

 Open access • Journal Article • DOI:10.1086/660928

Rethinking Orientalism: Colonialism and the Study of Indian Traditions

— [Source link](#) 

Raf Gelders, S. N. Balagangadhara

Published on: 01 Nov 2011 - History of Religions (University of Chicago Press Chicago, IL)

Topics: Cultural history, Orientalism, History of religions, Hinduism and Colonialism

Related papers:

- [Rethinking Religion in India : The Colonial Construction of Hinduism](#)
- [Missionaries and Anthropology](#)
- [Introduction: rethinking religion in India](#)
- [Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain](#)
- [C.M.S. Contact With Islam in East Africa Before 1914](#)

Share this paper:    

View more about this paper here: <https://typeset.io/papers/rethinking-orientalism-colonialism-and-the-study-of-indian-4efthrtle>



Rethinking Orientalism: Colonialism and the Study of Indian Traditions

Author(s): Raf Gelders and S. N. Balagangadhara

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *History of Religions*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (November 2011), pp. 101-128

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.uchicago.edu)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/660928>

Accessed: 07/11/2011 04:20

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *History of Religions*.

Raf Gelders
S. N. Balagangadhara

RETHINKING
ORIENTALISM:
COLONIALISM AND
THE STUDY OF INDIAN
TRADITIONS

It is a commonplace today to claim that the term “Hinduism” came into general use in the nineteenth century. It is said to be derived from “Hindooism,” first employed in 1787 by the missionary and later director of the East India Company Charles Grant.¹ The subsequent construction of Hinduism is said to have been a part of the British colonial project to impose conceptual and administrative order upon a world alien to them.² Though written primarily with the Middle East in view, Edward Said’s study of the Western representations of the Orient can also be applied in the study of Indian traditions. In the process of applying Said’s critique to the study of Indian traditions, postcolonial scholarship has advanced two important claims: (a) Orientalism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries systematized Europe’s knowledge about the Indian traditions into rigid, homogenous categories, and (b) these categories played a crucial role in the functioning of

¹ Geoffrey Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism* (London: Sage, 2006), 68–72. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1964; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 144, can be seen as a precursor of this thesis.

² See Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Romila Thapar, “Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity,” *Modern Asian Studies* 23, no. 2 (1989): 209–31; and Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

the colonial state. Let us call this set of claims about the colonial representations of India “the colonial constructionist thesis.”

In this essay, we focus on the above thesis to explore its explanatory power. Its defenders claim that they have identified the elements that gave birth to the colonial representations of Indian traditions. The first element is the “textual attitude” of the British: by assuming that the key to understanding Indian traditions was to be found in the ancient texts of India, the Orientalists are allegedly guilty of understanding the various Indian traditions by looking for textual foundations.³ A criticism of such an orientation is not meant to deny the existence of indigenous literary traditions, as Richard King points out, but emphasizes instead “the sense in which Western presuppositions about the role of sacred texts in ‘religion’ predisposed Orientalists towards focusing upon such texts as the essential foundation for understanding the Hindu people as a whole.”⁴ Guiding the “textualization of tradition” are specific presuppositions of the Orientalists or what Richard King also calls “the dominant Anglo-Protestant conception of religion.”⁵ The emphasis upon scriptures as the locus of religion channeled the interest of many scholars into the textual aspects of Indian culture. They applied what Sharada Sugirtharajah calls “Western Protestant hermeneutical principles” in their search for a body of texts that, far from being pan-Indian, represented the views of the priestly elite.⁶

This, then, is said to be the second element in the construction of Hinduism: the role of native agency. The British did not merely single out texts picked at random from the many available to them; instead, when they spoke of Hinduism, they were referring to a religion constituted by the canonicity of the Vedas, which carried the authoritative approval of the Brahmins. The second element in the colonial constructionist thesis came into vogue in the process of adding nuances to the bare claim that Orientalism is an exclusively Western affair. Many scholars felt that to claim simply

³ See Robert E. Frykenberg, “Constructions of Hinduism at the Nexus of History and Religion,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (1993): 523–50; and Rosane Rocher, “British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government,” in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 215–49.

⁴ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “the Mystic East”* (London: Routledge, 1999), 101.

⁵ Richard King, “Colonialism, Hinduism and the Discourse of Religion,” in *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*, ed. Esther Bloch, Marianne Kerpens, and Rajaram Hegde (London: Routledge, 2009), 95–113.

⁶ Sharada Sugirtharajah, *Imagining Hinduism: A Postcolonial Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2003), 25. This textual orientation is not restricted to the study of Hinduism. See Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 24; and Gregory Schopen, “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 31, no. 1 (1991): 1–23.

that “Hinduism was a Western construction” was to deny “agency” to the natives: therefore, the added nuance that there was “complicity” between the ruling Metropolis and the native elite in the process of construction. The native elites or informants who provided the data that gave content to the colonial discourse are identified as Brahmins. Robert Frykenberg suggests that the Brahmins participated in the colonial process in such a way that the Hinduism that we know today emerges as “a symbiosis between government and local elites.”⁷ Another proponent of this thesis, Nicholas Dirks, suggests that a myriad of traditions was delineated into a pan-Indian religion that turned out to be ever more Brahmanical. This canonization of Brahmanical texts was instrumental in dictating the colonial choices regarding traditions and identities.⁸

While the colonial constructionist thesis can be seen as a forceful critique of the Orientalist discourse, it falls prey to its own criticism. One could easily argue that the thesis itself is a product of Orientalism: after all, this thesis presupposes a monolithic and nonhistorical Brahmanism. One of the central ideas of the colonial constructionist thesis is this: the Orientalists focused upon manuscripts that were only representative of the ecclesiastical elite. Notice that this statement seems to carry with it an inconsistency. If there was no unified Hindu religion prior to the colonial interventions, what do the constructionists mean when they say that Orientalism focused solely on the texts of the priestly elite? Whose priests were these elites? This remains obscure, unless we assume that they were the priests of the Brahmanic religion, or Brahmanism. If this answer is given, one can indeed suggest that the postcolonial scholarship recapitulates Orientalist discourse. While shifting the analysis from Hinduism to Brahmanism, it presupposes a monolithic

⁷ Robert E. Frykenberg, “The Emergence of Modern ‘Hinduism’ as a Concept and as an Institution: A Reappraisal with special Reference to South India,” in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. G. D. Sontheimer and H. Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 1989), 29–49, 37. Also see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 103–4; Geoffrey Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism*, 99, 265–67; Peter van der Veer, “The Foreign Hand: Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and Communalism,” in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 23–44; and Gauri Viswanathan, “Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 23–44.

⁸ Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). This idea of the centrality of Brahmins also guides historians who seek to soften the impact of colonialism on Indian society by emphasizing the collaborations between informants and colonial administrators, leading to gradual transformations. See Christopher Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 155–68; and David Washbrook, “Orientalism and Occidents: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Historiography*, ed. R. W. Winks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 604. For other variations, see Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

and a Brahmanical system that holds sway both before and after colonial rule as a pan-Indian system. Notice too that the Brahmins can hardly be called a unified group, nor do they constitute an ecclesiastical organization. It can be shown that diverse groups in Indian society have always been able to set up their own temples without being dependent upon the Brahmins.⁹ As a matter of fact, the Brahmins do not constitute any organization: a pan-Indian Brahmanical alliance did not exist before colonization, nor does it exist today.

Furthermore, the constructionists continue to give primacy to textual sources and fail to take into account that the “sacred texts of Brahmanism” were unknown to the majority of the Brahmins when the British began to create a colonial state. They presuppose that the “textualization of tradition” is unproblematic when applied to the Brahmin traditions, thus, they reapply precisely those “Protestant hermeneutical principles” that they criticize. However, instead of Hinduism, the focus of this application is Brahmanism now, which is transfixed in an ancient Sanskrit past, hence, their inability to take into account that these texts were unknown to the majority of the Brahmins until colonial scholars unearthed them. When the Bengali reformer Raja Ram Rammohun Roy translated the Upanishads in the 1820s, a local pundit charged him with having fabricated them himself.¹⁰ The Sanskritist Fitzedward Hall wrote in 1868 that “the learned Bengali has long been satisfied, substantially, to do without the Veda.”¹¹ While it is assumed that these manuscripts were not only known but also important, it is a matter of historical record that texts like the Bhagavad Gita, the Vedas and the Upanishads only moved to occupy the center stage in colonial thought.¹² This is not to deny the existence of Brahmin traditions where textual transmission plays a role but, rather, to emphasize the manner in which postcolonial scholarship reapplies the assumptions that are alleged to guide the colonial scholarship. The postcolonial critique of the “ahistorical textualization of tradition” is thus deceptive: it takes for granted that the body of manuscripts on which the Orientalists relied was central to the Brahmin traditions and

⁹ See Partha Chatterjee, “Caste and Subaltern Consciousness,” in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 195; and Declan Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 54–86.

¹⁰ See Stephen Hay, ed., *Dialogue between a Theist and an Idolater: An 1820 Tract Probably by Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta, 1963), 46n.

¹¹ Fitzedward Hall in Om Prakash Kejariwal, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past, 1784–1838* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3. For similar observations, also see Jean-Antoine Dubois, *Description of the Character, Manners, and Customs of the People of India etc.* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1816), 173–74.

¹² A similar point is made in G. P. Deshpande, “The Plural Tradition,” *Seminar* 313 (1985): 23–29. In fact, Max Müller compiled his famous series, *The Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879–1910), particularly in order to popularize the Vedas.

presupposes the precolonial existence of a unitary Brahmanical system. But no evidence in support of these assumptions is ever presented.¹³

However, this is not all because the connection between postcolonial reflections on the nature of Hinduism and the Orientalist method runs deeper. In fact, colonial scholarship explicitly recognized the presence of diversity in the Indian religions. The “method” used by the nineteenth-century Orientalists to negotiate this diversity was to postulate and identify a sacerdotal nucleus. The proponents of the colonial constructionist thesis use and extend the same method: they negotiate the diversity that still characterizes the Indian subcontinent by postulating a unifying Brahmanical essence around which Hinduism was supposedly constructed. Yet, what is called “popular Hinduism” today was the focus of Horace H. Wilson’s *Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus*, issued in two volumes of the *Asiatic Researches* (1828, 1832). One of the most central colonial sources on Indian religion, Monier Monier-Williams’s *Hinduism*, was, in fact, an attempt to bridge two extremes that had come to light after comparing scriptural sources with local sects and practices. He accomplished this task by juxtaposing “the Brahman religion” against the contemporary forms of Hinduism. His *Brahmanism and Hinduism* explains that “the multiplicity of domestic ceremonies . . . are ‘roped together’ by one rigid and unyielding line of Brāhmanical pantheistic doctrine.”¹⁴ Monier-Williams also observed the composite character of Hinduism and, much like contemporary scholarship on this issue, emphasizes the alien nature of the term.¹⁵

The colonial scholars and administrators were thus not entirely out of touch with the Indian reality. This made them use a terminology that prefigures postcolonial vocabulary: Hinduism is “an immense mosaic,” Monier-Williams writes. It is “a colossal edifice formed by a congeries of heterogeneous materials, without symmetry or unity of design.”¹⁶ The colonial scholars engaged with the diversity by postulating a Brahmanical nucleus behind this large mosaic of traditions: “philosophical Hinduism,” the monotheistic and Sanskrit form of religion that traces to a paradisaical past.¹⁷ The second fork in this conception of religion was “popular

¹³ Besides these empirical problems, the debate on the construction of Hinduism is also fraught with conceptual ambiguity. See Jakob De Roover and Sarah Claeirhout, “The Colonial Construction of What?” in *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*, ed. Esther Bloch, Marianne Keppens, and Rajaram Hedge (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 164–83.

¹⁴ Monier Monier-Williams, *Brahmanism and Hinduism: Or, Religious Thought and Life in India* (n.p.: Murray, 1891), ix.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xvii–xviii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹⁷ This golden past was also elevated by poets and philosophers of the Romantic period. See Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). For the impact of the golden-past

Hinduism,” or the corruption of this monotheistic core into idolatry and ritual. It is in this manner that colonial scholars imposed unity on an inherently plural context.¹⁸ The “constructionists” continue this method: they negotiate the enormous diversity that characterizes the subcontinent today by similarly postulating an ancient Brahmanical system that supposedly was put into service to unify multiple traditions into a pan-Indian religion.

It will be our argument in this essay that this bifurcated conception of religion has a long history of servicing European scholarship. The implementation of this model is by no means unique to the study of Hinduism. Evan Zeusse suggests that during the colonial era the past of non-Christian traditions was typically elevated as their culminations, while present forms were viewed as shadows of the glorious tradition. Zeusse traces the structure of this format to the Protestant conflict with Catholicism.¹⁹ In the Indian context, the keepers of the glorious tradition—the postulated Brahmin priesthood—were identified as the agents of corruption, or the axis around which both models of religion revolved. Discussing the work by East India Company official Charles Grant (1797), Thomas Trautmann observes that this trope of priestcraft—here applied to Brahmins—was “a distinctly Protestant motif” or “a critique of Catholicism turned to new purposes in India.”²⁰ However, it is our argument that a forgotten archive of early modern Catholic sources suggests that this analytical format did not simply derive from Protestant assumptions but, rather, from a “generic” Christian conception of the history of religion shared across Christian denominations. In this sense, we suggest (*a*) that the colonial discourse thus did not develop in an intellectual vacuum, defined solely by the exigencies of the colonial state and (*b*) that the colonial discourse absorbed a structure of representation that was already present when the Reformation unfolded. In other words, we argue for two theses: while socioeconomic and political argu-

theory on indigenous developments, see esp. David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

¹⁸ Other examples of this two-tiered conception of religion can be found in various Orientalist works. See Henry T. Colebrooke, “On the Religious Ceremonies of the Hindus, and of the Bra’hmens Especially,” *Asiatic Researches* 5 (1801): 345–68, and *Asiatic Researches* 7 (1801): 232–87; and William Jones, “The Third Anniversary Discourse: On the Hindus,” *Asiatic Researches* 1 (1786): 343–55. For historiography, see esp. Mountstuart Elphinstone, *The History of India* (London, 1841), 86, 99. Also see Alfred Lyall, *Natural Religion in India etc.* (Cambridge, 1891), 6–7; and James H. Nelson, *A View of the Hindū Law as Administered by the High Court of Judicature at Madras* (Madras, 1877), 139. The notion of priestly corruption also structured French Orientalism of the period. See Dubois, *Description of the Character, Manners, and Customs of the People of India etc.*

¹⁹ Evan M. Zeusse, “The Degeneration Paradigm in the Western Study of World Religions,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 13, no. 1 (1976): 15–35.

²⁰ Thomas Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 104–5, and also see 124. For a similar argument, see Raf Gelders and Willem Derde, “Mantras of Anti-Brahmanism: Colonial Experience of Indian Intellectuals,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 43 (2003): 4611–17.

ments indeed have their place in historical explanations, to discount other dimensions (the religious dimension, in this article) is to make a mockery of the complexity of historical processes. Second, we show that we need to dig further into European religious history and not stop at the Reformation if we have to understand the complexity of colonial discourse.

We suggest that this “generic” Christian theological discourse concerned itself mainly with defining non-Christian traditions either as the proto-Christian or the post-Christian evidences for the existence of religion. The subsequent section of this essay initiates our argument about the “proto-Christian” religion in India by locating it within the Catholic discourses of the Counter-Reformation. It will be our argument that a sacerdotal nucleus behind the plethora of Indian traditions was presupposed from the early modern encounters onward, readily defined as the proto-Christian manifestation of religion in the East. We discuss the analytical format that over-arches Protestant and Catholic models of the history of religion and argue that, within this context, the contemporary forms of Hinduism were recognized as “post-Christian” expressions of religion in the East. The postulation of priesthood facilitated this move from truth to falsehood. The conceptual nature of the European engagement with India is shown in the fact that Europe always had to accept the existence of religion in India as true and that it was centered upon a priestly nucleus. Subsequently, we elucidate the immediate run-up to the colonial representations and argue that the “textualization of tradition” was not a specifically colonial endeavor resulting from the Protestant presuppositions of the British administrators but, rather, worked in tandem with the early modern identification of “Brahmanism” as the core around which multiple traditions coalesced. This article calls into question the widely accepted thesis that Orientalist descriptions of India were primarily shaped by the colonial project. The notion of a unifying and Brahmanical religious system appears unchallengeable and simply in the nature of things. A better understanding of how it developed requires a more serious engagement with the precolonial representations of India.²¹

THE PROTO-CHRISTIAN RELIGION OF INDIA

With just a little bit of exaggeration, one could say that the Counter-Reformation reached India with the arrival of the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier in 1542. Xavier’s missive, dated Cochin, January 15, 1544, is arguably the first detailed eyewitness account of the Brahmins in terms of priestcraft. This letter was addressed to the general of the Society of Jesus as well as to Xavier’s brothers in Rome, Portugal, Valencia, Cologne, and Paris.

²¹ It must be remarked that the archive of precolonial sources constitutes the most challenging problem for the colonial constructionist thesis. See esp. the essays in David N. Lorenzen, *Who Invented Hinduism?* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006).

Copy after copy was made by hand and sent to universities and convents all over Europe.²² The Latin original was quickly translated into French and was issued at Paris in a pocket volume in 1545. The Bishop of the Diocese of Rodez, Louis Abelly, produced another French translation in 1660. In this “January 15 letter,” Xavier describes in detail his endeavors along the Malabar coast and provides a conception of “Indian religion” that is representative of the intellectual concerns of his Counter-Reformation milieu. He reports that the first principle that the Brahmin students learn is never to disclose the mysteries of their faith. Xavier soon discovers that their secrets resemble the doctrines of his own religion: the Brahmins believe in one God. They also have a kind of Bible that contains the divine Law, written in a mysterious language, like Latin in Europe; on Sundays they worship God in prayer. This is how the passage appears in Abelly’s French translation:

One of their mysteries is that there is but one God, Creator of heaven and earth, and that only He should be worshipped; that the idols are but representations of devils; that the Brahmins have a sort of Bible [*une espèce de Bible*], in which the divine Laws are maintained. The religious doctors use a language unknown to the vulgar, like the Latin among us. . . . Sunday is for them a day of celebration, and on that day they repeat several times in their language the following oration, with a low voice, for not to disclose its secret: “Oh God I adore you and for ever ask your assistance.”²³

It is worthwhile to look at how this passage appeared in the first French edition of the letter (1545). The law in the Brahmanical scriptures is in no uncertain terms referred to as the Ten Commandments or Judeo-Christian Decalogue (*les dix commande[n]s de la loy*). The Brahmins keep Sunday as holy (the third Commandment in Catholic as well as Lutheran versions of the Decalogue) and also worship God in private prayer: “*On Cirinaraina noma*.” This line translates into the Sanskrit phrase, “*Om Śri Nārāyaṇāya Nāmaḥ*” (Om, Bows to Sri Narayana).²⁴ In other words, Xavier translates facets of Indian culture that he confronts into elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition. To elucidate the tenor of his writings, it is necessary to recover

²² John Correia-Afonso, *Jesuit Letters and Indian History, 1542–1773* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1969), 32. On the history of the Jesuit mission, also see Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 1:245–80; and Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²³ Francisco Xavier, “Lettre V. Aux Peres & Freres de la Comapgnie de Iesvs à Rome,” in *Lettres de S. Francois Xavier de la compagnie de Iesvs, apostre dv Iapon etc.*, trans. Louis Abelly (Paris, 1660), 68–69 (translation ours).

²⁴ Francisco Xavier, *Copie dunne lettre missive envoyee des Indes, par mo[n]sieur maistre Fra[n]cois xavier, frere treschier en Ihesuchrist, de la societe du nom de Ihesus, a son preuost monsieur Egnace de Layola, et a tous ses freres estudia[n]s aulx lettres a Romme, Pauie, Portugal, Valence, Coulogne, et a Paris* (Paris, 1545), fols. D–Dij.

the attitudes that preceded it, and this requires an analysis of the intellectual and cultural background against which Xavier's perception of religion developed.

The early modern accounts of the Indian traditions derive from the theological vision that the world had known the biblical God—a vision that can be traced back to the patristic notion of the divine law, which God implants in the heart of humankind. From the apologists of the primitive church through the spiritualist reformers of the Reformation to the Enlightenment theologies of natural religion, all agreed that knowledge of the biblical God could be found (and had indeed been found) outside the realm of the Christian Revelation. Though they differed as to what constituted the origins of true religion (the Spirit for the spiritualists; Nature for the Deists), they projected their theologies beyond the geographical boundaries of *corpus christianum* on earth and, as such, domesticated non-Christian religious traditions for local Christian consumption. In this context, the apologist of the primitive church, Justin Martyr, literally argued that pagan philosophers had been Christians prior to Christ.²⁵ The Brahmins did not escape the radar of the early church fathers either. As an English translation of St. Augustine's *De civitate Dei* explains, the Brahmins were known not merely for their admirable deeds but also for their doctrines. The fourth-century father concludes: "Therefore is our fayth called *Catholike*, because it was not taught to any peculiar nation, as the Iewes was, but to all mankind excluding none."²⁶ To sketch the complex history of the Brahmanical motif in early Christian writings is beyond the confines of this essay.²⁷ The distribution of this imagery in the patristic era suggests that the apologists of the church employed it as they applied Greco-Roman thought: to demonstrate the universal applicability of their faith. This apologetic method was still widespread in early modern Europe. One of the most influential ethnographic works of the period, the *Omnium gentium mores* (Customs of all nations; 1520) by the German Catholic Humanist, Johannes Boemus, widely distributed the image of the Brahmins living in a commonwealth

²⁵ Justin Martyr, "The First Apology of Justin," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Ann Arbor, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:178. For a detailed analysis of this assimilation of traditions into the Christian fold, see esp. S. N. Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in His Blindness . . .: Asia, the West, and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), chap. 2.

²⁶ Augustine, *St. Augustine, of the Citie of God: With the learned Comments of Io. Lod. Vives etc.*, trans. John Healey (London, 1610), 406. For other variations, see the fourth-century history of the church by Eusebius of Caesarea, *Preparation for the Gospel*, trans. E. H. Gifford (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903), bk. 6, 34.

²⁷ A fascinating attempt is made in Duncan M. Derrett, "Jewish Brahmins and the Tale of Zosimus: A Theme Common to Three Religions," *Classica et Mediaevalia: Revue danoise de philologie et d'histoire* 34 (1983): 75–90. Also see Beverly Berg, "Dandamis: An Early Christian Portrait of Indian Asceticism," *Classica et Mediaevalia: Revue danoise de philologie et d'histoire* 31, nos. 1–2 (1976): 269–305.

of virtue and worshipping the biblical God.²⁸ This imagery bore witness to the apologetic history of religion that Boemus outlined in the preface to his work: the Christian religion had been received by all nations.²⁹ This theological reflection took on ethnographic significance: transforming the elements of Indian culture into aspects of the Judeo-Christian traditions, Xavier represents the persistence of the categories with which the apologists of the church understood their own traditions and those of others.³⁰

At the same time, the fathers of the early church domesticated the Greek and Roman cults into corruptions of this perennial truth and saw the *pontifices* and *Virgines Vestales* as the sacerdotal agents of spiritual corruption. The Reformation polemicists reapplied this tactic when they redirected this critique: in much the same way as the Greco-Roman cults were seen as corruptions of God's religion, the Catholic priesthood was seen to incorporate the pagan customs and thus corrupt the message of Christ. The Catholic worship had degenerated into the worship of saints and idols, while exploiting the credulity of the masses. A whole genre of polemical literature appeared, with impressive sounding titles such as *Heidnisches Papstthum* (1607) and *Papatu romano per ethnicismum* (1634).³¹ In short, the Protestants revived Greco-Roman paganism as it was constructed before—as a corruption of the original and universal religion—and had it testify against Catholic Christianity. The period of Renaissance is marked by travel in time and space, and the novel input from the New World was soon incorporated into these debates.³² Raf Gelders has analyzed in detail how the ethnographic information that returned from India was incorporated into the Protestant polemics: an anticlerical conception of the Indian Brahmins emerged in Reformation Europe, used by the German, Dutch, French, and

²⁸ Johannes Boemus, *Omnivm gentivm mores leges et ritvs etc.* (Augsburg, 1520), fols. xxv–vi.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, fols. iii–vi. The success of this compendium can be measured in the multiple editions in which it appears. It ran through at least twenty-two editions in the sixteenth century alone. A French translation was issued at Antwerp in 1540, followed by at least three other French editions issued in Paris in 1542, 1545, and 1547. The Italians could read the work in their vernacular first in 1542, and then in 1549, 1558, 1560, and 1566. This work also found translation into Castilian, released in Antwerp in 1556. In 1555, William Waterman translated into English the first two books which were about Africa and Asia (including India). An English edition of the entire work was produced by Edward Aston as late as in 1611.

³⁰ This trend in Renaissance thought is often associated with the revival of Platonism under the Florentine Medici. See C. Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, no. 4 (1966): 505–32.

³¹ Titles cited in Johann C. Augusti, *Handbuch der christlichen Archäologie* (Leipzig, 1836), 1: 55. This theme was not confined to the Protestant intellectuals. See, e.g., Desiderius Erasmus, *The Plea of Reason, Religion and Humanity, against War* (New York, 1813), 33–35. The original sixteenth-century Latin manuscript is known as the *Antipolemus*.

³² See Sabine MacCormack, "Gods, Demons, and Idols in the Andes," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 4 (2006): 623–47; and Joan-Pau Rubiés, "Theology, Ethnography, and the Historicization of Idolatry," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 4 (2006): 571–96.

English reformers to support the analogies they identified with the heathen and Catholic *ecclesia*; these analogies were employed to attack various aspects of Catholic doctrine and worship.³³

It is important to remember that the attacks on the clergy were familiar to theologians and lay audiences not only from the reformed propaganda but also from the Catholic reformers. Beginning with the Council of Trent (1545–63), the Counter-Reformation did not just assert the position of Rome on doctrinal issues but also set out to curb the corruption within the administration of the church. Scholars of the *Annales* school in France challenge the perception that the Protestant Reformation was an isolated event. These recent interpretations of Christianity emphasize the continuities between the late medieval and early modern reform movements and see the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation as a result of several social and religious processes.³⁴ This continuity is also manifested in the ethnographic discourses of the Counter-Reformation. Though the Jesuits disagreed with the anti-Roman critique of Protestant reformers, they recognized the sentiments behind the anticlericalism of pre-Renaissance reform movements. The latter differed in its scope of application and was not anti-Catholic.³⁵ Xavier's "anathema" was thus directed against the priests of false religion. This is not surprising: Roman Catholic Christianity has had a long history of assimilating pagan cults as the manifestations of God's original religion, while either vilifying their protagonists as agents of corruption or applauding them as teachers of humankind.³⁶ Xavier's January 15 letter informed the superior general of the order in detail about the successes of Xavier's mission and about God's miraculous powers in the East, about the devilish forces at play, and about those most influenced by them: the alleged Brahmin priesthood.

According to Xavier, the Brahmins are the superintendents of paganism. He describes them as liars, impostors, and the most perverse and wicked of all. They trick the masses and make them believe that the idols require offerings and sacrifices. These are their major source of revenue, which they

³³ Raf Gelders, "Genealogy of Colonial Discourse: Hindu Traditions and the Limits of European Representation," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 3 (2009): 563–89.

³⁴ Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation*, trans. Jeremy Moiser, first French ed. 1971 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977). Also see Jane Schneider, "Spirits and the Spirit of Capitalism," in *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*, ed. Ellen Badone (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 24–53.

³⁵ See Phyllis Mack Crew, *Calvinist Preaching and Iconoclasm in the Netherlands, 1544–1569* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 149–50. For anticlerical tendencies within the Catholic Church, see the essays in Peter A. Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman, eds., *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

³⁶ Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

then funnel into their banquets. When these priests are displeased with the oblations, they threaten with dreadful vengeance of the gods. This is how the first French translation (1545) of his letter continues:

Among the gentiles are certain men called Brahmins, the superintendents of paganism, for they remain in the temples and are in charge of the idols. They are the most perverse and evil people in the world, and it is to them that the verses of David readily apply, *Deliver me from this profane race, and from evil men and cheats*. They are the biggest liars and impostors that ever existed: their profession is to cheat the poor people, taking advantage of the weakness and simplicity of the ignorant multitude, making them believe that the idols require sacrifices, which they desire for themselves, to maintain their families. They have these poor cretins believe that idols dine and sup. The most simple among them daily offer money to the idol—in the mornings and evenings—for the expense of its table. The Brahmins rejoice and banquet among the sounds of pipes and drums, propagating that the idols are eating what was served to them. When the items necessary for their domestic affairs are missing, they proclaim that the gods are angry for not sending what they asked for; that if they do not sacrifice immediately, vengeance will be upon them; that they will suffer disease and death; that the devils will not give them rest. Like this they abuse these poor people, who believe what they tell them, and immediately bring whatever they please. These impostors or Brahmins have little knowledge of letters, but compensate by iniquity what they lack in the sciences.³⁷

One could safely say that the vision of the Brahmins as it emerges in this work has not been altered to this day. Even those prone to treat this as an exaggeration will have to admit that the arsenal of arguments used to support the anti-Brahmanism of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries is to be found in this letter. While Xavier does not use a French equivalent of “priestcraft,” he nevertheless talks in terms of *menteurs* (liars) and *imposteurs* (impostors).³⁸ He writes that the Brahmins admit idolatry to be their source of revenue. To make matters worse, they are hypocrites: they believe in God but try to keep it a secret. Xavier further writes that the Brahmins bestowed unwanted gifts and greetings on him.

The question arises whether Xavier’s inability to convert the members of the Brahmin community might have colored the tone of his writings: he was vexed by his experiences and structured these experiences using the analytical format available to him. That format was given shape by

³⁷ Francisco Xavier, *Copie dunne lettre missive envoyee des Indes, par mo[n]sieur maistre Fra[n]cois xavier*, fols. Cii–Ciii (translation ours); also see fols. Ciii–Civ.

³⁸ Although the term “priestcraft” is of late seventeenth-century coinage, it is a useful designator for the range of corruptions—ceremonial and doctrinal—that Protestants thought to have uncovered in the Catholic universe. For a detailed history of the term, see Mark Goldie, “Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism,” in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 209–31.

the anticlerical sentiments operating across the denominations. Put differently, Xavier's frustrations were given coherence by the critiques that the reformed polemicists leveled against Catholic Rome. The anticlerical ethos of their criticism is reflected throughout Xavier's narrative. It is in this manner that the conception of a bifurcated, Brahmin-centric religion emerged in early modern Europe: the apologetic vision of the Brahmins worshipping the biblical God was replaced by the anticlerical vision of a monotheistic religion that had degenerated into image worship. At the heart of this conception lies a theological understanding of the history of religion that can be traced back to the fathers of the church.³⁹ As shown below, this Brahmin-centric representation of Indian traditions was widely distributed in the scholarship of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Xavier found the loudest resonance in historiography and cosmography. The number of books that drew on his letters ensured the dissemination of this Brahmin-centric religion in the European imagination. There are essentially two processes through which India was transformed into a proto-Christian space. As we have seen, the first propelled theological debates in Europe and can be traced back to the patristic notion of the divine law implanted in the heart of humankind. The second was informed by the Old Testament tradition: the progeny of the Jewish patriarch Abraham introduced Judaic elements of true religion into the East. The latter conforms to the thesis that all nations descended from the sons of Noah.⁴⁰ A prefiguration of this process can be found in one of the most recurring tropes in the early modern representations of India: the connection between India and the biblical tribes of Israel that was evoked in the 1555 English translation of Boemus's *Omnium gentium mores*, where the Brahmins are called "*Abrahamnes*."⁴¹ This analogy was anticipated in the fifteenth-century translations of Marco

³⁹ This shared understanding of the history of religion is further indicated by Joseph Wicki's discovery of a German translation of the January 15 letter, issued in the year of the first French edition (1545). One of the German copies contains a manuscript note that betrays the identity of its previous owner: Sebastian Lepusculus, a Protestant minister at Augsburg (1546–48). The impression that Xavier's letter left on his mind may be inferred from the marginal annotations and underscored passages in his personal copy. Lepusculus's attention was drawn, significantly, to sections on Indian priests and those that concerned idols. The Protestant divine also underscored "*One ciri naraina noma*," the Sunday prayer supposed to convey aspects of true religion. See Joseph Wicki, "Der älteste deutsche Druck eines Xaveriusbriefes aus dem Jahre 1545 etc.," *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 4 (1948): 105–9.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Hartman Schedel's *Liber Chronicarum* (Nuremberg Chronicle; 1493), fol. xiii, perhaps the most printed book during the century that movable type was invented. The Europeans continued to chart the travels of Noah and his family into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a trend not only exemplified in biblical scholarship. See Walter Raleigh's *The Historie of the World etc.* (London, 1614), esp. chap. 8.

⁴¹ Johannes Boemus, *The Fardle of facions conteneing the aunciente maners, customes, and Lawes, of the peoples enhabiting the two partes of the earth, called Affrike and Asie*, trans. W. Waterman (London, 1555), fol. L.ix.

Polo's travels, where one can read about the *Abraiamim*.⁴² One of the first Humanists to elaborate upon this correspondence in order to construct a genealogy of Asian paganism was the French Orientalist Guillaume Postel.

In November of 1548, an Italian report based on a Portuguese testimony was translated into Spanish by Francis Xavier and sent to Ignatius de Loyola. This was the testimony of a former Japanese samurai called Yajiro, baptized by Xavier as Paul de Santa Fé (Paul of the Holy Faith). Yajiro provided the Jesuits with a large amount of information on Japanese government and traditions. The French were quick on the uptake: four years later Postel reproduced this Spanish translation in his *Merveilles du Monde* (Marvels of the world; ca. 1552) to paint a utopian picture of Japan and interpolated the letter with multiple annotations set off in italic letter type. Postel infers that the Japanese adhere to many points of the Christian doctrine. The biggest marvel in *Merveilles du Monde* was the fact that the Christian God had his followers everywhere. Postel was enraptured and observed that God had diverse ways to teach diverse peoples: Europeans through Christ and Revelation, and the Japanese through natural reason. The implication was that true religion was possible at all times and places, even outside the geographical realm of Christ.⁴³ Postel uses Yajiro's testimony to satisfy his Renaissance curiosity in first sources. He writes that the *Abrahmanes*—that is, the ancient Brahmins called by Marco Polo "*Abrahmin*"—are the descendants of the biblical Abraham. When they disobeyed the laws of Isaac, Abraham had sent his offspring to the East but not without bestowing the divine doctrine. Postel foreshadows the diffusionist thesis that would become the cornerstone of later comparative scholarship:

I am persuaded that this is the doctrine of the Abrahmanes, the children of Abraham's concubines. Their beneficial influence brought this doctrine to the Orient, of which I am convinced by a letter by Francis Xavier to M. Ignatius de Loyola, the superior of the Society of Jesus, which was founded in Paris fifteen or sixteen years ago, in which Xavier mentions one of those Abrahmanes, which Marco Polo called Abrahmin. This Brahmin ate his letter after realizing that it displayed too liberally the universal foundations of our religion. Among many things, Xavier said that they have the same doctrine as ours, among their priests, but that they never disclose it to the people, and that nobody but a Brahman learns it. So did the Brahmin tell him, which I believe is true. After all, when Abraham saw that the children of his

⁴² See the first printed edition of Marco Polo's travels, published in German without title page: Marco Polo, [Begin:] *Hie hebt sich an das puch des edel[e]n Ritters un[d] Landtfarers Marcho Polo* (Nuremberg, 1477), fol. 50.

⁴³ Guillaume Postel, *Des Merveilles du Monde, et Principaleme[n]t des Admirables Choses des Indes, & du Nouveau Monde* (n.p., 1553?), esp. fols. 13–14, 16. The date of the first print is uncertain, though it was probably issued at Paris in 1552. We have consulted an edition probably dated 1553, with 96 folio pages, augmented with manuscript annotations by the hand of the author.

concubine did not obey Isaac and renounced the Catholic Church, he did not send them into the East without teaching them the divine doctrine, together with magic or astrology. As such, today they still retain its fragrance, together with a superior understanding of astrology, like those in Japan.⁴⁴

The reference is to Abraham's second wife, Keturah, whom the patriarch married after Sarah's death (1 Chron. 1:32).⁴⁵ It is widely acknowledged today that a breakthrough was made in the seventeenth-century discourse on religion, when comparison was no longer seen as simply a polemical tool and both Protestant and Catholic scholars recognized genuine differences between the diverse traditions in the world, past and present.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the vision of the proto-Christian Brahmins was to have a long history in the comparative study of religion. In addition, these studies took recourse to the tactics of priestcraft to explain religious diversity. The French Jesuit writer Pierre du Jarric, for instance, produced a synthesis of Jesuit letter books, a comprehensive history of the missionary project in Asia. It was released as *Histoire des choses plus memorable advenues tant ez Indes Orientales* (History of the most memorable things that occurred in the Oriental Indies; 1610). The first print of this leather-bound work appeared in three successive volumes at Bordeaux (1608, 1610, and 1614) and became famous for its history of the Jesuit missions to the court of Akbar. Jarric demonstrates just how standardized the outline of Indian spirituality had become as early as 1610. Though different families worship idols of their own, he writes, they are united in their worship of the devil—the Christian devil. Their priests—called Brachmanes since antiquity—are accountable for the snake pit of duplicity.⁴⁷ They convinced the gullible masses to sacrifice to the idols, which this “clerical estate” was ever so happy to keep for itself. Those

⁴⁴ Ibid., fols. 18–19 (translation ours). Also see fols. 29, 32.

⁴⁵ Here is where Postel derived his inspiration: *the Recognitions of Clement*, produced somewhere in the third century CE, outlines the elements of true religion taught to Abraham. The author of this early Christian work describes the exploits of Abraham's sons and mentions their progeny, including the Indian Brahmins. See Alexander Robertson and James Donaldson, eds., *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries etc.: The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Ann Arbor, MI: Eerdmans, 1951), chap. 33, 86. Postel's thesis was popular in the academies of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. His disciple Guy Lefèvre de la Boderie turned to the study of Oriental languages to further his Christian apologetics and recapitulated the thesis in verse. See Guy Lefèvre, *La Galliade, ou de la Révolution des Arts et Sciences* (Paris, 1578; 2nd ed. 1582), fols. 48–49. As late as in 1793, the Orientalist and librarian at the British Museum, Thomas Maurice, elaborated upon Postel's thesis in his *Indian antiquities etc.* (London, 1793), 2: 291–92. That the Brahmins can be traced to Abraham and the posterity of Keturah was to have a long history: a reference to this thesis can still be found in the entry on *Brachmins* in the 6th ed. of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1823), 4:364–65.

⁴⁶ Guy G. Stroumsa, “John Spencer and the Roots of Idolatry,” *History of Religions* 41, no. 1 (August 2001): 1–23.

⁴⁷ Pierre du Jarric, *Histoire des choses plus memorables advenues tant ez Indes Orientales, etc.* (Bordeaux, 1610), 44–45.

who did not sacrifice were punished by the intervention of the devil. The opposition to Christendom was easily explained: the Brahmins were hostile to Christianity because it uncovered their vicious schemes and deprived them of a major source of revenue.⁴⁸ Compared to what Xavier wrote about sixty years earlier, neither the content nor the tone had changed significantly.

In this context, consider Pierre d'Avity's *Les Estats, Empires, et Principautés du Monde* (The states, empires and principalities of the world; 1614). It was one of the most influential (French) political cosmographies in the seventeenth century. Written by a French military commander, it represented the territories of the known world in terms of geography, national character and institutions, economic resources, and religious life. Its wide reception in France, Germany, and England suggests that a broad circle of laymen was interested in it.⁴⁹ It contains detailed descriptions of India, from ancient India through contemporary Gujarat and Calicut to Vijayanagar. The information on traditions—past and present—is fitted in conventional formats. For ancient India, d'Avity directs his readers to the section on Vijayanagar—said to be applicable to the manners of all ancient Indians—in which he reproduces the favorable representation of the proto-Christian Brahmins known from the *Omnium gentium mores* (1520), together with Postel's genealogical thesis.⁵⁰ Contemporary traditions are described in terms of devil worship.⁵¹ D'Avity testifies to the sustained impact of the January 15 letter on the seventeenth-century discourses. The French author juggles the ethnographic data he makes use of, projecting Xavier's narrative on a pan-Indian scale to describe the Brahmins at Vijayanagar.⁵² In his account of the Madura mission, the Italian Jesuit Giacinto de Magistris (1661) similarly observes that the Indians are tricked by the devil, yet "have knowledge about the greatness of God, the glory of the Blessed, and the ways in which to earn Heaven through penance."⁵³

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 45. Other editions of the second part of this work were issued at Arras in 1611 and 1628. The Latin translation by Martino Matias Martinez appeared at Cologne in 1615. The first eight chapters of book 4 (on the missions to Akbar) were reissued as *Akbar and the Jesuits: An Account of the Jesuit Missions, to the Court of Akbar* by Father Pierre du Jarric, trans. C. H. Payne (London: Routledge, 1926).

⁴⁹ The general use of this work is indicated by the many translations and enlargements after the author's death (1635). Other French editions are dated 1617, 1619, 1630, 1635, 1644, 1649, and 1659. It saw at least twenty-five reprints. We have consulted the English translation by Edward Grimstone (London, 1615). The Dutch edition was released in Amsterdam in 1621. Johann Ludwig Gottfried translated the work into Latin (Frankfurt, 1628, 1649) and German (Frankfurt, 1628; enlarged ed. 1695). For the use of this work as a textbook in geography, also see Allan H. Gilbert, "Pierre Davity: His 'Geography' and Its Use by Milton," *Geographical Review* 7, no. 5 (1919): 322–38.

⁵⁰ Pierre d'Avity, *The Estates, Empires, & Principallities of the World*, trans. E. Grimstone (London, 1615), 774–75.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 756–57.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 778.

⁵³ Giacinto de Magistris, *Relation dernière de ce qui s'est passé dans les Royaumes de Maduré, de Tangeor, & autres lieux voisins du Malabar, aux Indes Orientales etc.* (first Italian ed. 1661; Paris, 1663), 8–9 (translation ours).

The number of sources that disseminated this imagery throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in various disciplines is truly astonishing. These works did not describe the Indian reality but projected the cultural history of Europe onto an alien setting in two interrelated ways. They first domesticated the Brahmin traditions by representing them in terms of elements characteristic to the Judeo-Christian religions. To explain the deviations from this original, they took recourse to the tactics that had been refined in Protestant thought. Given the fact that religion was thought to be a priest-centered affair, India had to have an estate of priests. Where the laity went astray, there the priesthood was accountable for the decline of true religion. The Catholic scholars did not differ on this fundamental score: they merely differed in its scope of application.⁵⁴

FROM PROTO-CHRISTIAN TO POST-CHRISTIAN INDIA

Whereas early Christian thought allowed for the transformation of India into a proto-Christian space (Brahmins worshipping the biblical God), there were other factors that allowed for the transformation of the subcontinent into a post-Christian space. After Christ restored the true religion, it was left to his apostles to turn the rest of the world toward its alleged spiritual roots. In the division of apostolic labor, St. Thomas the Apostle was credited with the conversion of the East.⁵⁵ This connection between India and the New Testament theology is featured in the reports of actual encounters. Europe was convinced that the Indian “heathens” had not only been aware of the biblical God and Judeo-Christian commandments but also of the finer aspects of Christian doctrine: early sixteenth-century Portuguese travelers such as Duarte Barbosa, Tomé Pires, and Fernão Nunes had informed their readers that the Brahmins were aware of the Holy Trinity, or the Triune God of the New Testament.⁵⁶ In a Spanish letter book translated from the

⁵⁴ Postel’s genealogical thesis and Xavier’s observations on aspects of true religion preserved by the Brahmins were also reproduced in the enlarged 1628 edition of the influential cosmography by the reformed humanist scholar, Sebastian Münster (first German edition 1540): *Cosmographia, Das ist: Beschreibung der gantzen Welt* (Basel, 1628), 1561–62. Also see the anonymous cosmography, issued in London and bound together with the chronology by the Jesuit Denis Pétau: *Geographical Description of the World. Describing Europe, Asia, Africa, and America etc.* (London, 1659), 83–84.

⁵⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea (*Historia Ecclesiae*, fourth century) also writes that the teacher of Clemens of Alexandria preached in the East—as far as India, where he found the Gospel according to Matthew, left there by the apostle Bartholomew. See Eusebius, “The Church History of Eusebius,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. A. Cushman McGiffert (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 225. Louis-André Vigneras, “Saint Thomas, Apostle of America,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 57, no. 1 (1977): 82–90, shows that this New Testament schematic was also applied to American history and religion.

⁵⁶ Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, trans. Mansel L. Dames (London, 1918), 1:115–16; Tomé Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, trans. A. Z. Cortesão (London, 1944), 39; and Fernão Nunes, “Chronicle of Fernão Nuniz,” in *A Forgotten Empire (Vijayanagar)*, trans. Robert Sewell (London, 1900), 390–91. As a result of the Portuguese policy of secrecy, the manuscripts of Barbosa and Pires would not appear in print until the Italian geographer

Portuguese (1558), the Jesuit missionary Rodriguez Gonzalez also wrote about India's temples and reported about an idol with three names, a false representation of the Trinity, he concluded, or "*la falsa Trinidad de los gentiles*."⁵⁷ The Portuguese military commander Afonso d'Albuquerque also reported that the Brahmins had knowledge of both the Trinity and the Virgin Mary, "whereby it appears that anciently they were Christians."⁵⁸

Before Barbosa and others made this observation, a Syro-Christian priest known as Josephus Indus (Josef) had traveled to Portugal with the Portuguese commander Pedro Alvares Cabral (1501). In European cities, Josef was questioned at length about his motherland. Josef informed his interlocutors that "the heathens at Canonor" (Kodungallur) worshipped one God—the Creator—yet also believed that he was one in three, and thus made statues of him with three faces. His answers were published in the Italian *Paesi novamente ritrovati* (The recently discovered lands; 1507). It shows that the Europeans did not necessarily need an eyewitness report to conclude that not only the Syrian-Malabar Christians believed in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Josef's report was reproduced in the *Novus orbis* (New world; 1532), the most famous travel collection of the period, thirty years prior to Ramussio's publication of Barbosa's writing (1550). Josef's testimony was reproduced as follows: "They worship God in Heaven and believe in the Trinity, which is why they paint God with three faces and His hands folded."⁵⁹ French historiographer François de Belleforest reproduced it like this in his famous *L'Histoire Universelle* (1570): "And do not think that they have not been Christian, see what they continue to confess: they believe in one God, and this in the form of a trinity, because of which they represent and paint Him with three faces, his hands folded, and call Him *Tambran* in their language."⁶⁰ This is how Josef's narration can be found

Giovanni Battista Ramussio included them in his Italian collection of voyages, *Delle navigationi et viaggi* (Venice, 1550).

⁵⁷ Rodriguez Gonzalez's letter was printed in an early collection of Jesuit correspondence, edited by the Portuguese Jesuit Manoel Alvarez: "Copia de una [carta] del padre Gonçalo rodriguez de Baçain etc.," in *Copia de algunas cartas que los padres y hermanos de la compañía de IESUS, que andan en la India, y otros partes orientales etc.*, ed. M. Alvarez (Coimbra, 1562), fol. 13.

⁵⁸ Portuguese editions of his *Commentaries* were released posthumously at Lisbon in 1557, 1576, and 1774. We have consulted the English translation issued by the Hakluyt Society. See Afonso d'Albuquerque, *The Commentaries of the Great A. Dalboquerque etc.* (London, 1875), 1:78.

⁵⁹ We consulted the Dutch edition of *Novus orbis*. See Johannes Huttichius and Sebastian Münster, eds., *Die Nieuwe Weerelt der Landschappen ende Eylanden etc.*, trans. C. Ablijn (Antwerp, 1563), ccxxxiii (translation ours). Other Latin editions were issued at Basel in 1537 and 1555. For a detailed analyses of *Novus orbis*, see Max Böhme, *Die grossen Reisesammlungen des 16: Jahrhunderts und ihre Bedeutung* (Strassburg, 1904), 46–69.

⁶⁰ François de Belleforest, *L'Histoire Universelle du Monde* (Paris, 1570), fol. 52 (translation ours). A second edition of this influential work appeared at Paris in 1572.

about 130 years later in a Dutch collection of voyages by Pieter van der Aa, a Dutch cartographer, suggesting just how potent the spiritual historiography of the Bible still was: "They worship one God in Heaven and call Him Tambram. They represent him with three faces and folded hands; as if they had some understanding of the Holy Trinity."⁶¹

The number of sources in which this imagery reappears indicates that this was not simply an early Portuguese confusion; nor was it derived from a purely missionary perspective. Europe effectively saw the Indian subcontinent as an extension of the Christian realm. The Portuguese bishop Jerónimo Osório da Fonseca, famous for his pro-Catholic epistle to Elizabeth I (1563), is also known for his Latin chronicle of the Portuguese empire, *De Rebus Emmanuelis* (The reign of Emanuel; 1571). Osório enjoyed close contacts with Pierre Lefevre (a cofounder of the Jesuit order) and also befriended Ignatio de Loyola. While narrating the Portuguese exploits in the East, Osório describes the Brahmins in disparaging terms, portraying them not simply as priests but also as swindlers and frauds, which is not too different from the manner in which Elizabeth's secretaries understood the Catholic priests:

This nation is depressingly superstitious and idolatrous. They have many temples and bestow much honor upon their priests, who are called Brachmanes or Bramins, said to understand the sciences of the human and divine. . . . They carry three threads from the right shoulder to the left-hand side, to represent the existence of the Trinity in one divine nature. They believe that God communicated with the world in order to redeem mankind from eternal death. It is very likely that they have taken this from the ancient Christians. They are big hypocrites: under the guise of holiness they commit grave sins their entire life. The other Malabarians are taught by these priests to worship monsters.⁶²

This anticlerical representation of the Brahmins appealed to Osório's antagonists. That such a representation derives from a shared understanding of the history of religion and the role of the priests therein is indicated by the fact that Osório's passage on the Brahmins was reproduced verbatim

⁶¹ Pieter van der Aa, ed., *Naaukeurige Versameling der Gedenk-Waardigste Zee en Land Reysen* (Leyden, 1707), 3:6 (translation ours).

⁶² Osório da Fonseca, *Histoire de Portugal etc.*, trans. Simon S. Goulart (Geneva, 1581), 2: 43 (translation and emphasis ours). Other Latin editions were issued in Cologne in 1574, 1581, 1586, and 1597. We have used Simon Goulart's French translation (Geneva, 1581). This edition consists of twenty books, of which the first twelve are taken from Osório and the final eight from the history of the Portuguese empire by Portuguese historian Fernão Lopes de Castanheda (1551). Another French edition with the works of both chroniclers appeared in Paris in 1587 and yet another in 1610. James Gibbs translated Osório da Fonseca's work into English in 1752.

in the anti-Catholic discourses of early Stuart England and employed to draw similarities between heathen priests and the supporters of the pope, like Osório da Fonseca himself.⁶³ This anticlerical representation of the Brahmins in the Protestant polemics was but one example of the process through which Europe transformed the East to suit its own expectations. As must be clear, this imagery found an eager audience among Catholic missionaries and scholars. In other words, to get an insight into the European representations of Indian traditions, we need to advance our understanding of anticlericalism beyond the strict confines of Protestant theology.

The explosion of biographies and hagiographies that followed Xavier's death (1552) was an essential stage in the distribution of this anticlerical imagery beyond the strict confines of Protestant polemics. These works went through multiple editions and translations themselves, further distributing and also embellishing the vitriolic components of Xavier's epistles in the vernacular literatures of Southern and Western Europe. They served in the Catholic seminaries both as leisure reading and as instructions to the seminarians. Xavier's first biography (composed with hagiographic intent) was produced in Latin by the Italian Jesuit Orazio Torsellino and released in Antwerp in 1596.⁶⁴ Torsellino draws from the January 15 letter, including the passages quoted above, and further adds that the Brahmins call God (the Christian God) *Parabram* (a reference to *Para Brahman*, the ultimate goal in Vedanta). Yet "together with this truth they mingle innumerable fables to deceive the common people."⁶⁵ That Torsellino sees this as a corruption of Christianity becomes clear in his explanation of their deceit: they say that God has three sons who govern the world, "hauling in this manner, either through the malice of men, or craft of the Diuel corrupted the mystery of the *B. Trinitie*, which was anciently received among them."⁶⁶ Not surprisingly,

⁶³ Lancelot Andrewes, *A Learned discourse of ceremonies Retained and used in Christian Churches etc.* (London, 1653), 24–25. As the bishop of Winchester, Andrewes drafted the *Discourse Shewing that many Paynim Ceremonies were retained in England after Christianity was received*, shortly before his death in 1626. His notes were later edited by Edward Leigh and published posthumously (London, 1653).

⁶⁴ This work was widely distributed all over Europe. Other Latin editions appeared in Liège (1597), Mainz (1600), Lyon (1601, 1607), Cologne (1610, 1621), as well as Augsburg (1752, 1797). Almost literally reproducing Xavier's January 15 letter, this work became a major vehicle through which the anti-Brahmanical imagery percolated into the vernacular literature. It soon found translation into Spanish by Pedro de Guzman. The Spanish edition was released in Valladolid in 1600, with a second edition in 1603, and a small pocket edition issued in Pamplona in 1620. An Italian edition appeared in Milan in 1606. The German translation appeared in München in 1674. Via the hand of Torsellino, Xavier's firsthand relation of the dynamics of priestcraft also entered the English literature through the 1632 translation by the Jesuit rector of the English college at Rome, Thomas Fitzherbert, which we have used for our quotations. See Orazio Torsellino, *The admirable Life of S. Francis Xavier etc.*, trans. T. Fitzherbert (Paris, 1632), 141.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

the Brahmins' threefold thread was associated with a corrupt understanding of the Trinitarian doctrine. Torsellino also notes that they "cover their natural lewdness with abominable deceit" and mentions Brahmin banquets, funded by their stratagems and frauds.⁶⁷ About a century later, the French hagiography of Xavier (1682) by Jesuit Dominique Bouhours draws from the work of Torsellino and once again reproduces the passages on Brahmins contained in the January 15 letter. This publication remained popular in an English translation by John Dryden all the way through the nineteenth century.⁶⁸ Bouhours similarly expresses strong anticlerical or anti-Brahmanical sentiments when he recapitulates an account that crudely anticipates the colonial or Indological vision of "the Hindu pantheon." He made it all too clear what he had in mind when he wrote about the sons of *Parabrama*, or "Lord of all the others" and "most perfect Substance":

The first, and Lord of all the others, is *Parabrama*; that is to say, a most perfect Substance, who has his Being from himself, and who gives Being to the others. This God being a Spirit free from matter, and desirous to appear once under a sensible Figure, became Man. . . . he conceiv'd a Son, who came out at his Mouth, and was call'd *Maiso* [Shiva]. He had two others after him, one of them whose name was *Visnu*, was born out of his Breast, the other call'd *Brama*, out of his Belly. . . . These are the three Deities which the *Indians* represent by one Idol, with three Heads growing out of one Body, with this mysterious signification, that they all proceed from the same principle. *By which it may be inferr'd, that in former times they have heard of Christianity; and that their Religion is an imperfect imitation, or rather a Corruption of ours.*⁶⁹

Whether and when the ideal state of true religion ever prevailed in the East is a subject about which most Europeans remained silent. The internal critiques at home hint at the fact that Europe saw itself as part of this normative and asymptotic process, which is why it perpetually reinvented itself in ever more Christian denominations. Their shared understanding of the history of religion propelled the fragmentation at home; it also enabled the transition from a proto-Christian to a post-Christian India, both which revolved around a Brahmanical axis. The reports of actual encounters

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 141–42. The second biography of Xavier (1600) by the Portuguese Jesuit João de Lucena also provides a lengthy account of the Brahmins and the anti-Brahmanical passages of the January 15 letter. See João de Lucena, *Historia da vida de Padre Francisco de Xavier etc.* (Lisbon, 1600), 98–107. The second Portuguese edition appeared in Lisbon in 1788. An Italian translation of this work was made by Lodovico P. Mansoni and published in Rome in 1613. The Spanish translation by Alonso de Sabdoval was issued in Seville in 1619.

⁶⁸ Dominique Bouhours, *The Life of St. Francis Xavier, of the Society of Jesus etc.*, trans. John Dryden (London, 1688), 125–26. Other English editions appeared in London in 1743, 1812, 1828, and 1837. The French editions were released in 1682, 1826, 1828, 1845, and 1853. Bouhours's hagiography also found translation into Italian (Rome, 1824).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 117–18 (emphasis ours).

merely provided more fuel to the theological machinery already operating at full speed.

In other words, it is not our argument that the European representations of India simply arose out of a closed textual system of books influencing other books. Rather, the cultural limits of the European engagement with India were such that various historical actors—Protestant as well as Catholic—manufactured the same outline of a unified religion when confronted with a plurality of traditions. The January 15 letter was by no means unique. Though the Iberian sources were in contact with cities like Paris, Basel, and Antwerp, it is difficult to establish the impact of early Jesuit works on the development of a pan-European imagery. Many works were produced during the first few decades of the seventeenth century but remained in a manuscript form until the twentieth. Studies about this vast body of southern European ethnography have emerged in recent years, and it seems at least to be the case that late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Iberian and Italian Jesuits took recourse to the very same conceptual formats to organize their data.⁷⁰ For example, the Italian Jesuit visitor of the East, Antonio Rubino, provided the first detailed account of the traditions of interior South India (1608), which first appeared in print when included in an excellent article by Joan-Pau Rubiés. Rubino did not question the identification of the Indian customs and practices with the corruption of a forgotten truth—Christianity—and went so far as to represent Krishna as a mockery of Christ. The anti-Brahmanical bias that facilitated the move from truth to falsehood also guided Rubino's study.⁷¹ The division between the monotheistic ideal, on the one hand, and the early modern Indian reality, on the other, continued to guide Jesuit discourses—and it may be argued, in fact, that the Jesuit method of accommodation was drafted along the lines where the monotheistic Brahman embodied in the figure of the *sannyasi* was worthy of emulation by the missionaries. It is not our intention to provide a comprehensive overview of the Jesuit discourses on India. Suffice it to say, the conceptual formats they made use of forced them to reproduce the bifurcated outline of Indian spirituality that was simultaneously being developed in the libraries at home.⁷²

⁷⁰ For southern European representations of South India, see esp. Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁷¹ Joan-Pau Rubiés, "The Jesuit Discovery of Hinduism: Antonio Rubino's Account of the History and Religion of Vijayanagara (1608)," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 3 (2001): 210–56.

⁷² For the seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656), see his *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise etc.*, trans. A. Amaladass (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000). For his two-tiered outlook on Indian traditions, also see Ines G. Županov, *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. 3, 24–30.

The anticlerical ethos that permeates the cultural history of Europe was thus extrapolated to the Brahmins, identified as the priesthood that juggled true religion in the East. This conception of religion—with the Brahmin as the central and recurring element—was reproduced in a variety of early modern sources.⁷³ Its structure is consistent with nineteenth-century colonial representations: Brahmins had corrupted a monotheistic core into ritual and idolatry. Or put differently, the local Indian traditions (“popular Hinduism”) were roped together by a rigid and unyielding Brahmanical system (“philosophical Hinduism”). As far as colonial scholarship was concerned, the locus of this system was to be found in ancient Indian manuscripts.

THE TEXTUALIZATION OF TRADITION

Some manuscripts or texts might be of importance to some traditions in India, but that is no reason to assume that they serve the same purpose as the Torah or the Bible in Judaism and Christianity. The Indian traditions have many books, songs, and poems; some are recited in some traditions, others in other traditions, and there are traditions that reject textual transmission.⁷⁴ Even when textual sources are considered important, scriptural authority is either absent or differs significantly from the primordial status of divine Revelation for the Jews and Christians. The presence of meditation techniques and yogic practices central to many Indian traditions should suffice to get the point across: these are not textual in nature. As such, it is not clear today what the role of texts is in the Indian traditions. There is simply no *prima facie* evidence to presume that Indian manuscripts have among the Brahmin traditions (or any other Hindu tradition) the same status as the Bible has in Christianity.⁷⁵

⁷³ See, e.g., the massive Flemish history of the church by the Jesuit Cornelius Hazart; *Kerckelycke Historie van de Gheheele Wereldt etc.* (Antwerpen, 1671), 1: 245–79. This chronicle soon found translation into German by the hand of Mathias Soutermans (1678–1701). Similar to Postel (ca. 1552), the German Jesuit antiquarian, Athanasius Kircher, incorporated both modes of representation into his theories of the genealogy of Asian paganism, including the Indian belief in the Trinity, as explained in his Latin work, the *China Illustrata* (1667). The *China Illustrata* was translated into Dutch by Jan Hendrik Glazemaker (1668) and into French by François-Savinien de Alquie (1670). We have consulted the French edition: *La Chine d’Athanasie Kirchere De la Compagnie de Jesus etc.*, trans. F. de Alquie (Amsterdam, 1670), esp. 214–15. As late as in 1733, the French Jesuit Joseph-François Lafitau associated the threefold Brahman thread with the “Hindu pantheon” (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) and conceptualized it as a corruption of the mystery of the Holy Trinity. See Joseph F. Lafitau, *Histoire des Découvertes et Conquestes des Portugais dans le nouveau monde* (Paris, 1733), 1:98.

⁷⁴ See Heinrich von Stietencron, “Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term,” in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. Günter-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 1991), 11–27.

⁷⁵ See R. N. Dandekar, “Hinduism,” in *Historia Religionum: Handbook for the History of Religions*, ed. E. Jouco Bleeker and Geo Widengren (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 2:237–345; and Simon Weinghtman, “Hinduism,” in *A Handbook of Living Religions*, ed. John R. Hinnells

The European search for scriptural foundations began with the first wave of the Jesuit activity in India. The idea that a text or a canon of texts is central to “the Indian religion” was manifestly presupposed from the sixteenth century onward. No research was needed to arrive at the common-sense claim that the Vedas were like the Bible in Christianity. Equally, the “textualization of tradition” is not a specifically colonial project, nor does it draw from an exclusively Protestant model of religion.⁷⁶ One only has to highlight the Jesuit works discussed above, or the Portuguese work on Hindu mythology by the Jesuit Jacopo Fenicio, the *Livro de Seitas dos Indias Orientais* (Book of the sects of the Oriental Indians; 1609), to get a glimpse of the Jesuit project of locating and translating the so-called sacred scriptures of the Brahmins.⁷⁷ Already in 1602, the Jesuit visitor of India, Niccolò Pimenta, copied a letter from the pen of Melchior Cotingo (alias Père Emanuel de Vega). Cotingo not only observed that the Brahmins originate from the dispersion of the twelve tribes of Israel but also that their books, called “samescretan,” resemble those of the Holy (Christian) Scripture remarkably well.⁷⁸

The endurance of these ethnographic commonplaces is best illustrated by the letters of Jean Venant Bouchet, a French Jesuit missionary who traveled extensively in South India during the first half of the eighteenth century. For our purposes, his most interesting letters were written to provide the theologians with fresh evidence from the East. One of his recipients was the bishop of Avranches, Pierre-Daniel Huet, author of *Demonstratio Evangelica* (Demonstration of the Gospel; 1679), an attempt at showing that the religions of the world could indeed be derived from Christian Revelation. Bouchet saw it as his task to corroborate this thesis with arguments from India. The English translator introduced his letter (first issued in French in 1713) as follows: “A Letter from Father Bouchet to the Bishop of Avranches, concerning the knowledge the Indians have had of the True

(Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), 191–236. Others have noted the absence of scriptural authority in Ancient Greek religion. See Sir Moses Finley in his introduction to P. E. Easterling and John Muir, eds., *Greek Religion and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xiii–xx.

⁷⁶ It is sufficient to refer here to the “textualizing” responses in Counter-Reformation Catholicism. See esp. Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire*, 40–43.

⁷⁷ Jacobo Fenicio, *The Livro Da Seita Dos Indios Orientais etc.*, ed. Jarl Charpentier (Uppsala, 1933). While the British Museum manuscript was issued in the twentieth century, this work was used by several early writers for its account of Indian cosmology and mythology, and many of them never acknowledged their debt. One of the most famous examples can be found in the Dutch publication by Philippus Baldaeus, *Naauwkeurige beschryvinge van Malabar en Coromandel, etc.* (Amsterdam, 1672).

⁷⁸ This collection of letters, sent to Claudio Aquaviva, the general of the order (Goa, December 1, 1600), appeared in Italian in Rome in 1602 and found translation into Latin, issued in Mainz, that same year. We have consulted the French translation of 1603: Melchior Cotingo in Niccolò Pimenta, *Les Miracles Merveilleux Advenus aux Indes Orientales etc.* (Paris, 1603), 50–51.

Religion, the Truth whereof they have corrupted with Fables.” The Jesuit reproduces the claim made by many in the sixteenth century: while the Indians retain knowledge of the biblical God, their present religion was a corruption of the true worship of God conveyed in a multitude of fables. The added advantage Bouchet enjoyed was that he could “corroborate” this thesis on the basis of textual evidence. This is what the Jesuit Father proposes to Bishop Huet as late as 1713: “The Indians have taken their Religion from the Books of Moses and the Prophets; that all the Fables their Books are fill’d with, do not so much disguise the Truth but that it may still be known, at least in Part, by their Commerce with the Jews and Egyptians, there appear among them plain Footsteps of the Christian Religion, preached to them by St. Thomas, the Apostle . . . and other great Men, ever since the first Ages of the church.”⁷⁹ Because the Indians acknowledged an infinitely perfect God, Bouchet recapitulates what the church fathers tried to demonstrate: “the Author of Nature has engrafted this fundamental Truth in the Minds of all Men.”⁸⁰ The remainder of his letter can be summarized in brief: the ingredients of the Indian stories are themes from the Bible. From the Indian cosmogonies through their notions of the Flood to the etymological connection between the names of Brahma and Abraham, the similarity was virtually endless: the Ramayana resembled a passage in the life of Samson; other stories were drawn from the book of Job. The ancient conformity of names not only applied to Abraham but also to his wife: the Jewish Sarah and the Indian Sarasvati were, in fact, the same historical person.⁸¹ Most elements of the later colonial discourse are present in this letter. Bouchet continues with an account of Indian Law and sacred scriptures, authored by Brahma and called Vedam or the Book of Law, unmistakably “an imitation of Moses’s Pentateuch.”⁸² The cosmogonies in the first Veda further demonstrate the connection with the first chapter of Genesis; the moral precepts in the second Veda are similar to the precepts found in Exodus; while the fourth Veda, describing sacrifices, guidelines for temples, and festivals, reminded Bouchet of Leviticus.⁸³ And whereas Brahma, Vichnou, and Routren [Rudra] bore witness to the corruption of monotheism into idolatry, the “more learned” exemplified the “confuse[d]

⁷⁹ Jean Venant Bouchet, “A Letter from F. Bouchet, of the Society of Jesus, Missioner at Madure, and Superior of the New Mission of Carnate, to the Lord Bishop of Auranches,” in *The Travels of several Learned Missioners of the Society of Jesus, into divers parts of the Archipelago, India, China, and America etc.*, ed. Charles Le Gobien (London, 1714), 2. This was the English translation of a French collection of Jesuit correspondence, or the *Lettres Édifiantes et Curieuses*, issued at Paris in 1713.

⁸⁰ Bouchet, *Travels*, 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 20.

Notion the Indians still retain of the adorable Trinity, which was former preach'd to them."⁸⁴

On the eve of the colonial era, while the missionary zeal to understand Indian paganism for the purpose of conversion was contributing to the development of the field of Indology, the Jesuits continued to reproduce century-old commonplaces. In a missionary letter dated 1705, a Jesuit in India, F. de la Lane, mentions an Indian "Book of Law, writ in Samouseredam," observing that "our sacred Books have not been altogether unknown to them; for they make Mention of the Flood, of an Ark, and of many more such like Things."⁸⁵ In another letter, issued in the same collection of correspondence, de la Lane elaborates upon these scriptures, concluding that the Indians "formerly had a distinct knowledge enough of the true God."⁸⁶ Similar to Bouchet, he arrives at an understanding of the textual sources that would guide the Orientalist projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the poets of India "have by their Fictions from Time to Time effac'd out of the Minds of the People the Notions of the Deity." While he no longer takes recourse to devilish interventions, de la Lane still identifies the role of scriptures as his predecessors did and thereby prefigures the colonial method: these ancient manuscripts, "containing the purer Doctrine, have by Degrees been neglected, and the Use of that language [Sanskrit] is altogether ceas'd."⁸⁷ Like his nineteenth-century Orientalist successors, de la Lane does not wonder whether this "negligence" indicates an altogether different attitude toward scriptures, and continues that "This is most certain with Respect to the Book of the Religion call'd Vedam, which the learned Men of the Country do not now understand."⁸⁸

These sources mentioned above are the products of missionary activity in the early eighteenth century. The Indian manuscripts were not simply sacred scriptures but spurious copies of the Bible, in the same way as the sixteenth-century cosmographers saw the Indian traditions as the manifestations of defective Christianity in the East. Whether or not they were copies of the Bible in the eyes of the nineteenth-century Orientalists, the Vedas had to be

⁸⁴ Ibid., 21. This letter circulated widely. It was translated into German and issued in a collection of Jesuit correspondence edited by Joseph Stöcklein, Petrus Probst, and Franciscus Keller, *Allerhand so lehr- als geist-reiche Brief, Schriften und Reis-Beschreibungen, etc.* (Augsburg, 1726). Bouchet's letter was also reprinted in the influential Enlightenment compendium on religion, known by the name of the engraver, Bernard Picart, in *Cérémonies et Coutumes Religieuses des Peuples Idolâtres etc.* (Amsterdam, 1723), 1:100–106, providing an even wider distribution of its content. A Dutch translation of this collection appeared at The Hague in 1728. The first of multiple English editions appeared in London in 1733.

⁸⁵ F. de la Lane, "An Extract of another Letter. From the same F. de la Lane. Tarkolan, 1705," in Bouchet, *The Travels of several Learned Missioners of the Society of Jesus*, 124.

⁸⁶ F. de la Lane, "A Letter from F. de la Lane, Missioner of the Society of Jesus in India, to F. Mourgues, of the Same Society," in *ibid.*, 107.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

the sacred scriptures all the same, performing exactly the same role in India as the Bible in Christianity. The long history of this emphasis on textual sources must be clear. While de la Lane had left the demonological thesis aside, he continued to find in ancient scriptures evidences of a forgotten truth, which in his particular case was also the Christian truth. Although it is important to allow for variations, there is a direct line of interpretation that connects this discourse with such later scholarship as the work by the French Catholic missionary in India, Abbé Dubois (1816), recommended by Lord William Bentinck, the governor of Madras, for being of “the greatest benefit in aiding the servants of the Government in conducting themselves more in unison with the customs of the natives.”⁸⁹ Abbé Dubois provided a unified picture of Indian traditions that fits the two-tiered model of religion outlined above, with a particular emphasis on the scriptures as the harbingers of a monotheistic truth and an imaginary Brahmin priesthood as the defiler of this truth.⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

The so-called construction of Hinduism has been associated historically with centers of political, economic, and social power. But does this tell us something fundamental about the European representations of India? It does not, because there is nothing particularly colonial about the unification of multiple traditions into a Brahmin-centric format: precolonial European authors conceptualized “the Indian religion” in much the same way, long before the British coined the term “Hinduism.” The idea that the Vedas and the Upanishads are the sacred scriptures of India means that they enjoy the same status as the Bible in Christianity. Also, this emphasis on scripture is not particularly colonial in nature; rather, it derives from a theological vision that Indian manuscripts are not just like the Bible but are, in fact, spurious copies of the Bible. Orientalist scholarship left the demonological argument about the corruption of religion aside, and Hinduism became part of the “world religions,” but this discourse of world religions displays no major discontinuity in its structure of representation. The two-tiered conceptualization of a unified, Brahmin-centric religion that took root when theological considerations determined the discourse on religion was translated into the language of colonialism and employed as a neutral analytical format to study Indian traditions. The theological nature of this paradigm is less easily recognized because it no longer manifests itself in an explicitly Christian guise. What was at its origin a theological conceptualization of India—shared across various Christian denominations—percolated so

⁸⁹ Cited in the third edition, edited and annotated by Henry K. Beauchamp: Dubois, *Description of the Character, Manners, and Customs of the People of India etc.*, xv.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 105, 186–87, 566–67, 576, 606–7.

deeply into the Western (and Indian) intellectual tradition that it is now taken too often as a given.

There is simply no evidence for the claim that the multiple “Hindu traditions” derive from a unifying Brahmanical essence. Not only is this pervasive, yet simplified representation of the Indian reality unwarranted but the emphasis on colonial sources and the emphasis on the so-called nexus between knowledge and power distort our ability to grasp the nature of this discourse. Furthermore, this emphasis leaves intact many, if not most, key presuppositions of Orientalist discourse. The critique of the colonial representations of India has neither provided novel insights into the nature of the Indian traditions nor a more sophisticated understanding of Orientalism. There still exists a deep neglect of the differences that distinguish the Indian traditions from religions such as Christianity. The critical study of the Indian traditions today is still anchored in a long-standing and ongoing process of translating the Indian reality into a Western-cultural context.⁹¹

Finally, this essay calls into question the widely accepted thesis that Orientalist discourse was primarily shaped by the colonial project. The “constructionist thesis” projects Orientalist scholarship to be an expression of the intellectual and political dominance of the West: hence, the connection between the construction of Hinduism and the colonial state. As this essay has argued, European representations of India cannot be fruitfully approached without an understanding of Orientalism that transcends the tired theme of power and knowledge. Hence, rather than outlining the relations between colonial state formation and colonial knowledge, we would like to draw attention to the often neglected thread in Said’s work that engages with Orientalist discourse not primarily as an imperialist but, rather, as a cultural project.⁹² Put differently, the multiple ways in which Europe has described the world are entwined with the ways in which it has experienced the world. An understanding of Orientalism, therefore, necessarily begins with an understanding of Western culture.

Ghent University

⁹¹ Exceptions can be found in recent attempts to reconceptualize the Indian traditions. See S. N. Balagangadhara, “How to Speak for the Indian Traditions: An Agenda for the Future,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 4 (2005): 987–1013.

⁹² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 12, 42, 60, 62, 67.