The Journal of Asian Studies Vol. 73, No. 2 (May) 2014: 305–308.
© The Association for Asian Studies, Inc., 2014 doi:10.1017/S0021911814000448

Rethinking Religious Divides

RICHARD M. EATON

Notwithstanding the considerable body of scholarship on South Asian history that has appeared over the past several decades, we still live with the image of a monolithic and alien Islam colliding with an equally monolithic Hinduism, construed as indigenous, and from the eleventh century on, politically suppressed. Such a cardboard-cutout caricature survives in much of India's tabloid media, as well as in textbooks informed by a revivalist, aggressively political strand of Hinduism, or "Hindutva." Though useful for stoking primordial identities or mobilizing support for political agendas, this caricature thrives on a pervasive ignorance of South Asia's past. Removing such ignorance is precisely the endeavor to which academic institutions, and scholarship more generally, are properly committed.

It is astonishing, then, to find such a distorted image of South Asian religions appearing in a four-page "reflection" by Professor Gerald James Larson at the front of the previous issue of the *Journal of Asian Studies*, where it is framed as a brief introduction to "Idols in the Archive," an elegant, memoir-inflected essay by Manan Ahmed Asif.[1] Here Larson thrice invokes an oil-and-water relationship between Hinduism and Islam. Ever since the partition of British India in 1947, he writes, South Asians have realized "that Hindu religious sensibilities could not coexist with Muslim sensibilities in a modern, democratic polity" and that "Hinduism and Islam have now emerged as distinct cultural traditions."[2] Although the last quote's phrasing might suggest that Larson sees this religious apartheid as a post-1947 phenomenon, elsewhere on these pages he flatly declares that "Hindu and Muslim religious sensibilities are the antithesis of one another."[3]

Several issues here are methodological. First, across the human sciences, scholarship depends on presenting facts, drawing inferences from these facts, and, especially when presenting views that venture into disputed territory, offering both facts and inferences to the public for evaluation. In introductory essays such as Larson's, a full scholarly apparatus is not to be expected, but given the way that some of his claims go against the grain of much recent academic work, citations to more than simply his own 1995 book, *India's Agony Over Religion*, would have been appreciated.[4]

Richard M. Eaton (reaton@email.arizona.edu) is Professor in the History Department at the University of Arizona.

[1]Gerald James Larson, "Partition: The 'Pulsing Heart that Grieved,'" *Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 1 (2014): 5–8; Manan Ahmed Asif, "Idols in the Archive," *Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 1 (2014): 9–16.

[2]Larson, "Partition," *op. cit.* note 1, 5, 7.

[3]Ibid., 6.

[4]Gerald James Larson, *India's Agony Over Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814000448 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Second, historians, especially, are accustomed to thinking empirically, that is, gathering evidence and building arguments "from the ground up," but Larson seems to have formed his opinions on South Asian religions by reasoning downwards from normative principles. For him, it appears from this piece, South Asian religions can be understood as if they were recipes in a cookbook authored by some unidentified master chef. Thus the recipe for Islam, as presented in the piece, consists of one God, a master text, a master historical narrative, a master community, a credo ("orthodoxy"), and the sacred space of Mecca. The Hindu religion, by contrast, consists of many or no deities, many texts, many narratives, an absence of a credo, and a plurality of normatively hierarchical mini-communities. Without even getting to the question of whether Larson has his recipes right, the problem for the historian or the anthropologist—both of them trained to keep their noses to the ground and not in a cookbook—is that people do not always follow normative recipes, often preferring to concoct their own religious traditions. Or, they might disagree over which recipe is "right." Indeed, they might not even be aware of the existence of a recipe, or in any event of a single one that applies exclusively to themselves, a condition that fairly describes the greater part of South Asia's population before the eighteenth century. Larson appears to be anachronistically back-projecting onto several millennia of South Asian history his own modernist understanding of religion in general, as well as of specific religious traditions.

Where might the author have acquired such notions? *India's Agony Over Religion*, which tends to pose issues in terms of sharp dichotomies and divides, reveals a curious notion of India's religious history. For its author, South Asia seems over time to have witnessed a sequence of distinct, fully formed, and self-contained religious traditions that were simply added on to earlier such traditions, rather like the separate layers of sedimentary strata successively deposited on an ocean floor. Understanding India's history thus becomes an exercise in religious archaeology, a project of excavating and exposing such cultural layers. For Larson, India's earliest and deepest layers were the "Indus Valley" and the "Indic (Hindu-Buddhist-Jain)," both construed as indigenous and authentically South Asian. By contrast, he understands India's subsequent layers, the "Indo-Islamic" and "Indo-Anglian," as alien and fundamentally unassimilable. Indeed, from the late tenth century on, he writes, "intrusions" by Muslims "became serious threats to the independence of the subcontinent."[5]

If we follow Larson and construe Islam as a "threat" to South Asia's post-tenth-century "independence"—whatever such a formulation might mean—we enter a bizarre and disturbing corner of Indian historiography. Indeed, we seem to have reached a terrain inhabited by the late Samuel Huntington, who sketched out his theory of a "clash of civilizations" in a 1992 lecture before the American Enterprise Institute, soon thereafter published in a 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article.[6] Since this article appeared just two years before *India's Agony Over Religion*, one might suspect a direct influence, or perhaps there was something in the zeitgeist in the mid-1990s causing people to think along parallel lines. In any event, Huntington imagined the earth's surface as akin to a large jigsaw puzzle, with each of its pieces corresponding to

[5]Ibid., 53, 103.
[6]Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814000448 Published online by Cambridge University Press

one, and only one, distinct "civilization." No fuzzy boundaries, no overlapping; one belonged to either one civilization or another. His color-coded map of the planet juxtaposed a saffron-colored India with a green-colored Bangladesh to the east and a green-colored Pakistan and Middle East to the west.

As a political scientist, Huntington was of course referring to his own times, the late twentieth century. But Larson, with his notion of Islam's "threat" to India's late medieval "independence," seems to have projected Huntington's static clash-of-civilizations model backwards to the tenth century, construing an alien Islam as intruding on an indigenous Hinduism. Such a move, however, prevents him from considering how religious traditions emerge, disappear, or evolve over time, how they adapt to different cultural environments, freely assimilating some bits and pieces of those environments, but not others. It also begs the question of how Islam, or any religion, could have diffused beyond its point of origin. With such a static model, one could hardly explain the diffusion of Buddhism into East Asia, of Christianity into northern Europe, of Islam into the East Indies, or indeed, of Hinduism within India. Reflecting on Larson's assertion that "Hindu and Muslim religious sensibilities are the antithesis of one another,"[7] one might fairly wonder how South Asia became the demographic center of the Muslim world, outnumbering the Muslim population of the entire Middle East.

The good news is that a great deal of scholarly work—scholarship of which Larson may be unaware or at least by which he seems not to have been influenced—has been done on such questions. During the 1980s and 1990s, even before Huntington propounded his "clash" theory, scholars had grown skeptical of the notion of bounded civilizational entities. From one side, postmodernist schools of thought challenged the idea of all fixed and stable identities, whether political, religious, or civilizational, highlighting "decentredness" and "contingency" rather than "centredness" or "authenticity."[8] From another, scholars of late medieval and early modern India studied such phenomena as the naturalization of Perso-Arabic vocabulary in Indian languages, the incorporation of Indian superhuman beings in Islamic cosmologies, and the patronage, by "Muslim" courts, of Hindu literati writing in Sanskrit or Indian vernaculars.[9]

[7]Larson, *India's Agony*, *op. cit.* note 1, 6.

[8]See Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (1994): 348–56; Simon During, "Postmodernism or Postcolonialism?" *Landfall* 39 (1985): 366–80; Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 95–105, and chap. 8; Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,'" *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 84–98.

[9]For examples, see the articles in David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds., *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000). See also Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Cynthia Talbot, "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 4 (1995): 692–722; Tony K. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory," *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 260–87; Romila Thapar, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* (New York: Verso, 2005); Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, *Religious Cultures of Early Modern India: New Perspectives* (New Delhi: Routledge,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814000448 Published online by Cambridge University Press

We know that both British colonial and Indian/Pakistani nationalist scholarship tended to divide India's past into two tidy columns—one Hindu, one Muslim—with texts, architecture, art, kings, courts, language, etc. crammed into one or the other of these two procrustean beds. But as the late Aditya Behl has shown, this sort of binary thinking made it impossible to classify such phenomena as the earliest genre of Hindi literature, the *premakhyan*s (lit. "love-stories"), which appeared in the eastern Gangetic Plain between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.[10] Composed originally in the Persian script by Sufis who narrated the seeker's mystical quest for union with Allah, this literary genre used characters who were ostensibly "Hindu" in name and cultural/religious practice, situating them in a landscape saturated with Indian deities, mythology, flora, and fauna. Such texts vividly reflect the remarkable fluidity of religious sensibilities in premodern India. Yet early twentieth-century nationalist writers, constrained by the Hindu-Muslim binary mindset of their times, engaged in long and fruitless debates as to where to pigeonhole this literature, and even whether or not it was truly "Indian." Larson's reflections notwithstanding, recent South Asian scholarship has moved far beyond those days.

2011); Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379–1545* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[10]Behl, *op cit.* note 9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814000448 Published online by Cambridge University Press