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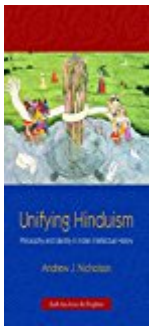

Andrew J. Nicholson. *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History.* South Asia across the Disciplines Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 280 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-14986-0.

Reviewed by Vishwa Adluri

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Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Review editor's note: Due to software difficulties I have had to omit diacriticals from several Sanskrit words, either in citations or in the main text. The reviewer and cited authors followed the standard convention for rendering Sanskrit into Roman font. I also apologize for any remaining format errors in this review.

The title of Andrew J. Nicholson's book, *Unifying Hinduism*, is suitably ambiguous, for the "unifying" is as much about the scholarly consensus regarding Hinduism as the process underway among its adherents. The topic of "Hinduism" as a unified or coherent tradition has long been subject to debate. Many critics of the concept argue that the concept is an invention of British colonialists and the missionaries and scholars who followed them. Any discussion of a unified Hindu identity also was considered suspect in academic circles, viewed as contributing to fundamentalism. The dominant position was championed by German scholars, such as Paul Hacker. Hacker claimed that the term "Hinduism" was a "group description" (*Sammelbezeichnung*) and that contemporary Hindus (whom he disparagingly referred to as "Neohindus") had nothing in common with the ancient religious traditions of India.[1] The institutional dominance of this view made it almost impossible to use the term "Hinduism" without the obligatory scare quotes. Yet, in recent years, on the one hand, scholars have been increasingly willing to question this dominant paradigm. Beginning with David L. Lorenzen's 1999 article, there has been a spate of literature on the topic.[2] At the same time, scholars have also been increasingly willing to question their own praxis as scholars, an undertaking that has occasionally led to disquieting revelations about the political and religious ideologies of an earlier generation of Indologists.[3] On the other hand, those contesting the idea of Hindu identity have not held back with their counterarguments.[4]

In this charged atmosphere, Nicholson's book combines a nuanced approach with careful historical research. Rather than engage in the often heated debates that have unfolded between the two camps, Nicholson chooses to return to the his-

torical sources. Can we find evidence of an indigenous reflection on the concept of Hindu identity in precolonial India? And if so, could this reflection have laid the foundations for Hindu identity? Nicholson argues that we can find this evidence, specifically, in the work of medieval doxographers who, "between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries CE,... began to treat as a single whole the diverse philosophical teachings of the Upanisads, epics, Puranas, and the schools known retrospectively as the 'six systems' (sh*addarshana*) of mainstream Hindu philosophy" (p. 2). In doing so, Nicholson argues that such thinkers as Vijñanabhikshu and his contemporaries "made possible the world religion later known by the name Hinduism" (p. 6). If correct, Nicholson's view has radical consequences for our understanding of Hindu identity. Not only is the concept significantly older than we are accustomed to thinking, but it can also be traced back to indigenous Indian origins rather than being predicated on Western ideals of nationhood. I will briefly summarize the book's argument, before addressing some of these consequences.

In the introduction, Nicholson sets up the problem and explains why he thinks that the enunciation of a distinction between "a*stika*" and "*nastika*" schools in the work of late medieval doxographers, such as Vijñanabhikshu and Madhava, represents the precursor of a unified Hinduism. In chapters 2 and 3, he looks at the Bhedabheda school of Vedanta (to which Vijñanabhikshu belonged) to understand how this school formulated the ideal of a canonical "a*stika*" outlook. In chapters 4 to 6, he extends this approach to the Sankhya and Yoga schools. Although German Indologists, including Richard Garbe, depicted Sankhya as the "rationalist" Indian philosophy par excellence (and hence as completely atheistic), Nicholson argues that there is no evidence for this view. Garbe's view "is based on arbitrary oversimplifications and on the arbitrary privileging of certain 'classical' texts over others that Indologists have deemed not fit to include in the Sankhya canon" (p. 68). In chapter 7, Nicholson examines how, in a process of "intercultural mimesis," nineteenth-century Orientalists "appropriate[d] certain concepts or symbols they [found] in non-Western traditions and then recontextualize[d] [them] for ideological reasons specific to the European cultural sphere" (p. 126). In chapter 8, he then turns to the precursors of these Western historiographers, the medieval doxographers whose classificatory systems provided the foundation for Western scholars' work. Chapter 9 takes a look at how Indian authors used the terms "a*stika* " and "*nastika*" to define both "self" and "other" in Hinduism. Finally, in chapter 10, he returns to his central thesis that Vijnanabhikshu and his contemporaries formulated a proto-Hindu identity," one that "was later elaborated by Hindu reformers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and transformed into the basis of the world religion today known as Hinduism" (p. 23). Via discussions of the work of the German Indologists Hacker and Heinrich von Stietencron, Nicholson shows how Western criticisms of the concept of a unified Hinduism were often motivated by political and religious considerations. Thus, he demonstrates that the work of Hacker is the biased work of a "Christian polemicist," just as Stietencron's work is biased by his views on contemporary Indian politics (p. 188). The insight that "'unifying Hinduism' is a process, not an entity," one that "Indian intellectuals have been engaged in ... for at least seven hundred years" leads Nicholson to strike an appropriately cautionary note in the conclusion (p. 202). "As scholars," he writes, "we must fight against the projection of contemporary political ideologies onto Indian history in order to fully appreciate the riches of the intellectual traditions known today as Hinduism" (p. 205).

Nicholson's book takes a refreshingly undogmatic look at the history of Hinduism. The author's lucid prose and clear presentation make this an excellent introduction both to the history of Indian philosophy and to the specific period in Indian intellectual history it studies. The book

also represents an important stage in the evolving dialogue between Western scholars and Indian traditions. Not only does it present important correctives to misleading Orientalist historiographies, but it also points to a more hermeneutically circumspect approach to studying history. For this reason alone, this book ought to be on the reading list of every student of Indian history and religious studies.

While I am extremely sympathetic to Nicholson's approach, the book also contains some weaknesses, principally relating to its treatment of German Indologists. I cite three examples here. Although Nicholson asserts that Garbe's views on Sankhya are rooted in a "barely veiled hostility toward the realist schools of Vedanta" and that "this attitude is primarily based on the supremacy and antiquity of the Advaita school in the Orientalist imagination," the situation is much more complex (p. 68). Not all scholars considered Advaita to be the oldest or the highest philosophical school. Garbe, for example, described Sankhya as the "oldest real system of Indian philosophy."[5] Although Nicholson quotes this very passage, he does not clarify how this fits with his broader portrayal of the Orientalist prejudice in favor of Vedanta. For the answer, one must turn to Garbe's 1903 text, ***Beiträge zur indischen Kulturgeschichte***. Here Garbe argues that the "rationalistic Sankhya system" arose as a "reaction" to the "idealistic monism of the Upanishads." A careful reading of the passage clarifies why, for him, the Sankhya system represents the apex of philosophical achievement in India: he interprets Sankhya dualism along Stoic/Kantian lines, i.e., as the distinction between the "practical subject" (who belongs to the domain of moral action, i.e., freedom) and the "theoretical subject" (who belongs to the domain of causality). Given this commitment to a Kantian ideal of philosophy, it is also clear why Garbe would claim that Sankhya represents the "the oldest genuine [wirkliche] system of Indian philosophy."[6] By not engaging this material, Nicholson, in my view, passes up an opportunity to explore the question of how nineteenth-century scholars' own definitions of philosophy influenced their attitude toward Indian sources.

Definitions of philosophy do not operate in a vacuum. In nineteenth-century Germany, philosophical debates were often only thinly veiled theological disputes. In particular, the ***Pantheismusstreit*** ("Pantheism debate") of the eighteenth century still cast a long shadow over German intellectual life.[7] Ever since Jacobi's attacks on Spinozistic pantheism, pantheism was considered the atheistic philosophy par excellence and hence, philosophically, the kiss of death for any system. To show that a system was "pantheistic" was to show that it was morally suspect and intellectually unworthy of consideration. Vedanta, of course, with its "All-Eins-Lehre" ("doctrine that all is One") was considered the quintessential pantheistic system. In fact, "All-Eins" was often used synonymously with "pantheism" in German philosophy. Thus, what is at the back of this seemingly innocuous debate over whether Vedanta or Sankhya represents the oldest Indian philosophical school is the much more complex question of whether one considers Indians to be fundamentally atheistic (indeed, incapable of forming a clear conception of God) or whether one sees them as potentially capable of the moral and intellectual maturity that would culminate in the worship of a monotheistic God.

Now, this debate about the potential moral perfectibility of Indians had still deeper roots, since whether one affirmed or denied this potential was ultimately a question of whether one posited indigenous aboriginal origins or foreign Aryan origins for Indian culture. Thus, such scholars as Richard Garbe and Hermann Oldenberg have argued that Indian thought had originally been rationalistic. Oldenberg, in fact, found incipient strands of monotheism in "Aryan " religion.[8] In other words,Aryan religion in India (as in Germany, its Western counterpart) had been on its way to a rational monotheistic religion, before the

rise of Brahmanism put an end to this evolutionary process. In Oldenberg's view, Vedanta is akin to an abortifacient that frustrates the religious development of the Eastern branch of the Aryans. Likewise, Garbe, too, considers Vedanta to be a later development. In his 1897 book, he champions Archibald E. Gough's thesis that pantheistic strains of thought must have originated among the "aboriginal inhabitants" of India and only later made their way into the thinking of the Aryans.[9] Garbe's valorization of Sankhya as the original Indian system is indissolubly linked to his program of claiming redemptive Aryan origins for Indian thought and of distinguishing between an Aryan and a Brahmanic phase in Indian history.[10]

I mention these connections here not to criticize Nicholson, but to show just how profound the perspectives his book opens up are. Nicholson is absolutely right when he notes that nineteenth-century Orientalists "appropriate[d] certain concepts or symbols they [found] in non-Western traditions and then recontextualize[d] [them] for ideological reasons specific to the European cultural sphere" (p. 126). In fact, one can push the statement further and say that nineteenth-century Orientalists also appropriated concepts or symbols they found in their *own* Western tradition (e.g., "rationalism," "pantheism," a Kantian definition of "philosophy," a Hegelian narrative of "history," etc.) and then recontextualized them for ideological reasons specific to their own cultural sphere. Nicholson's book joins the growing chorus of scholars aware of the problems with German Indological scholarship and its hegemonic domination of Indian studies.

Nicholson is also right to call attention to the religious ideologies behind the work of many critics of the concept of Hinduism. But while he rightly notes of Hacker that he is an "apologist for Roman Catholicism," there is much more that needs to be said (p. 187). As the author of the "invention of Hinduism" hypothesis, Hacker deserves our special attention, because many contemporary theories concerning Hinduism can ultimately be traced back to his work.[11] The question of Hacker's motivations and his ideological commitments is therefore crucial for understanding the problems with the "invention of Hinduism" hypothesis.

Hacker developed the thesis of the invention of Hinduism in ten articles on Hinduism between 1954 and 1978. An eleventh article was published posthumously in 1983.[12] With the exception of this last article, all ten articles were reprinted in his collected essays, five in a section titled "Hinduismus (religionsgeschichtlich)" and another five in a section titled "Neohinduismus." All ten articles are presented as scholarly contributions to a scientific debate. Yet, at the same time as the editor Lambert Schmitthausen, acting on Hacker's wishes, included these ten articles as contributions to a legitimate academic debate, he also suppressed (again at Hacker's explicit behest), the author's polemical and fundamentalist Christian writings. These writings, "partly anonymous" and "without a scientific agenda," appeared in fringe religious pamphlets and propaganda literature and are therefore unknown to the majority of scholars today.[13]

Hacker's suppression of this material casts serious doubts about his integrity as a scholar. It misleads readers into thinking that his writings on Hinduism are dispassionate, critical evaluations, when, in fact, they are--as Nicholson rightly notes--the work of a "Christian polemicist" (p. 188). Not to present them in their historical context--Hacker's intense religious feeling, bordering on fundamentalism in many of the suppressed writings, his anti-ecumenical stance that provoked him into vituperative exchanges with the Indian bishop Amalorpavadass and the Jesuit theologian Rahner, and his need to go down on his knees before God--is to present a distorted account of history, and to rob readers of their freedom to evaluate the Hinduism debate objectively.

The debate concerning the concept of Hindu identity will almost certainly continue. There will be passionate counters to Nicholson from critics, both right (Hindu fundamentalists) and left (such German Indologists von Stietencron). Yet, against the background of this debate, the philosophical genius of Vijñanabhiksu and the sensitive, nuanced retelling of his story by Nicholson stand out.

Notes

[1]. Hacker did not coin the term, which he attributes to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and claims to have found via an article on the latter by Robert Antoine; see Paul Hacker, "Aspects of Neo-Hinduism As Contrasted with Surviving Traditional Hinduism," in Paul Hacker, *Kleine Schriften*, ed. Lambert Schmitthausen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1978), 581. Hacker, however, is almost certainly responsible for popularizing and making the term academically legitimate.

[2]. David N. Lorenzen, "Who Invented Hinduism?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 4 (1999): 630–659.

[3]. See Jakob Stuchlik's exposé of the Austrian Indologist Erich Frauwallner's commitment to a Nazi ideology: Stuchlik, *Der arische Ansatz: Erich Frauwallner und der Nationalsozialismus* (Vienna: Akademie, 2009).

[4]. See Heinrich von Stietencron, "Hinduism," in *Secularization and the World Religions*, ed. Hans Joas and Klaus Wiegandt (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 122-140, in which he defends and restates material that he presented earlier in "Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term," in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. Günther Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 1989), 11–27.

[5]. Richard Garbe, *The Philosophy of Ancient India* (Chicago: Open Court, 1897), 10.

[6]. Richard Garbe, *Beiträge zur indischen Kulturgeschichte* (Berlin: Gebrüder Paetel, 1903), 48.

[7]. For a useful résumé of the *Pantheismusstreit* as it influenced scholars' attitudes toward Indian thought, see Bradley L. Herling, *The German Gita? Hermeneutics and Discipline in the German Reception of Indian Thought, 1778-1831* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[8]. See his *Die Lehre der Upanishaden und die Anfänge des Buddhismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1915).

[9]. Garbe, *Philosophy of Ancient India*, 5-6.

[10]. The *locus classicus* for this distinction is Frauwallner's 1939 essay "Der arische Anteil an der indischen Philosophie," *WZKM* 46 (1939): 267–91.

[11]. Stietencron's work, for example, is completely beholden to Hacker: most of his work simply repeats claims already made in Hacker.

[12]. For a comprehensive bibliography of Hacker's writings on Hinduism and Christianity, see Joydeep Bagchee, "The Invention of Difference and the Assault on Ecumenism: Paul Hacker Becomes a Catholic," paper presented at *Rethinking Religion in India III*, Pardubice, Czech Republic, October 11-14."Inklusivismus," in *Inklusivismus: Eine indische Denkform*, ed. Gerhardt Oberhammer (Vienna: Akad., 1983), 11-28.

[13]. See Hacker, *op. cit.*, vi, xiv. For an overview of the contents of these writings, see Bagchee, *op. cit.* N.14

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