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Source: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 31 (2002), pp. 173-187

Published by: Annual Reviews

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4132876>

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# RELIGION IN SOUTH ASIA

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**Key Words** postcolonial studies, state formation, public sphere, transnationalism

■ **Abstract** This article examines the study of religions of South Asia, in particular of India, from the angle of postcolonial criticism. It argues that the study of state formation provides a crucial perspective for the unraveling of the multiple transformations of religion in the colonial and postcolonial public sphere. The colonial state cannot be studied in isolation from the global framework of imperial interactions between metropole and colony, in which colonial and national modernity is produced. Such a study depends on a postcolonial critique of the very category of “religion” while acknowledging the centrality of that category in colonial and postcolonial politics. The transformation of the public sphere in South Asia shows the increasing importance of religious movements and of the political use of religious images in new communication technologies. One of the most important trends in the present era is the attempt to create a homogenous religious community, not only within the national territorial space, but also in a transnational space. Such attempts offer a violent confrontation with “the Other,” however defined.

## INTRODUCTION

The history of the colonial state is crucial for the anthropological understanding of postcolonial religious formations in South Asia. Postcolonial studies, combining history and anthropology, have contributed much to this area of study, which emerged fully in the 1980s (Cohn 1987, Mathur 2000). Influenced by Foucault (1979) and Said (1979), a major argument is that orientalism as a form of knowledge is central to the control and governance of the Orient (Inden 1990, Breckenridge & van der Veer 1993). Orientalism gives religion a privileged status as the foremost site of essentialized difference between the religious East and the secular West (Dumont 1980). The orientalist privileging of religion is not based simply upon an acknowledgement of the importance of religious institutions in the colonies of the subcontinent; rather, it is directly dependent on modern understandings of religion related to the nationalization of religion and its new location in the public sphere.

Religion became crucial in the transformation of the public spheres in British India and in the postcolonial nation-states of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as well as Sri Lanka. Many of the leading political parties and social movements

mobilize people around religious issues. A relatively new element is that, especially since the 1960s, transnational migration from South Asia to Europe and the United States has brought a crucial transnational element to these forms of mobilization.

The interpretation of religion in South Asia thus requires an understanding of colonial modernity, of the postcolonial transformation of the public sphere, of religious forms of social mobilization, and of the dialectics between nationalism and transnationalism.

## COLONIAL RELIGION

A major debate in the writing of the history of British India is about the importance of colonial rule for the transformation of Indian society. One historical school of thought portrays colonial rule not as an imposition but as an Indian project or as a form of dialogue between the Indians and the British (Bayly 1988, 1998). A Marxist permutation of this view with more emphasis on historical logic than on agency is that of Washbrook (1988), who argues that “colonialism was the logical outcome of South Asia’s own history of capitalist development.”

Another school of thought emphasizes colonial knowledge and power, and colonialism as a cultural project of control. As Cohn put it, “the conquest of India was the conquest of knowledge” (1996, p. 16). The argument is that colonial rule existed and technologies of knowledge [or, as Ludden (1993) has called it, “orientalist empiricism”] were crucial in the formation of the cultural categories through which Indian realities were understood both by the natives and by the British. Cohn (1987) has famously shown the importance of the census operations on understandings of caste, tribe, and religious community in the development of a politics of numbers. Appadurai (1981) has demonstrated the ways in which the colonial administration of temples was central to colonial governmentality. Dirks (1987) has argued that under colonialism an understanding of caste was developed that enabled the British to dismantle a previous power structure, to make it into “a hollow crown.” This kind of work has influenced scholarship on Sri Lanka (Scott 1994, 1999) and Nepal (Ortner 1989) more than it has scholarship on Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Some of the differences in these positions can be traced to the use of the tropes of internality and externality as signifying a structure of mutual exclusivity. The colonial state is portrayed as an external global power formation, originating outside of India, whereas Indian subjects are seen as native agency, internal to India. Another way of looking at this is that the imperial encounters between India and Britain produced an imperial modernity both in India and in Britain, in which these tropes of internality and externality should be taken not as foundational grounds of scholarly discussion, but rather as the shifting grounds of imperial discourse itself (Suleri 1992; Viswanathan 1989, 1998; van der Veer 2001). Religion can be taken as a particularly apt site for this dynamic of power and knowledge.

Asad (1993) has pointed out that the universalization of the concept of “religion” is closely related to the coming of modernity in Europe and to the

European expansion over the world. This raises the broad historical question of the ways in which a modern Western understanding of religion has become dominant and has been applied as a universal concept (Balagangadhara 1994). The project of modernization, which is crucial to the spread of colonial power over the world, has provided new conceptual frameworks in which both the colonizing and the colonized understand themselves and their actions.

The above perspective should not, however, be taken as arguing that the traditions labeled as religion in the nineteenth century are invented, although Hinduism is in fact a good candidate for the claim that it is an invented tradition (Dalmia & von Stietencron 1995, Thapar 1989). Hindu traditions are not invented but are now understood as Hinduism and as Hindu religion. It has often been noted how difficult it is to speak of a religion called Hinduism. The term Hindu is derived from Sanskrit *sindhu* and refers to the people who live near the great river Indus. *Al-Hind* is an early Arabic term used by Muslims who settled in this region. Hindu is thus a term used by outsiders to speak about this region and its population. Later the term Hindustan, again a geographical designation, came into vogue. The term used in the early period of European expansion into India is *gentoo* (Latin: gentiles) or heathen. It was European Orientalism of the eighteenth century that gradually systematized knowledge about the people of India and their various beliefs and practices into an integrated, coherent religion called Hinduism. This was part of a larger, empirical enterprise to map India and its inhabitants, an enterprise framed in metropolitan theoretical concerns. It is often asserted that Hinduism, as such, does not exist, but that there is instead a great variety of heterogeneous practices of a devotional and ritual nature as well as of metaphysical schools that were lumped together under the foreign term Hinduism in the early nineteenth century. Such an assertion contains some truth, but it is exaggerated because these practices and doctrines do belong together as a tradition, although they are not unified by a central authority (Lorenzen 1999, Dube 1998). Moreover, in this regard, Hinduism is not an exception but is similar to other religions in South Asia, such as Islam, Sikhism, and Buddhism (Asad 1986, Oberoi 1994, Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988).

Revivalist movements, like the Arya Samaj, discovered in Hinduism a monotheistic God, a Book, and congregational worship. This was a substantial transformation of a set of polytheistic traditions with a great variety of scriptures, none of which is really dominant, and domestic and temple worship that is seldom congregational. What these movements wanted to create was a modern Hinduism that would be respectable in the eyes of the world (monotheistic and text-based) and that could be the basis for a morality of acting in the secular world as in Mohandas Gandhi's use of the Bhagavad-Gita as the foundational text for social work. Similar transformations took place in Islam, Sikhism, and Buddhism (Metcalf 1982, Fox 1985, Oberoi 1994, Obeyesekere 1995, Roberts 1997).

If one accepts Asad's argument that religion itself is a modern category, one has to realize that it is applied to Christianity as much as it is applied to Hinduism. The difference, however—and that remains crucial—is that Christianity, at least from Kant onward, is portrayed as the rational religion of Western modernity, whereas

Hinduism is mystified as Oriental wisdom or irrationality (Halbfass 1988, King 1999). It is in the field of historical interaction, established by imperial expansion, that the category of religion receives its significance. One could therefore argue that the modern category of religion was constructed in imperial encounters during the Western expansion and that it transformed both Christianity and other religions such as Hinduism and Islam. Modern forms of knowledge and power are indispensable in the self-understanding of missionaries, reformers, and state officials alike and thus they are the very subject of our historical understanding. The colonial state is crucial for the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the debate about it is so bitter because postcolonial questions about religion and politics are tied up with colonial history. There is no “pure” indigenous society that responds to the “purely” external force of the colonial state. The categories of modernity for colonizer and colonized alike are formed in the imperial encounter itself and thus cannot be understood in terms of the imposition of modern concepts on a traditional society that resists this imposition in its own moral languages. The transformation of these moral languages is at issue. Some argue that the colonial expansion entails resistance in the form of peasant insurgency embedded in the ritual beliefs and practices of indigenous society (Guha 1997, Hardiman 1987), but such an argument may place peasants outside of the history of modernity. Others argue in terms of a dialogue between colonizer and colonized (Irschick 1994), but the term dialogue ignores power inequalities in communication.

Although we need to go beyond the study of the colonial state by examining movements and forms of communication that are not sponsored by the state, it is also important to reflect upon the nature of our historical information. The study of Indian religious history has a number of problems that demand conceptual reflection and cannot be solved by simply collecting more factual evidence. The idea that there is a corpus of texts, a dead, inert body that contains answers to everything we want to ask, called the archive, is obviously a fiction. However eager and industrious we are, however much we know the relevant languages, the archive first has to be located, and it has its politics and its history (Amin 1995, Dirks 2001). The archive is not in fact dead, but alive. In research on religious orders one does not find many documents, and the existing documents often refer to landed property, to the building of temples, to patronage. These documents are held in temples, mosques, khanqas, gurdwaras, and they are used and framed in relation to claims in the present. What remains entirely outside of this is the documentation of the history of itinerant monks and faqirs. Even the other textual evidence—devotional literature, songs in praise of God, theological arguments—does not give much clue to those who are footloose. Devotional literature, moreover, has one major difficulty, namely the complete ideological negation of history. Even in its genealogical accounts of the succession of abbots, such literature is hagiographical and miraculous rather than historical (van der Veer 1988, Pinch 1996, Ewing 1997, Carrithers & Humphrey 1991, Lorenzen 1995).

To some extent the answer to these troubles is oral history (Ortner 1989, Amin 1995, Mayaram 1997). One can find out in the ethnographic present what the

tensions and fissures are in a social configuration, such as a monastic order or a priestly caste (Parry 1994). Moreover, participants often answer questions in a historical way. This can be done in a quasimythological fashion—"this has been the case since the time of Rama"—but also in a quite specific way in case there are events that people themselves have witnessed. Controversy can lead to the writing of pamphlets that give us the opportunity to read documentary evidence against ethnographic evidence in the reconstruction of a social configuration. A major difficulty, however, is to reconstruct long-term history with the help of oral history (Geertz 1980, Schulte Nordholt 1991, Comaroff & Comaroff 1992). Ethnography helps us to understand a social configuration and thus to make certain historical conjectures, but this can only be a first step. The work done by the doyen of Indian sociology, G. S. Ghurye (1953), on Indian *sadhus* is still extremely useful, both as an ethnographic snapshot and as an exercise in historical conjecture, but there is very little terra firma here. Similarly, in the most important historical and political debate in India over the last twenty years, the Babar Mosque controversy, it is striking that the historical evidence is so slim and that oral history plays such an important role (van der Veer 1988, Gopal 1993). This explains the importance of the colonial archive. Archives are products of state centralization of management and control, and the modern state places empirical evidence squarely at its service. Much of precolonial and extracolony evidence is framed and given significance in the colonial archive so that metaphors of internality and externality are of little use in describing the colonial intervention.

## MODERN RELIGION: THE PUBLIC SPHERE

One finds in modern religions the development of an informed religious public. A number of recent studies show how important religion is for the creation of the public sphere (Hefner 2000, Eickelman & Anderson 1999). This may come as a surprise to those who accept Habermas's understanding of the rise of the public sphere. In his seminal work Habermas (1989) argued that, in the eighteenth century, private individuals assembled into a public body began to discuss openly and critically the exercise of political power by the state. These citizens had free access to information and expressed their opinion in a rational and domination-free manner. Crucial to this development was the emergence and expansion of a market for newspapers and other printed materials, as was the rise of the bourgeoisie, which is why Habermas spoke of the bourgeois public sphere. These bourgeois turn out to be secular liberals rather than religious radicals. Habermas's analysis of the Enlightenment tradition belongs, at the theoretical level, very much to a discourse of modern, European self-representation (Calhoun 1994, van der Veer & Lehmann 1999). A striking element in this self-representation is the neglect of religious public opinion because it cannot be regarded as rational and critical. The productive side of Habermas's argument, however, is his focus on the sociology of the public sphere: both the discursive possibilities of critical debate

and the tendency of the public sphere to expand and allow a growing number of participants. The notions of “publicity,” “the public,” and “public opinion,” captured by Habermas’s concept of “the public sphere,” are important and can be used for comparative purposes if we are not constrained by Habermas’s secularist perspective.

One finds a new configuration in the modern nation-state that allows citizens to follow different religions without immediately raising the question of political loyalty. Loyalty to one’s king and state follows not from one’s religious affiliation, but from one’s national identity, of which religion is one ingredient among others. Nationalism replaces religion in this regard, and one can come to nationalism via a variety of religious affiliations. Another way of expressing this is that in the modern era religions are nationalized. Separation of church and state does not lead to the decline of the social and political importance of religion (Madan 1997). With the rise of the nation-state an enormous shift occurred in what religion means. Religion produces the secular as much as vice versa, but this interaction can be understood only in the context of the emergence of nationalism in the nineteenth century. In India religious neutrality of the colonial state left the public sphere open for missionary activities of Christian organizations. A great number of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh organizations emerged to resist the Christian missionary project. This dialectic of aggressive missionization and Hindu resistance contributed to the formation of a public sphere in British India in the nineteenth century that was not at all secular. Secularity and religion receive particular historical meanings in this atmosphere of debate, however. The administration and upkeep of Hindu temples and rituals fell to newly emergent elites, which used the British legal apparatus to create a new, corporate Hinduism that was fully modern (Thapar 1985). These elites were interested not only in controlling Hindu institutions, which especially in South India were quite powerful and immediately connected to political control; they also had a reformist agenda concerning religious education, ritual action, and customs that is crucial even today (Fuller 1984).

The colonial state attempted not to interfere with native religions; it also did much to disavow any connection to the missionary project and to Christianity as such (Viswanathan 1989). One can indeed speak of a definite secularity of the British state in India that was much stronger than in Britain itself. The British considered a sharp separation of church and state essential to their ability to govern India. Their attempts to develop a neutral religious policy in a society in which religious institutions played an important political role could not be anything but ambivalent. In the management of both South Indian Hindu temples and North Indian Sikh and Muslim shrines, the colonial government remained involved, despite all efforts to remain neutral (Pressler 1987, Gilmartin 1988, Oberoi 1994). Nevertheless, externality and neutrality became the tropes of a state that tried to project itself as playing the role of a transcendent arbiter in a country divided along religious lines. Again, however, this did not contribute to a secular atmosphere in society. Indian religions were transformed in opposition to the state, and religion became more important in the emergent public sphere. As in Britain, religion was

transformed and molded in a national form, but that form defined itself in opposition to the colonizing state. The denial of participation in the political institutions of the colony led Indians to develop an alternative set of institutions of a jointly political and religious nature. Indians did not conceive the colonial state as neutral and secular, but rather as fundamentally Christian (Kumar 1998). Similarly, popular conceptions of British rule, as evident in the Cow Protection Movement of the 1880s, portrayed it as of an alien, Christian nature. When in 1888 the North-Western Provincial High Court decreed that the cow was not a sacred object and thus did not have to be protected by the state, the decision galvanized the movement not only against Muslims, but also against rule by Christian "cow-eaters" (Freitag 1989). When the state started to use religion among its census categories, it came itself to be understood in religious categories. Although the legitimizing rituals and discourses of the colonial state were those of development, progress, and evolution and meant to be secular, they could indeed easily be understood as essentially Christian. The response both the state and the missionary societies provoked was also decidedly religious. Hindu and Islamic forms of modernism led to the establishment of modern Hindu and Muslim schools, universities, and hospitals, superseding or marginalizing precolonial forms of education. Far from having a secularizing influence on Indian society, the modernizing project of the secular colonial state in fact gave modern religion a strong new impulse.

The development of a public sphere of debate, petitions, and pamphlets is in Habermas's view the privilege of a literate, bourgeois public. In the later part of the nineteenth century this public sphere, according to Habermas, deteriorated into democratic mass politics, in which critical debate is replaced by agitation. Habermas raises the important issue of elites versus the masses. A number of studies explore whether we can speak of a rise of a bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century India or, more fundamentally, whether the category bourgeoisie is significant in a society stratified by caste and not by class (Chakrabarty 2000, Fuller 1997). I would think that the category is appropriate and that it is signaled by the emergence of a literate group of businessmen, educators, and administrators whose careers show the geographical range of imperial business. It is the spread of education, the improvement of transport, and the modern need for mobility that make this possible. The fact that caste endogamy is still practiced does not mean that this is not a bourgeoisie, but it is a bourgeoisie fractured as in many parts of the modern world by ethnic and religious bonds. According to Chakrabarty (2000), the formation of the bourgeois individual has been incomplete in India because one does not find an interiorized, private self reflected in autobiographies, novels, diaries, and such. This kind of formation of the self does belong to a particular Western history, of which Protestant Christianity is one of the most important sources. This does not mean that there are no Hindu or Muslim individuals with private selves and public personae, but that the discursive sources of the self are different. Nevertheless, there are a number of technologies of the self, like modern education, novel writing, autobiographies, newspapers, and modern art that emerged in India in the nineteenth century as they did in



Britain. Similarly, technologies of public debate, such as pamphlets, petitions, and newspapers, but also processions in public arenas, emerged in India as carriers of public opinion outside of the older patterns of elite patronage and influence.

Chatterjee (1993) has argued for the rise in India of another kind of private and public distinction under colonial rule. This is a division of the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual. The private sphere of the household is the site of spirituality and has to be protected against colonial materialism, in Chatterjee's analysis. However, the modern notion of spirituality that comes up in the imperial encounter between Britain and India is not opposed to materialist science at all. Hindu nationalists claim that science is part of India's spiritual heritage, and they find support among Britain's theosophists and spiritualists (Prakash 1999, van der Veer 2001). Moreover, reform of the household, female education, and transformation of marriage practices are precisely the subjects of public debate (Chandra 1998).

The rise of mass politics, of a politics of numbers both in the metropole and in the colony, transformed the public sphere in major ways at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. In the absence of democratic participation, mass politics led in India to the development of mass agitation in the form of political rituals like Tilak's Ganapati festival in Maharashtra (Hansen 2001). It also led to the representation of Hinduism as a majority religion and Islam and Christianity as minority religions. In the context of a politics of numbers, questions of untouchability, of Dravidianism, of Sufi syncretism took on new meanings. In that context, the religious history of modern India has to deal with Ambedkar and his politics of conversion (Viswanathan 1998, Dirks 2001), with E. V. Ramaswamy or Periyar and his politics of anti-Brahmanism, with Muhammad Ilyas and his politics of internal Islamic conversion, with Gandhi and his politics of Hindu inclusivism.

## Religious Movements in the Public Sphere

Crucial in the modern public sphere in South Asia are religious movements that have their origin in the colonial period or are successors of those movements. The most important among them want to unify and homogenize the religious community. As such they respond to what they perceive as the assault by the "pseudo-secular" state and attempts at conversion by other religious communities. In all these movements both clerics and intellectuals, trained in secular institutions, play a dominant role. Striking is the position of leadership in militancy and interethnic violence taken by Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka (Tambiah 1992), Muslim clerics in Pakistan (Nasr 1994, 2000), and Hindu monks in India (van der Veer 1994, McKean 1996). Among Hindu movements most attention has been given to organizations connected to political violence, such as the Rasthriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Shiv Sena (Ludden 1996; Hansen 1999, 2001). Among Muslim movements both the Tablighi Jama'at, an avowedly apolitical movement, and the radically political Jama'at-i-Islami have been subjects of study. The Tablighi Jama'at and the Visva Hindu Parishad, an offshoot of the Rasthriya Swayamsevak Sangh, are more directly involved in religious issues of belief and conversion.

The Tablighi Jama'at is an internal missionary movement among Muslims, founded in north India in the 1920s (Metcalf 1993, 1996; Masud 2000; Sikand 1998; Troll 1994). Associated with the famous seminary of Deoband, it is focused much less on learning and much more on simple preaching (Metcalf 1982). Its origins are only understandable in the colonial context in which a politics of numbers and communal competition made it essential for both Hindu and Muslim movements to strengthen their ranks and numbers. Hindu purification movements tried to "invite back" and re-convert Muslim communities that had recognizable Hindu customs. Movements like the Tablighi Jama'at tried to counteract this by asking such communities to reform their practices and become "good Muslims." Like the Jehova's Witnesses they go in small groups from community to community to invite Muslims to join them and perform the simplest Islamic tasks, such as going regularly to the mosque and reading the Qur'an. Annually there are gatherings, some of which, such as the ones in Raiwind in Pakistan and Tong in Bangladesh, are the largest gatherings of Muslims (some two million) in the world outside the hajj. Research on the Tablighis is difficult because, contrary to many Islamist movements, they put no value in media such as books and pamphlets and certainly not in video- or audiotapes in spreading their message. They have some official publications such as transcripts of lectures delivered by leading Tablighis, mostly containing simple, short, edifying stories. There are also some hagiographies of the founder of the movement, Muhammad Ilyas, and some other leading figures. This kind of literature is fundamentally antihistorical. Like the stories of the behavior of the Prophet and his companions, they have value only as models for behavior. History is regarded as a worldly pursuit that simply distracts from ritual observance. The focus is not on reading, but on ritual observance. Communication between activists is largely oral and letters are destroyed after being read. The movement is definitely secretive in the way it communicates its way of organizing. Striking is the focus on individual, behavioral change connected with creation of an unmediated public sphere of huge gatherings and people taking time off to go in groups. Tablighi Jama'at is a kind of pietistic quietism that wants to change the world (and make it a place controlled by Islamic Law) by transforming the self.

To what extent does the Tablighi Jama'at belong to the public sphere and provide a space for criticism of the state? The answer is ambiguous because the Tablighis explicitly do not want to be of this world and explicitly do not want to be political. Still, the movement's stress on personal matters such as Islamic dress and education brings it into direct confrontation with the agenda of the secular nation-state that cannot refrain from intervening in the ways communities organize their lives (for examples in Europe, see Gerholm & Lithman 1988, Nielsen 1995, Kepel 1997). When Tablighis immigrate into Western societies, they cannot fail to come into conflict with secular arrangements in schools and so on. Integration into secular societies is the opposite of what this movement wants to achieve. Their personal jihad may be less overtly political than the jihad of Islamist groups, but within the conditions of modern state formation it is still of great political significance. The Tablighi Jama'at is the largest transnational Islamic movement in the world. Thanks to its universalist message it can escape from the claims of national societies

and play a significant role in providing models for migrant communities. The studies collected in Masud's volume show how Tablighis cope with the different circumstances in Canada, South Africa, Morocco, France, Belgium, and Germany. By existing in a transnational space, these migrants can create a sphere of their own that is relatively independent of their daily breadwinning activities. This sphere offers them a dignity and routine that is unavailable in the leisure activities offered by the host societies. It allows for a moral condemnation of the state without taking any political responsibility.

The Visva Hindu Parishad (VHP), or World Hindu Council, is of much more recent origin than the Tablighi Jama'at. It is an initiative taken in 1964 to "unite the Hindus" worldwide in order to recapture the Indian state from the secularists who "dominated" it and to prevent conversions from the Hindu fold to Islam. An important role is played by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a militant organization that emerged in the 1920s and has been continuously involved in communal violence against Muslims (Hansen 1999). The ideology of the VHP is not much different from other Hindu Unity movements over the century. It expresses the need to reassert Hindu dignity and pride in the face of alleged attempts of the state to secularize society and appease the Muslim community. However, its organization is innovative. Its secular leadership, which derives from the RSS, depends on decisions taken in a public debate among religious leaders in what is called a Parliament of Hindu Religion. The Parliament convenes in one of the big Hindu bathing festivals, the latest being the Kumbh Mela in February 2000 in Allahabad, where more than 20 million pilgrims and monks convened for a holy dip in the Ganges. The tone in these meetings is highly critical and demands a change in the policies of the government toward the Hindu community. The Parliament of Hindu Religion sees itself as an alternative to parliamentary politics in Delhi. Its organization, depending on changing alliances between religious leaders, is very unclear and secretive. The political role of the VHP is indirect but very important because its campaigns have led to electoral successes of the allied political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which dominates the current Indian government.

The VHP had its first success in a context very similar to the one in which the Tablighi Jama'at had originated: the context of mass conversion as part of a politics of numbers and communal competition. After the oil crisis of 1973 there had been an explosion of allegations and violence centering on the idea that conversions to Islam, by necessity, had to have been induced by oil money. The most important of such conflicts related to Meenakshipuram, a South Indian village in which an untouchable community converted to Islam in 1981. The VHP successfully mobilized the minority syndrome of the Hindu majority and saw its following increase to the extent that it could mobilize support for the far-reaching attack on the Babar Mosque in Ayodhya that was destroyed in 1992.

Hindu movements like the VHP, the Swaminarayan Movement, and Muslim movements like the Tablighi Jama'at are prime agents in globalization (Williams 1984, 1988; Vertovec & Peach 1997; van der Veer 1995; Werbner 1999). A Hindu guru can be called successful only if he is supported by Hindu followers

abroad. These networks are enabled by constant air travel, but also increasingly by digital religion: websites where one can “click a deity.” The focus of these global movements is on the family. The struggle of migrants is to reproduce their religious culture in a foreign environment (Blank 2001). The fear is often that the children will lose all touch with the culture of the parents and thus, in some sense, be lost to them. The globalization of production and consumption, including the flexibility and mobility of labor, is addressed by religious movements and is a major element in their politics of belonging. The idea that migrants are rootless because they are highly mobile misunderstands the imaginary nature of roots. To have roots requires a lot of work for the imagination (dreamwork). One element of that dreamwork is that pride in one’s nation of origin is important in the construction of self-esteem in the place of immigration (Appadurai 1996, van der Veer 1995).

## Media and the Public Sphere

Another important element in the transformation of the public sphere is the development of communication technologies. Viewing (*darshan*) is a central medium of worship and communication in Hindu devotion. The viewing of a divine image brings one into the presence of the supernatural. Certainly some images are more powerful than others, so much so that Hindus go on long pilgrimages to be in the presence of divine power (van der Veer 1988, Fuller 1992, Parry 1994). Also time is important in this regard: Some spaces are more powerful at some moments. This would entail a certain localization of sacred power that is also found in Islam (Werbner & Basu 1998), but the mechanical reproduction of pictures of deities in Hinduism, of “god posters”—compounded by film and television images, all available on videocassettes—allows for an increasing mobility of sacred power (Babb & Wadley 1995). Especially the broadcasting of the great Hindu epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, by Indian state-run television has enabled the appropriation of a Hindu visual regime at the popular level in a new political language in the public sphere. This is not to argue that the televised epics have replaced older forms of dramatic performance of these traditions, but that they have created new audiences and new arguments (Lutgendorf 1990). This transformation of the visual register in the public sphere is immediately connected to transformations in the literary and linguistic register (Haq 1999, Rai 2001, Ramaswamy 1997). In South India the connection between populist politics and cinematic performance in the public sphere has been long-standing (Dickey 1994) and has been extended to national television and Bollywood cinema. A number of recent studies have shown the importance of the new media for religious politics in India and Pakistan (Rajagopal 2001, Mankekar 1999, Akhtar 2000). One of the challenges of religious movements today is to appropriate visual imagery in a market saturated with cable television broadcasting fashion shows, advertising, music clips. The VHP, for instance, is able to capture both a peasant audience in rural India and an urban middle-class audience by carrying its message in campaigns that involve the traversing of the country by motorized processions and

by simultaneous packaging in video messages and websites. The use of religious symbolism in its campaigns is incredibly astute (Ludden 1996, McKean 1996), informed by the long Bollywood tradition of cinematic melodrama. An important aspect of this is its syncretism, the creation of a unified, national religion that can bridge the gaps between the various strands that make up the Hindu tradition. Not only is this new religious unity excellent for use outside of India, it is in fact created in a transnational space in which transnational migrants contribute to the transformation of religion at home.

## CONCLUSION

The study of religion in South Asia requires an understanding of the colonial histories that were formative for the postcolonial nation-state. At the same time it is crucial to understand that nation-states are formed in a global context and that the current transformations of the nation-state under regimes of globalization show not only departures, but also continuities. Religion is one of the defining elements in the politics of belonging and identity in modern South Asia. The social movements and media that communicate religious beliefs and practices and socialize new generations in them are as little confined to South Asia as South Asians themselves. The violent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, between high castes and dalits, between Shi'as and Sunnis, between Buddhists and Hindus are also not regional, but increasingly global. The study of South Asian religions is thus forced to combine historical awareness, conceptual acuity, and spatial mobility.

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