is therefore counterpoised (some would say, even superseded) by an ardent quest for spiritual knowledge found in the Upaniṣads, which form part of the Vedas. The Upaniṣads accrued over many centuries, between 1000 and 300 BCE. Out of a hundred or more, thirteen are popularly known. These are said to contain the 'end' or goal of the Vedas, and are designated *Vedānta*. Educated Hindus turn to the Upaniṣads for spiritual wisdom.

The seers (*ṛiṣis*) who composed these philosophical meditations performed an exegetical task rather similar to what certain Church Fathers did with the Old Testament. Deploying allegory, typology, dialogue and poetic speculation, they quarried the *Vedic* texts for spiritual meanings. For example: *Vedic* sacrifices involved many priests, much slaughter of animals, and pouring of clarified butter into brick altar-fires. In the Upaniṣads, all this undergoes symbolic transformation: the fire-ritual of the domestic hearth (*agnihotra*) becomes a 'sacrifice of the fire of breath': a form of meditation where one focusses on the inhalation and exhalation of life-breath (*prāṇa*). (A popular joke, when pundits preach today, is that the only remaining fire-ritual (*agnihotra*) is smoking cigarettes.) Human life itself is contemplated as sacrifice:

> Man is sacrifice. His (first) twenty four years are the morning libation. . . . The next forty years are the midday libation. . . . The next forty-eight years are the third libation . . .
>
> (*Chāndogya* III.16.)[1]

1. *The Upaniṣads,* translated by F. Max Müller, Part I (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), pp. 50-1.

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There are two prayers, or 'invocations', that set the tone and mood of the spiritual quest that finds varied expression in the Upanişads. The first prayer reflects the close personal teacher-pupil relationship that some scholars identify as the literal meaning of the word 'Upanişad': what you learn by 'sitting down near [the teacher]'. This is the prayer that marks the conclusion of an Upanişad. It is still used in Hindu schools, such as the Ramakrishna Mission School which I myself attended:

> *Sahanã vavatu, sahana bhunaktu, saha veeryam karavãvahai, tejasvi nãmadhitamastu mã vidwashãvahai. Om shãntih, shãntih, shãntih.*
>
> May He protect us both (teacher and the taught) together by revealing knowledge. May He protect us both (by vouchsafing the results of knowledge). May we attain vigour. May what we study be invigorating! May we not cavil at each other! Om! Peace, peace, peace.[1]

The significance of this prayer lies in its approach to the very notion of 'knowledge'. The word 'Veda' comes from the root *vidh,* 'to know', and the knowledge that the Upanişads contain is referred to as *Vedānta,* 'the end' or 'goal' (*anta* means 'end') of the Vedas. This 'knowledge' is not just an intellectual enterprise but a quest for the divine: the goal is to achieve an intuitive perception and experience of the ultimate spiritual reality designated as Brahman. In this voyage of discovery, the teacher and pupil journey together; and success depends on a harmonious, reverential, devout, personal relationship between teacher and disciple. One finds a very similar pattern of spiritual life in many Orthodox Christian monastic circles, ancient and modern.

The second and most famous of all *Upanişadic* 'prayers' expresses that deep longing for spiritual liberation which is the common thread running through all the Upanişads. Again, I had met them at school where we used to chant this prayer at morning assembly:

asato mã satgamaya	Lead me from the untruth to truth
tamaso mã jyotirgamaya	Lead me from darkness to light
mrityo mā amṛtamgamaya	Lead me from death to life

One should note that it is not clear to whom these verses are addressed. Perhaps because of this very 'open-endedness', and also the musical

1. *Eight Upanişads,* Vol. I, translated by Swami Gambhirānanda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1986), p. 92.

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settings that these simple words have inspired, the verses have ubiquitous appeal. They are sung not only at cultural, religious occasions but have found their way into film soundtracks and pop music.[1]

Though it is not possible here to do full justice to the appeal of the Upaniṣads, I shall attempt a brief account of why Hindus find them inspiring, drawing from my experience of reading them in bilingual texts (Sanskrit-English, Sanskrit-Tamil) with commentaries, as put out by the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission.

The recurrent motif of the Upaniṣads is the dual concept of *ātman-brahman.* Brahman (the Great One) is the term for the ultimate spiritual reality underpinning all existence, whilst *ātman* refers to the immanent presence of Brahman within the human person. The Upaniṣads explore the relationship between *ātman-brahman* in countless ways, using the negative (apophatic) as well as positive (cataphatic) modes of discourse.

It is not possible to assign a stable ontological identity to Brahman. There is a strong case for asserting, as Śaṅkara (ninth century CE) does with superb logic, that Brahman represents that supreme spiritual reality which annuls the subject-object axis which theism implies. Likewise, Rāmānuja (eleventh century CE), an eminent theistic philosopher who disputed Śaṅkara's interpretation, can argue equally persuasively that Brahman is to be understood as the Supreme Lord and God. The contention between these two schools of theology continues to be debated to this day, despite attempts by neo-*Vedāntins*[2] to patch over the differences.

The sages constantly proclaim that Brahman is beyond description; hence they prefer to use the language of poetry, paradox and what one might call mystical conundrums or word-plays. For example, the word for 'fullness' (*pūrṇam*), meaning 'infinite', 'complete', 'brimful', occasions an amazingly mathematical yet profoundly mystical meditation:

1. Popularly known as the *Śānthi* (peace) prayer, these verses are not only highly valued by religious Hindus but they have recently entered the realm of entertainment and pop culture. They feature as the 'Navras' soundtrack in the movie *The Matrix Revolutions,* and have inspired a meditative crooning song in an album from the singer Nalini.
2. Neo-*Vedānta* is a term commonly used to describe the philosophical approach of Hindu reformers since the nineteenth century who reinterpreted *Vedānta* in various ways to make it relevant for modern life. Swami Vivekānanda and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan are key figures in this movement. This task of 'reconciliation', and 'reinterpretation', continues still in countless popular lectures, sermons and in scholarly works. As a student I was impressed by Vivekānanda's 'Practical *Vedānta*' but revisiting it now, I cannot but feel that much of the subtlety of the original writers is lost in the course of tailoring *Vedānta* to fit what are perceived to be 'practical' needs.

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> *Om pūrṇamadhahp ūrṇamidamp ūrṇathp ūrṇamudachyate*
> *pūrṇasyap ūrṇamãdaya pūrṇamevavishisyate.*
>
> Om. That (Supreme or unconditioned invisible Brahman) is infinite and this (conditioned, visible Brahman) is infinite. The infinite proceeds from the infinite. Taking the infinity out of the infinity, it remains as the infinite.[1]

Take another example, where an abstract vocabulary of apparent contradiction is used to convey the mystery of Brahman**:**

> That moves. That does not move:
> That is far off. That is very near:
> That is inside all, and That is outside all.
>
> (Isa 5.)[2]

I might add that the Tamil word for God, *katavul,* literally means 'outside-inside'. '*The Self is within us all'* is a theme that runs concurrently with a magniloquent, poetic apprehension of Brahman as transcendent truth:

> The Self that is subtler than the subtle and greater than the great is lodged in the heart of (every) creature. A desireless man sees the glory of the Self through the serenity of the organs, and (thereby he becomes) free from sorrow.
>
> (*Katha,* I.ii.20.)[3]

By and large, such language is recurrent; so much so that it supports the influential view of non-dualists (Advaitins) that one should regard Brahman as impersonal. Nevertheless, there are also passages which allow for a theist reading of Brahman: for Brahman is also spoken of as the 'Lord' or as Puruṣa, who spans everything from the infinite to the infinitesimal:

> The Purusha, who is the size of a thumb (size of the lotus of the heart) is like light without smoke. He is the ruler of the past and the future. He exists today, and He will tomorrow. This is that.
>
> (*Katha*, II.i.13.)[4]

> As the moving (sun) He dwells in heaven, (as air) He pervades all and dwells in inter-space: as fire He resides on the earth; as Soma, He stays in a jar; He lives among men; He lives among

1. *Eight Upaniśads,* Vol. I, trans. Swami Gambhirānanda, p. 2.
2. Ibid, p. 11.
3. Ibid, p. 145.
4. Ibid, pp. 181-2.

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> gods; He dwells in space, He is born in water; He takes birth from the earth; He is born in sacrifice; He emerges from the mountains. He is unchanging; and He is great.
>
> (*Katha*, II.ii.2.)[1]

Whichever school of interpretation a Hindu adheres to, there is no doubt that verses such as these, which are plentiful in the Upaniṣads, give a thrill comparable to the contemporary physicist's passion for cosmological exploration. The destiny of the human person is set in a cosmic context that exhilarates one with tantalising spiritual possibilities. Thus many Hindus find (as I did) in the Upaniṣads a powerful, uplifting antidote to a daily life governed by ritualism, idol-worship and the dreary doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. Even as Hindus continue to adhere to the formalism of rituals, they are equally goaded to seek inward enlightenment by the ancient sages with their call: 'Sleepers awake!'

Being Hindu means acquiring the ability from early life to accommodate differing and even conflicting viewpoints within one's psyche. Now and then writers undertake to resolve contradictions (this pursuit is very popular among contemporary Hindus) and they attempt to provide a seamless structure, commonly hierarchical, where every view and every practice that is considered Hindu is allotted a place. The precedent for this endeavour can be found in what has become for modern Hindus the most significant of all Hindu sacred texts: the Bhagavadgītā.

1. Ibid, p. 186.

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THE UNIVERSAL FORM OF KṚṢṆA
'Viśvarūpam', modern lithograph

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Part III
The Role of the Bhagavadgītā in the Modern Hindu World

There is no doubt that many modern Hindus, from Gandhi onwards, treat the Bhagavadgītā as an all-purpose spiritual guidebook. It was not always the case. Historically, the Gītā was no doubt regarded as a succinct exposition of *Vedānta* philosophy and valued for its vindication of the popular tradition of devotional love *(bhakti)*. It had inspired commentaries from eminent *Vedāntic* scholars, such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. Both used this 'sacred text' to stake their claims to their brand of theology: in the case of Śaṅkara, non-dualism *(advaita)* which is impersonalist; and, in the case of Rāmānuja, 'qualified non-dualism' *(viśiṣṭādvaita)*, which is theistic and personalist. It is only since the nineteenth century that the Gītā has moved centre-stage as the 'spiritual-guide' par excellence and is even promoted as the Hindu counterpart to the Bible.

The Bhagavadgītā, which features in the epic Mahābhārata, is a poetic religious discourse set in the context of a battle.[1] The two armies of feuding brothers, the Kauravas and the Pāndavas, are gearing up for a fight. The Pāndavas' chief warrior Arjuna is overcome with depression at the thought of slaughtering his own kith and kin in order to win back from his evil half-brothers the lands that rightfully belong to the Pāndavas. In this battle between good and evil, the good doesn't seem worth the bloodshed. So Arjuna lays down his arms and refuses to fight. Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna's charioteer and mentor, urges him to do his caste-duty and sets out to dispel what he sees as the ignorance of his grief-struck pupil as to the nature of life and death, body and soul.

1. There is considerable uncertainty, as with most Hindu sacred texts, concerning the date of composition of the Gītā. A plausible attribution is somewhere around 250 BCE. The only thing we can safely assert is that it is post-*Upaniṣadic* and post-Buddhist. Some scholars suggest that it is post-Christian, though this is questionable.

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Who is Kṛṣṇa?

His name means the 'dark one' (in iconography, he is dark-blue). In the Mahābhārata, he is portrayed as a tribal chieftain, a wonder-worker, a charismatic diplomat who befriends the Pāndavas. Yet, there are episodes in the epic that indicate Kṛṣṇa's divine power, majesty and compassion. The Gītā confirms this dual perspective:

> O Arjuna, whenever Dharma or righteousness is in danger and Adharma or unrighteousness becomes rampant, then I manifest Myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of Dharma, I incarnate Myself from time to time.[1]

Throughout the Gītā, one hears a single voice: the voice of the charioteer-friend and mentor remains the same even when Kṛṣṇa speaks of himself as God. It is because of these two aspects, the human and the divine, that Kṛṣṇa is worshipped as an *avatār* ('divine descent') by Hindus. The verse quoted above is taken by Hindus as confirming Kṛṣṇa's claim to that title. An *avatār*'s utterances have the stamp of

1. *Srimad Bhagavadgita,* translated with commentary by Sista Subba Rao (Secunderabad: Sista Shanta Subba Rao, 1957, 2007). In this edition (by a revered blind scholar – a pundit and my personal friend – one meets the approach of a typical devout Hindu to this 'sacred text'. Where scholarly precision in translation is paramount, I use R.C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavadgītā* with a commentary based on the original sources (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). Most translations of the Gītā in English are problematic. What Zaehner had said of the competing versions then (in 1969) still holds true because the old editions continue to be read: '. . . translations of the Gītā (particularly the more popular ones) have not been accurate at all, and by being both inaccurate and theologically biased, a very false view of what the Gītā actually says has been passed off on an unsuspecting public'.

   Subba Rao gives his theological reflections in a gloss rather than infusing them into the translation itself, as many Indian and some Western translators tend to do. (Two key examples can be cited: Radhakrishnan who imports into the text his brand of 'indifferentism', and Juan Mascaró who in the Penguin translation imports Christian overtones of the concept 'love' when he refers to Brahman, which are not always appropriate). As many key terms have multiple meanings, accurate translation is difficult to achieve. Moreover, many Hindu scholars (including Subba Rao) choose the term 'incarnation' for *'avatār',* perhaps with a view to incorporating (consciously or unconsciously) its Christian connotations. The term, however, means literally 'descent' from the divine to the human realm and connotes 'assuming' a fleshly body rather than being 'fully human'. See Chapter 5 on *Karma* for more on this crucial difference.

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divine authority, and therefore Hindus regard Kṛṣṇa's instructions to Arjuna as universally applicable *divine* guidance. Kṛṣṇa reasons thus:

> The indwelling soul is imperishable, immeasurable and eternal but the bodies are perishable. Therefore fight.
>
> (Zaehner 2.18.)

> Just as a person throws away worn out clothes and puts on new ones, so does the soul cast off worn out bodies and enter new ones.
>
> (Zaehner 2.22.)

> Unmanifest, unthinkable, immutable is it called: then realize it thus and do not grieve [about it].
>
> (Zaehner 2.2.)

The Gītā's message rests on a dualistic philosophical system called *Sāṃkhya*. According to this system, the Self *(Puruṣa)* overseeing the created order is totally divorced from Nature *(Prakṛti)*. Nature, including human nature, is said to be composed of three 'qualities' *(guṇas)*: *sattva* (white, gentle, truthful); *rajas* (red, fiery, passionate); and *tamas* (black, heavy, sluggish). One's behaviour is said to be determined by the dominant *guṇa*. It is the *guṇas* of Nature, so the argument goes, that are responsible for our actions, and only the fool thinks that he is in charge. The wise man seeks the Supreme Self who is beyond Nature, for Nature *(Prakṛti)* traps human beings in endless cycles of birth and death. Liberation, according to Kṛṣṇa, comprises release from the life governed by Nature and, to attain such liberation, he preaches a triad of 'spiritual disciplines' *(yogas)*.

Scholars may well argue about whether the message of the Gītā is coherent or consistent: whether there is an underlying unity and progressive development in the text or whether it is a collage of different perspectives. These issues rarely bother pious Hindus. For them, the Gītā is not for scholarly scrutiny, let alone dissection, but for reverential recitation. In Gītā classes, such as the one I was sent to as a child, one is taught to learn the text by rote and to chant it to certain set melodic patterns: music first and meaning afterwards.

The appeal of the Gītā lies in the richness, practicality and apparent simplicity of the triple-formula for life that Kṛṣṇa offers so persuasively to a sensitive soul in crisis: 'the discipline of knowledge' (*jñāna yoga*), 'the discipline of work' (*karma yoga*), 'the discipline of devotional love' (*bhakti*). All the three disciplines (*yogas*) which Kṛṣṇa explicates lead the listener into those mysterious caverns of Hindu religious experience where a sure-footed searcher will find rich veins to explore.

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I. The Discipline of Knowledge (Jñāna Yoga)

Let us consider Kṛṣṇa's description of the 'spiritual athlete' (*stithaprjña*) or the 'silent sage', in the *jñāna yoga* sections of the Gītā:

> When the mind is undismayed [though beset by many a sorrow], who for pleasures has no further longing, from whom all passion, fear and wrath have fled, such a man is called a man of steadfast thought, a silent sage.
>
> (Zaehner 2.55.)

This ideal of dispassion is close to the Stoic goal of *apatheia***.** The sage strives for perfect peace, for an inner equilibrium and stillness (*enstasis*) through a process of 'ingathering':

> As the waters flow into the sea, full-filled, whose ground (i.e. the ocean's) remains unmoved, so all desires flow into [the heart of] man; and such a man wins peace – not the desirer of desires.
>
> (Zaehner 2.70.)

Thus the 'man of steady intellect' (*stithaprajña*) is one in whom the ego is extinguished. This notion draws heavily from Buddhist sources. A Buddhist canon in Pali states that the concept of 'I' and 'Mine' are illusory: *'Neither the body nor the "mind" nor the senses nor feeling nor perception nor consciousness nor anything associated with life in this world can be described as "I" or "Mine".'*[1] In a similar vein, Kṛṣṇa describes the 'man of steady intellect' (*stithaprajña*) as one who 'does not think "this I am", or "this is mine"' (Zaehner 2.71).

Faced with the adulation of this ideal of apparent inaction, Arjuna asks (as we might): if withdrawal into silence and stillness is so desirable, why bother to act? Why not renounce the world altogether? The answer is given in terms of the next pathway.

II. The Discipline of Works (Karma Yoga)

Kṛṣṇa insists that the warrior Arjuna must do his duty and fight. He argues that action is unavoidable, since we are bound in Nature and our inherent 'qualities' (*guṇas*) impel us to act. He rejects repression: *'What will repression do?'* (3.33). He cites himself as a model to follow: in his capacity as God, he too has to act.

1. Zaehner, *The Bhagavadgītā,* p. 71.

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> I, who am God, have to work for the well-being of the world, for world-coherence. Work is the element in which I move.
>
> (Zaehner 3.22.)

> If I were not to do my work, these worlds would fall to ruin, and I should be a worker of confusion, destroying these [my] creatures.
>
> (Zaehner 3.24.)

Kṛṣṇa's advice to Arjuna is to work even as he, as God, works: that is, without attachment. Then the man of action can stabilise his Self in disciplined action: he can see '*work in worklessness*', and '*worklessness in work*'. This key notion of 'disinterested action' (*niṣkāma karma*), which involves carrying out actions without any regard to gain, is valued by Hindus as a practical form of spiritual discipline. It is comparable to what Orthodox Christian writers speak of as *askesis*; and the two ideals offer a rich field for comparison. (This is undertaken in Chapter 5.)

Through his triple formula, Kṛṣṇa articulates what seems to be a new ideal which he names *brahma-nirvāna*. Both literally and conceptually, *brahma-nirvāna* is a compound of the *upaniṣadic brahman* and the Buddhist notion of *nirvāna*. Individually or together, these notions would seem to present the supreme spiritual state to be sought as impersonal; and so it is, until the third discipline of *bhakti* is introduced.

III. The 'Discipline of Devotional Love' (Bhakti Yoga)

Even as Arjuna struggles to comprehend the 'disciplines' of 'knowledge' and of 'work', a third discipline*, bhakti yoga,* is introduced and extolled as the best and simplest means of accessing the divine. This 'Discipline of Devotional Love' (*Bhakti Yoga*) may at first sight seem to cancel (or 'sublate', to use a technical term favoured by Hindu philosophers) the previous two 'disciplines'. However, this is not so. What is impressive is the balancing act that follows whereby the author of the Gītā, like a juggler, continues to keep all three balls in the air. Without negating the ways of 'knowledge' and of 'work', Kṛṣṇa presents himself as Cosmic Lord and focus of worship:

> Knowing me to be the proper object of sacrifice and mortification, great Lord of all the world, friend of all contingent beings, he reaches peace.
>
> (Zaehner 5.29.)

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The 'discipline of devotional love' *(bhakti yoga*) recommended by Kṛṣṇa is of utter simplicity, expressed in a verse which is often quoted and cherished by Hindus:

> Be it a leaf or flower or fruit or water that a zealous soul may offer me with love's devotion, that do I [willingly] accept, for it was love that made the offering.
>
> (Zaehner 9.26.)

This love is to extend to all because Kṛṣṇa as God is in all:

> Who sees me everywhere, who sees the All in Me, for him I am not lost, nor is he lost to me.
>
> (Zaehner 6.30.)

The 'way of devotional love' (*bhakti yoga*) is not merely *taught,* but reinforced by a theophany in chapter eleven of the Gītā: Kṛṣṇa grants Arjuna a 'celestial eye' so that he can see the 'universal form' (*viśvarūpam*) of his Godhead. Arjuna is awestruck by its terrifying majesty and incandescent light; he sees all the multiplicity of creation converging into the One: entire worlds rushing headlong into the mouth of the Godhead. He sees the past and the future. Overwhelmed and humbled, he prostrates himself before Kṛṣṇa and offers him praise and glory.

> You are the imperishable, [You] wisdom's highest goal; You, of this universe, the last prop-and-resting place, You are the changeless, [You] the guardian of eternal law, You, the Primal person; [at last] I understand.
>
> (Zaehner 11.18.)

Kṛṣṇa as Personal God demands exclusive devotion and repeatedly assures his devotee: '*I love the devout man'.*

> Bear me in mind, love me, and worship Me, sacrifice, prostrate yourself to Me; so will you truly come to me. I promise you truly, for you are dear to me.
>
> (Zaehner 18:65.)

The appeal of the Gītā stems from this very personal assurance of a very personal God. Here we find transcendental theism, the hallmark of popular Hindu spirituality.

As I have said before, the triple disciplines of 'knowledge', 'work' and 'devotional love' propounded in the Bhagavadgītā leads us to key areas of Hindu religious territory. *Jñāna yoga* offers a short cut

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to Hindu teachings on various branches of *yoga*: posture, meditation, breathing, concentration (*ekāgrata*), aloneness (*kaivalya*). *Karma yoga* provides guidelines for everyday asceticism, based on eradicating the 'ego'. It offers strategies for coping with suffering and evil, in a succinct presentation of the dual concept of *Karma* and rebirth. *Bhakti yoga* caters for the affective side of personality: the need to love and be loved by God. Its theistic orientation counterbalances the seemingly narcissistic preoccupation of *jñāna* and *Karma yogas.* Moreover, the universalism of Godhead underlying the theophany of Kṛṣṇa presents a mandate for compassionate love: *'who sees me and me in everything*'. Kṛṣṇa as God, in his 'universal form' *(viśvarūpam*) also assures Hindus of divine concern for human beings and of his own approachability. All these themes that form the warp and woof of the Gītā will be taken up in the following chapters and discussed in a comparative context.

Non-Hindus find the philosophy-cum-theology of the Gītā attractive as well. One obvious example is the popularity of the Hare Krishna sect, which seems to attract more Westerners than 'cradle' Hindus. There are others in the West, marginal or lapsed Christians, who look to this Hindu text as an alternative to the Bible and the Church. I once met a Florentine hairdresser who had little English, but enough to communicate his enthusiasm for the Gītā. He had found Kṛṣṇa 'beautiful' and his teachings 'attractive'. Recently, I found myself in conversation with a Polish taxi-driver in Cambridge, a Roman Catholic but not a church-goer. He was reading the Gītā and was entranced by its dualist views on the soul-body relationship. When I voiced (guardedly) my view of the limitations of that as against what I believed to be the holistic anthropology of Christianity (as expressed in the doctrine of bodily resurrection) he was keen to pursue the dialogue. Needless to say, it was not easy to discuss such philosophical theology in soundbites, yet this encounter brought to the fore yet another curious twist that interfaith dialogue can take: a convert to Orthodox Christianity explaining Christian doctrine to a possibly lapsed Roman Catholic who aspired to be Hindu!

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Part IV
God, Gods, Goddesses, and Temples

I, like most Hindus, grew up in a world of gods, goddesses and temples.

Given the vast number of gods and goddesses worshipped by Hindus, it is fair to ask: do Hindus believe in one God or many? The honest answer is, I believe, *both*. How is that possible? It is possible because the many gods Hindus worship are regarded as manifestations of the One God. The Hindu pantheon contains a complex network of relationships between the gods and goddesses; and it is an important part of Hindu religious education to identify and decode the symbolic language of Hindu iconography. Each god is distinguished by a particular posture, by a mark on the forehead, a weapon, a vehicle, or even by a favourite food!

The symbol of Śiva is the *lingam,* a clearly phallic symbol that is hardly ever spoken of in such terms by Hindus, but which is seen as a 'mark' or 'sign' (which is what the word means) of the god's creative energy. Śiva's vehicle is the bull, signifying his strength, his weapon is the trident, with which he destroys evil. Viṣṇu, the other popular god, is seen with a mace and a discus. One might think of these accessories (as it were) of the gods as a visual, tangible way of depicting their attributes: might, justice, and compassion. Devotion to the gods may be partisan or ecumenical: a Hindu might worship one particular manifestation exclusively or switch to different gods at different times, according to need and their perceived effectiveness.

Goddesses are equally if not more popular among Hindus. The Hindu pantheon of goddesses covers every possible aspect of femininity that might rejoice the heart of a modern-day ultra-feminist: Kanyãkumāri is a virgin-goddess who resides in the southernmost tip of India and guards the whole sub-continent. Lalitha, who is worshipped in a popular 'hymn of thousand names', is frankly praised in erotic epithets as an embodiment of feminine beauty, fecundity and charm: she is the queen of heaven and object of the mystic's meditation.

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A Hindu monk of Austrian origin, Agehananda Bharati, speaks of the 'possibility of learnt, skilled bliss' through mantra-meditation on a god or goddess that might enable a meditator to 'switch on bliss at will', instead of waiting for any random visitation of grace.[1] Nevertheless, not all Hindus launch into heady mystic adventures. They seek out Lakshmi for wealth and good luck; they pay homage to the goddess of learning and the arts in Saraswati; and they placate an ambivalent mother-figure in Kālī or Durga, who can be both malign and benign: Kālī both destroys and saves. To be destroyed by a goddess often means to be saved. I dare say one might speculate on the sexual undertones of such a notion of salvation; but whether one does or not, the annihilation of self as a focus of egocentricity is recommended in most Hindu traditions.

There is also a huge corpus of sacred lore known as the Purāṇas (literally, 'Old Tales'), that narrate the exploits of these gods and goddesses. Though modern Hindus find it difficult to take such mythic stories seriously,[2] they cannot entirely resist them or reject them, for various reasons. Often, they are tales of heroic endeavour and benediction: the gods quell evil, uphold the good, grant boons to their devotees, and most importantly, they give visions of themselves. Such experiences of seeing the Godhead, known as *darshan,* are sought out by the devout. Gods and goddesses permeate the very fabric of Hindu culture. They have inspired fine art, sculpture, temples, poetry, music, dance, and festivals. If the gods were banished from the Hindu psyche (this was tried by the nineteenth century reformers in the *Brahmo Samaj*), there would be lost along with them a great deal that is beautiful and spiritually moving in Hindu devotion. On the other hand, idol worship at its worst thrives on superstition and breeds it: some cults, whether they are based on crude village shrines or on wonder-working gurus in āśrams, keep many captive to a fear-ridden world of magic and the occult.

1. Agehananda Bharati, *Ochre Robe: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 140.
2. However, lavish, flamboyant dramatisations of the great Hindu epic *Mahābhārata* on television have drawn huge audiences. They are as popular as 'soapies', but also stimulate lively debate, especially among women who query traditional approaches to cherished Hindu principles such as *dharma*. The Purāṇas also seem to be enjoying a new lease of life, especially in the wake of an ascendant Hindu fundamentalism. Stories of gods and heroes from the Purāṇas are revamped in comic books for the entertainment and edification of children and young adults. Cartoons of the heroes and villains are often drawn in the style of popular Western characters such as Superman, Wonder-Woman and the *Star Wars* figures. The comic book versions of Purāṇic stories are equally popular on television.

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Worship and Prayer

It is common to find in most Hindu households a prayer-room, a corner, or a shelf that holds images of gods, pictures of gurus, and lamps in silver or bronze of elegant design. The most favoured form of worship is the *pūjā.* It is an act of invocation and adoration; a musical recitation of the attributes of the god; a catalogue-aria accompanied by rhythmic offerings of flowers and sacred leaves. A *pūjā* can be a simple or an elaborate ritual. In the temples, for instance, the presiding deity is treated like a royal personage, and the *pūjā* can be a series of extended ceremonies. The god is serenaded in the morning, bathed and 'fed' mid-morning, taken out in procession in the evening, put to bed at night (and allowed to rejoin his spouse and consort-goddess).

Private prayer also means petitioning a chosen god for one's spiritual needs. Daily, at dawn, devout Hindus (though only the men) address the sun with a set-prayer, a sacred formula known as the *gāyatri mantra*; this is a routine request for forgiveness and illumination. Often a guru or spiritual guide will give a devotee a specific mantra, a verbal talisman as it were, for regular meditation. Simple repetition of a mantra is believed to deliver the devotee from danger or sickness and to grant salvation (*mokşa*), which is understood both as release from the 'curse' of repeated births and as union with divinity.

The contours of my following chapters follow the motifs I have sketched above. I am often asked how I deal with my Hindu past. My response is that it is like visiting an attic, where I find treasures to cherish, as well as junk to dispose of. I hasten to add that I have to perform a similar exercise when dealing with Orthodox tradition and 'Orthodox traditions'. Jaroslav Pelikan's distinction between the two provides a useful guideline for distinguishing what is valuable, essential and life-giving, from what is legalistic, culturally-conditioned or moribund:

> Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose, I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.[1]

My observations are conditioned, admittedly, by the specifics of my Hindu background. Yet I believe internal dialogue may illuminate and authenticate comparative studies, provided one stays close to the texts and to the interpretative traditions of the faiths under consideration. One might conceive of the discussion like this: 'Suppose Śaňkara or

1. Jaroslov Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (the 1983 Jefferson lecture in the Humanities). (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 85.

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Rāmānuja were to meet St Basil or Gregory of Nazianzus; or imagine a Hindu worshipping an idol of Kṛṣṇa or Śiva were to encounter an Orthodox Christian venerating icons of Christ, or of the Mother of God or of the Saints – supposing such a scenario, how would they react? What would they have to say to each other? How might mutual understanding, respect and magnanimity of spirit best be promoted, whilst at the same time acknowledging, if necessary, certain crucial divergences?'

It is such questions as these that will underlie the chapters that follow.

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