
The title of Nicholson’s book, *Unifying Hinduism*, is suitably ambiguous, for the “unifying” is as much about the scholarly consensus regarding Hinduism as the process underway amongst 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. On the other hand, any discussion of a unified Hindu identity was considered suspect in academic circles, as contributing to Hindu fundamentalism. The dominant position was one 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. The institutional dominance of this view made it almost impossible to use the term “Hinduism” without the obligatory scare quotes. Yet, in recent years, scholars have been increasingly willing to question this dominant paradigm. Beginning with Lorenzen’s 1999 article,¹ there has been a spate of literature in recent years on the topic.² At the same time, scholars have also been increasingly willing to question their own praxis as scholars,³ an undertaking that has occasionally led to disquieting revelations about the political and religious ideologies of an earlier generation of

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¹ Hacker, however, 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; cf. Paul Hacker, “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism as Contrasted with Surviving Traditional Hinduism,” in Paul Hacker, *Kleine Schriften*, ed. L. Schmithausen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1978), 581. Hacker, however, is almost certainly responsible for popularizing and making the term academically legitimate.


In the Introduction, Nicholson sets up the problem and explains why he thinks that the enunciation of a distinction between “āstika” and “nāstika” schools in the work of late medieval doxographers such as Vijnānabhrsū and Mādhava represents the precursor of a unified Hinduism. In chapters 2 and 3, he looks at the Bhedabheda school of Vedānta (to which Vijnānabhrsū belonged) to understand how this school formulated the ideal of a canonical “āstika” outlook. In chapters 4 to 6, he extends this approach to the Sāṁkhya and Yoga schools. Although German Indologists such as Garbe depicted Sāṁkhya 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 Sāṁkhya canon” (68). In chapter 7, Nicholson examines how, in a process of “intercultural mimesis,” 19th 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” (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 “āstika” and “nāstika” to define both the “self” and the “other” in Hinduism. Finally, in chapter 10, he returns to his central thesis that “Vijnānabhrsū and his contemporaries

5 See, for example, Stuchlik’s exposé of the Austrian Indologist Erich Frauwallner’s commitment to a Nazi ideology (Der arische Ansatz: Erich Frauwallner und der Nationalsozialismus (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009)).

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” (23). Via discussions of the work of the German Indologists Paul 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” (188), just as Stietencron’s work is biased by his views on contemporary Indian politics. 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” (202) leads Nicholson to strike an appropriately cautionary note in the conclusion. “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” (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 will cite three examples here. Although Nicholson asserts that Garbe’s views on Sāṁkhya are rooted in a “barely veiled hostility toward the realist schools of Vedānta” and that “this attitude is primarily based on the supremacy and antiquity of the Advaita school in the Orientalist imagination” (68), the situation is much more complex. Not all scholars considered Advaita to be the oldest or the highest philosophical school. Garbe, for example, described Sāṁkhya as the “oldest real system of Indian philosophy.”7 Although Nicholson quotes this very passage, he does not clarify how this fits with Garbe’s broader portrayal of the Orientalist prejudice in favor of Vedānta. For the answer, one must turn to Garbe’s 1903 text, *Beiträge zur indischen Kulturgeschichte*. Here Garbe argues that the “rationalistic Sāṁkhya system” arose as a “reaction” to the “idealistic monism of the Upanisads.”8 A careful reading of the passage clarifies why, for him, the Sāṁkhya system represents the apex of philosophical achievement in India: he interprets Sāṁkhya 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).9 Given this commitment

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7 Richard Garbe, *The Philosophy of Ancient India* (Chicago: Open Court, 1897), 10.
9 This distinction is at the heart of Kant’s distinction of philosophy into two critiques: the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of [Pure] Practical Reason* (to which he later added a third critique, *The Critique of Judgment*, which is meant to explain the connection between the two domains of pure and practical reason). For a discussion of the Stoic origins of this distinction, see Arbogast Schmitt’s *Die
to a Kantian ideal of philosophy, it is also clear why Garbe would claim that Sāṁkhya represents the “the oldest genuine [wirkliche] system of Indian philosophy.”

By not engaging this material, Nicholson, in my view, passes up an opportunity to explore the question of how 19th century scholars’ own definitions of philosophy influenced their attitude towards Indian sources.

Definitions of philosophy do not operate in a vacuum. In 19th century Germany, philosophical debates were often only thinly veiled theological disputes. In particular, the Pantheismusstreit (“Pantheism debate”) of the 18th century still cast a long shadow over German intellectual life. 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. Vedānta, 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 Vedānta or Sāṁkhya 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, of course, had still deeper roots, since whether one affirmed or denied this potential was ultimately a

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11 The potential for confusion in the translation and interpretation of Indian terms has been noted before, most prominently by Doroth Figueira in *The Exotic: A Decadent Quest* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994). Discussing the European reception of the Bhagavadgītā, Figueira notes the need “to provide a working definition of the principle terms that engendered the debate (sāṁkhya and yoga), for no other reason than to mark out the ‘garden paths’ along which these European thinkers strayed.” Ibid., 65. See also the work of the anthroposophist and Nazi Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, who goes astray precisely down the path of Yoga.

12 Literature on the Pantheismusstreit runs into the hundreds; for a useful résumé of the debate as it influenced German scholars’ attitudes toward Indian thought, see Bradley L. Herling, *The German Gītā: Hermeneutics and Discipline in the German Reception of Indian Thought*, 1778-1831 (New York: Routledge, 2006).

13 The earliest philosophical usage of the term appears to be in Thaddae Anselm Rixner’s *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der uralten indischen All-Eins-Lehre* (Nürnberg: In der Steinischen Buchhandlung, 1808), but the term has a precursor in Goethe’s poem “Eins und Alles,” which is deeply permeated by pantheistic sentiments. Not unsurprisingly, Goethe himself was accused of harboring pantheistic sympathies (he was also one of the correspondents in the Pantheismusstreit).

14 This is one of the main reasons why German Indologists frequently sought to portray Vedānta as the paradigmatic Indian system: their underlying motivation was not always and not simply an affinity for Vedānta, but had to do, rather, with their interest in justifying the innate superiority of Western consciousness over Indian consciousness. Since pantheism was at the lowest end of a hierarchical scale, whose other end was represented by monotheistic religion, the portrayal of Indian thought as inherently pantheistic was also sotto voce a justification for missionary activity.
question of whether one posited indigenous aboriginal origins or foreign Āryan origins for Indian culture. Thus, scholars such as Garbe and Oldenberg argued that Indian thought had originally been rationalistic. Oldenberg, in fact, found incipient strands of monotheism in “Āryan” religion. In other words, Āryan 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, Vedānta is akin to an abortifacient that frustrates the religious development of the Eastern branch of the Āryans. Likewise, Garbe, too, considers Vedānta to be a later development. In his 1897 book, for example, he champions 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 Āryans. Garbe’s valorization of Sāṁkhya as the original Indian system is indissolubly linked to his program of claiming redemptive Āryan origins for Indian thought and of distinguishing between an Āryan and a Brahmanic phase in Indian history.

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 19th 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” (126). In fact, one can push the statement further and say that 19th 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.

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

16 Richard Garbe, The Philosophy of Ancient India (Chicago: Open Court, 1897), 5.

17 The full quotation reads: “It is well known that the belief that the human soul passes after death into the trunks of trees and the bodies of animals is extremely widespread among half-savage tribes. On the basis of this fact, [A.E.] Gough assumes that the Aryans, on their amalgamation with the original indigenous inhabitants of India, received from these the idea of the continuance of life in animals and trees. … the idea, in my opinion, is very probable, because it explains what no other combinations sufficiently explain.” Ibid., 4-5. Garbe, of course, acknowledges that the Āryans “can have received only the first impetus to the development of the theory of transmigration from the aboriginal inhabitants,” the “assumption of a constant, changing continuance of life, and its connexion with the doctrine of the power of deeds” must be regarded “as their own peculiar moral achievement,” “having in view the satisfaction of the moral consciousness.” Ibid., 5-6.

18 The locus classicus for this distinction is Frauwallner’s 1939 essay “Der arische Anteil an der indischen Philosophie,” Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 46 (1939): 267–91 but see also his Geschichte der indischen Philosophie, vol. 1 (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1953). (Both works have now been discussed with exemplary precision in Stuchlik, op. cit.) Garbe’s work, of course, antedates Frauwallner, but could perhaps, for this reason, be seen as the latter’s intellectual progenitor. Garbe’s aversion to all things Indian is documented in his Indische Reiseskizzen (Berlin: Verlag von Gebrüder Paetel, 1889); see also his The Redemption of the Brahman (Chicago: Open Court, 1894), where some of the issues discussed here are clearly manifested (see esp. p. 35 for his revealing comment, “nigger is nigger”).

19 See Hazarika’s recent presentation at the Rethinking Religion in India conference, making a distinction between “evaluative English” and “conceptual English.” Hazarika notes that Rammohan Roy was
With this book, Nicholson 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” (187), there is much more that needs to be said. 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. 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. With the exception of this last article, all ten articles were reprinted in his collected essays published in 1978, a year before his death. Of the ten articles, five

quick to appreciate the negative connotations of terms such as “polytheism” or “idol-worship” and the positive connotations of “monotheism,” but did not actually grasp their content. This led Roy to make claims about Hinduism (e.g., that the different Gods worshipped are but forms of the one true God or that the icon does not really represent God but is merely an object of concentration for those at a lower level of the religion) that an orthodox worshipper would have difficulty accepting.

Something similar might be said of the German Orientalists studied by Nicholson as well: they have an excellent grasp of an “evaluative language” (e.g., they know that terms such as “rationalism,” etc. have very positive resonances), but almost no understanding of a “conceptual language” (Garbe, for example, has no idea of the Stoic roots of the Kantian concept of rationality or the problems with this Stoic/Neo-Stoic conception, etc.). Western Orientalists can thus be seen as engaged in a similar justificatory enterprise as that of Roy. (For Hazarika’s work on Roy, see “Can We Practice What We Preach? An Inquiry into Systems of Knowledge in the Social Reform Period,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Kuvempu University, 2011 [see esp. chapter 3, “Colonial Discourse and Native Practices.”])

20 Stietencron’s work, for example, is completely beholden to Hacker: most of his work simply repeats claims already made in Hacker.

were published 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.24 Yet, at the same time as the editor Lambert Schmitthausen, acting on Hacker’s wishes,25 included these ten articles as contributions to a legitimate academic debate, he also suppressed (again at Hacker’s explicit behest)26 the author’s polemical and fundamentalist Christian writings. These writings, “partly anonymous” and “without a scientific agenda,”27 appeared in fringe religious pamphlets and propaganda literature and are therefore unknown to the majority of scholars today.

Hacker’s suppression of this material casts serious doubts on his integrity as a scholar. It misleads readers into thinking that his writings on Hinduism are dispassionate, critical evaluations, whereas, in fact, they are—as Nicholson rightly notes—the work of a “Christian polemicist” (188). Not to present them in their true historical context—Hacker’s intense religious feeling, bordering on fundamentalism in many of the suppressed writings, his anti-ecumenical stance which provoked him into vituperative exchanges with the Indian bishop D. S. Amalorpavadass and the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, his need to go down on his knees before God28—is to present

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24 The volume is edited by Hacker’s student and successor to his chair at the University of Munster, Lambert Schmitthausen, and published in the series of the Helmut-von-Glasenapp-Stiftung. In his preface, Schmitthausen notes of Hacker: “Paul Hacker always considered Indology as a science [Wissenschaft] that also includes the present [period] of the Indian cultural sphere, albeit always against the horizon of [its] cultural inheritance.” Ibid., vi. “Within this framework,” Schmitthausen continues, “he decisively advanced the analysis of Neohindu thinking.... All his works are—a state of affairs that is unusual in our discipline [Wissenschaft]—accompanied by a methodological reflection.” Ibid.

25 Ibid., vi: “In übrigen ist die Auswahl mit dem Autor abgesprochen.”

26 Ibid., xiv: “Auf Wunsch des Autors sind sie in das vorliegende Schriftenverzeichnis nicht aufgenommen worden.”

27 Ibid., xiv. Thanks to Bagchee’s researches (see n. 21), we now have a much clearer understanding of what these writings contained. There are 27 articles in all that Hacker suppressed from inclusion in the Schriftenverzeichnis or list of his complete writings. These include only those he signed; the anonymous contributions may perhaps never be identified. Of these 27, 16 appeared in the conservative Catholic organ, Una Voce Korrespondenz, which was opposed to the introduction of the “New Mass” (also referred to as the “Mass of Paul VI”) in 1969. The articles range from criticisms of the new liturgy, mainly on jingoistic grounds, to accusations of “Protestantization” of the Roman Catholic church to accusations of a “pseudo-ecumenism” to claims that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (better known to contemporary readers as Pope Benedict XVI) was responsible for the destruction of the dogma. Alongside these anti-ecumenical and anti-progressive writings with their insistence on a fundamentalist interpretation of the dogma, Hacker also wrote a number of articles in which he accused the Indian bishops of turning away from the true, i.e., Western, Latinate Catholic tradition, and leading the Indian church back to “heathenism.”

28 As his obituarist notes, Hacker had an intense “longing to throw himself down, to go down on his knees, to pray... In the Evangelical church there is no bending of the knees; but he had an intense need for it. Thus, he always received the holy Communion on his knees, that is, adoringly.” Karl H. Kehren, “Werft euch nieder vor dem Herrn in seinem heiligen Tempel: In Memoriam an Paul Hacker,” Una Voce Korrespondenz Una Voce Korrespondenz 9,2 (1979): 114. According to Kehren, this was one of the main reasons why Hacker left the Evangelical church for the Catholic.

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 (the Hindu fundamentalists) and left (German Indologists such as von Stietencron). Yet, against the background of this debate, the philosophical genius of Vijñānabhikṣu and the sensitive, nuanced retelling of his story by Nicholson stand out.