

Introduction

What is the best way to assess the role of religion in nineteenth-century India? Should it be defined by texts? Rituals and religious practice? Reform movements? Distinctive histories of each religious community? Given how multi-faceted religious experience has been and continues to be in India, the question compels no easy answer. Also, given the numerous nationalist uses of nominally religious symbols and references, the importance of defining its historical contours and boundaries has become only more prominent in recent years. Outside simplistic models of nationalism, communalism, or political ideologies that use religion as a rallying cry, how do we begin to understand the role of religion in modern Indian history? If we start with Shashi Tharoor, a prominent public intellectual, one answer would be an affirmative celebration of being Hindu, based on a notion of Hinduism as a transcendental philosophy.¹ If one looks elsewhere, such as to the rich world of Dalit and anti-caste activism, what sorts of answers would we find to that question? Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, another public intellectual, would answer that religion in India cannot be imagined outside of caste, hierarchy, and violence.²

These works both generated a fair amount of press in the various public spheres of India and raised questions for any student of religion in India. Is Hinduism, as Tharoor claims, a “tolerant” religion? When viewed from the history of religions, how shall Hinduism be distinguished from the various appropriations of it in the guise of Hindu nationalism? Distinguishing Hinduism from Hindu nationalism is of course Tharoor’s goal. Is Hinduism, as Shepherd argues, based on manipulation of life and labor by Brahminical forces? Caste is the basic building block of Hinduism for Ilaiah. As such, he composed his book in the wake of generations of anti-caste theorists of religion, from Jyotirao Phule in western India (1827–1890) and Iyothée Thass in south India (1845–1914), two prominent nineteenth-century pioneers in anti-caste thought. Tharoor is writing from another Indian tradition that began with polyglot and polymath reformer

Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) in the early nineteenth century and continued with Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948) and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) in the twentieth century. Figures like Rammohan and Gandhi are mentioned by Shepherd but interpreted through their caste-based privileges and blind spots. Rather than interpret the question of religion in India as a question with only one definitive answer, the history of modern religion in India shows both positions as drawing on a rich history of politics and intellectual engagement with the notion of religion. Both positions speak to an important point for all concerned about India's past, present, and future. Tharoor does not handle why one "should" be a Hindu and only addresses the question from a first-person perspective. Shepherd argues that Hinduism was forced upon him, erasing the possibility of addressing what Hinduism potentially could be.

One figure mentioned in both works, and known at some level throughout the world, is Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948). Seen by many in the world as an apostle of non-violence and a man of religion, Gandhi often figures as a metonym for religion in India writ large, the religion that many imagine to be in existence in India. This form of religion has been lauded by supporters of Gandhi as "tolerant," "inclusive," and even "non-violent." Critics of Gandhi have long questioned these labels, seeing someone who avoided the violence of the lived experience of caste, harbored racist sentiment and logic, and used and abused certain women while exalting other women.

Discussions of India before and after Gandhi have reached wide audiences, bolstered by the scholarship of Ramachandra Guha, one of the latest scholars to approach Gandhi in a historical context.³ As with other aspects of his life and his politics, Gandhi's views on religion are extensively documented.⁴ Usually analyzed with reference to *Hind Swaraj*, his landmark 1909 text that set out a plan for internal self-transformation of Indians under colonial rule, he underlined the "religion behind all religions." This second-order meta-religion drew from everyday life as well as religion that brought together his studies in comparative religion. Enabled by a mentor and friend, Raj Chandra Mehta, he eagerly read a great deal about comparative religion in the 1890s and early 1900s. Based on these readings and a variety of experiments in communal living, he delivered a series of lectures in 1905 in Johannesburg on the meaning of Indian religion, defined in the main as tolerant of difference and absorptive of numerous traditions. This popular meaning derived to a great degree from his many readings in comparative religion. As Gandhi's own intellectual heritage and journeys are well documented, *how was comparative religion imagined* by Indians *before* Gandhi emerged as a political and religious thinker?

Conceptualizations of religion in ancient India are found in texts such as the Vedas and selected Upaniṣads as well as in various socio-religious movements from medieval and early modern India like the Basava Lingayat movements, the Satnami movements, and various devotional movements. The rise of the religion of Sikhism, the entry of Islam into India, and the long career of Christianity in India also offer a range of reflections on religion before the rise of the modern world. What remains hazily understood is the status and meaning of comparative religion in nineteenth-century India before Gandhi came to prominence. How did nineteenth-century Indian theorists and reformers of religion conceptualize religion before the rise of Gandhi? This book, *Chips from a Calcutta Workshop: Comparative Religion in Nineteenth-Century India*, addresses this question by offering an analysis of how nineteenth-century thinkers from Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) to Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905) to Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884) and Narendra Nath Datta/Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) defined religion through translation and comparison, within the purview of Indian texts and practices. All these figures approached the study of religion as both an intellectual quest and a site of practical intervention into Indian society. Common to all is an investment in translation, comparison, and reform of religion for practical, this-worldly purposes. This book offers an intellectual history of comparative religion in nineteenth-century India by exploring religion as a site of social criticism as well as practical action.

Intellectual Histories of Modern Indian Religion

Intellectual histories of Indian religion fit into three registers relevant to the question of modern religion in nineteenth-century India. One register centers pre-modern and early modern intellectual history of South Asia. The work of Sheldon Pollock, Christian Novetzke, and Elaine Fisher offers the impression that data for intellectual histories of religion lie in the distant past, introducing a decisive rupture in the early nineteenth century.⁵ As Pollock states in as clear a fashion as possible, “by 1800, indigenous intellectual formations ... were on the point of vanishing altogether as a creative force in Indian life, to be supplanted by other knowledge systems based on unfamiliar, sometimes radically different principles of epistemology, sociality, and polity.”⁶ Such a position on the intellectual history of religion in India avoids serious consideration of nineteenth-century sources within the study of religion. Though scholars of modern Indian religious history have focused on the many meanings of modern religion in India, the role of comparative religion within Indian intellectual history remains under-examined.⁷

Another way to address the subject of comparative religion in nineteenth-century India is through a critical approach to colonialism and the knowledge produced in modern colonial encounters. This approach situates the birth of modern religion as a product of the rise of modern secularism in colonial regimes, as seen in the work of Talal Asad.⁸ As Asad argues, any discussion of secularism “presupposes new concepts of ‘religion’, ‘ethics’ and ‘politics’ and new imperatives associated with them.”⁹ Following in the wake of such an intervention, other scholars have focused on the rise of the world religions paradigm in the nineteenth century and the function of religion in nineteenth-century contexts of empire.¹⁰ In my account of comparative religion in nineteenth-century India, I seek to specify and highlight with precision aspects of the history of *modern religion* before the rise of formal secular governance from the mid-twentieth century onward. Though it is undeniable that new concepts of religion were made legible with the rise of secular governance in twentieth-century South Asia, this book focuses on examining the ways religion was understood before the rise of secular power, the creation of religious minorities, and the establishment of a constitutional order.

Explored in depth by scholars of religion in the Western world but unevenly studied in colonial contexts is the role of comparative religion within a broader history of modern religion. Ably charted by scholars such as Eric J. Sharpe and Hans Kippenberg, among others, comparative religion as an academic field reveals linkages to theories of evolution, the burgeoning world of science, and the discipline of anthropology in the nineteenth century. According to Kippenberg, comparative religion allowed scholars and theorists to reinterpret their societies in fast-industrializing Europe to critique modernization. As Sharpe shows, comparative religion, which was formally born in the early twentieth century, served as a foundation for the later discipline of religious studies. In the context of African history, David Chidester critiques the Eurocentric nature of comparative religion through a magisterial study of South African intellectuals and theorists from the 1870s through the 1930s. He argues that comparative religion linked Great Britain and Southern Africa in numerous ways and deserves study within a framework that incorporates modern empire as a constitutive element of its existence. His broader goals extend beyond only South African religious history, as he argues for “situating the subject field [of comparative religion] within cultural, social, and political dynamics both inside of and outside the modern West.”¹¹ This work follows Chidester by focusing on how Indian thinkers and reformers wrestled with comparative religion in the context of nineteenth-century religious change.

Unlike comparative religion’s role in the West – primarily alive in academic settings and by and for intellectuals – in nineteenth-century India, academic study was rarely detached from practical action in the reform of religion.

Following Chidester's delimitation of three types of comparative religion – the interfaith, the theosophical, and the critical –¹² Indian thinkers embraced variants of each of these types from Rammohan to Vivekananda. All, however, linked research in comparative religion to practical projects to intervene in the affairs of the world.

Though scholars of religion in nineteenth-century India have advanced knowledge about several topics, from religious reform to self-constitution to political theology,¹³ my work analyzes the history of comparative religion as a central feature of nineteenth-century Indian religion. Following Chidester for South Africa, I emphasize how Indian thinkers reshaped religion in the nineteenth century. These approaches to make religion anew occurred through projects of translation, the formation of a canon, and attempts to make a universal religion. By the end of the century, these facets of religious life showcase tensions between attempts at creating a universal religion and a recognition, and preservation, of pluralism in Indian religious contexts. These four facets of comparative religion in nineteenth-century India are shown most clearly through the history of the Brāhmo Samaj, and thinkers who emanated from Brāhmo circles.

As the Brāhmo Samaj, and its various leaders and intellectuals, are not at all the only reformers active in nineteenth-century India, I investigate their writings and institutional contributions to Indian religious life to illustrate the larger changes at play in the nineteenth century. As in any study of religion, a surplus of material exceeds the scope of any one scholar. The Brāhmo Samaj remains an important centerpiece, because of the many lessons it yields regarding the history of comparative religion, and the history of the construction of religion as a modern idea, in India. The four thematic aspects of religious history I uncover – translation, canon formation, attempts to create a universal religion, and tensions between universalism and pluralism – inform attempts to remake religion across numerous sites in South Asia. Other sites of religion-making across nineteenth-century India feature various projects that reinvigorate and redefine Sikhism, Islam, and Buddhism.¹⁴ All depend on some sort of encounter with translations of various texts and the attempt to make or purify a canon. All grapple with the universal nature of their respective religion or choices regarding religion. They also inform how the interplay between religion and various aspects of social and political life is inseparable from the making of modern religion. Scholars for several generations have focused on the interactional and relational facets of religion as a signature aspect of the global history of the modern world.¹⁵ This book follows in such a tradition, not by emphasizing relations between India and Britain in the nineteenth century, but by integrating a study of North American audiences and contexts into the history of religion in nineteenth-century India.

The role of North American writers and intellectuals in the history of nineteenth-century Indian religion has been traditionally studied through centering American movements like Transcendentalism¹⁶ or analyzing the impacts of individuals like Rammohan Roy on American Christianity.¹⁷ As opposed to a view only from within American history, this book integrates an appreciation for North American audiences and shared investments in Indian religion in the history of nineteenth-century Indian religion. Whereas a substantial body of work tackles the intimate interactions between England and India in nineteenth-century religious life,¹⁸ this work situates North American writers, readers, and institutions squarely into this history. North America remains an important touchstone for this history as it formed a burgeoning center of intellectual and social engagement on comparative religious topics from the late nineteenth onward.

Definitions of modern religion in India often flow from figures such as Vivekananda, Gandhi, or Radhakrishnan, all of whom are key for Tharoor and, to some degree, for Shepherd.¹⁹ When pursuing these sources with precision, one finds a common thread: a conflation of “Hindu” with “Indian religion,” such that both practices and histories subsumed under either category may include engagements with the vast diversity of religious life in India. Second, the Indian religion referenced in this variant is one of tolerance, and inclusivity, with the capacity to absorb and incorporate religious diversity. Shashi Tharoor’s *Why I Am a Hindu* is only one of the many in the post-nineteenth-century landscape of ideas who has carried forth this tradition. What, then, is Indian religion, if it is *not* to be viewed only as a version of Hinduism? Where does it come from?

Following early modern historians such as Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Aditya Behl, and Andrew Nicholson,²⁰ this book explores in detail the process by which Indians defined religion, a process that held precedents well known to the ancient and early medieval worlds. References to how such a process works in the modern world often occur without any historical framework that would embed the detailed engagements in between the often ambiguously defined “medieval” period and the making of the modern world in the nineteenth century. The time from the emergence of Rammohan Roy to the rise of Mohandas Gandhi offers a century of thought and practice that often gets missed in discussions of the meaning and end of Indian religion. So where does the story begin? A prelude would be the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Early Modern Histories of Comparative Religion

Before comparative religion became an identifiable issue for the seventeenth century, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Guy Stroumsa have shown, thinkers

such as Bartolome de Las Casas and Jose de Acosta engaged in exercises of comparative religious thought in the early sixteenth century. Subrahmanyam's reflections on comparative or conversion-related approaches to religion are most appropriate.²¹ In a wide-ranging study of Europeans in India from 1,500 to 1,800, Subrahmanyam argues that whereas some approached Indian religion as a source of falsehood, only to destroy through conversion, many approached Indian religion in a comparative framework, with the intended goal of developing language for a universal definition of religion. One origin point to the comparative approach began with Samuel Purchas in 1613. We may see this in the context of the seventeenth-century Age of Enlightenment. The first text written in this mode was *Purchas His Pilgrimage*, a study of taxonomies of Asian and African religions as well as numerous ideas and practices around the world. One year later, Edward Brerewood published *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religions through the Chief Parts of the World*, which links language to religion and kept alive the four-fold "idolatry, Muhammadanism [*sic*], Judaism, and Christianity." Another was Alexander Ross's *Pansebeia; or, a View of All Religions in the World*, published in 1653. Using biblical religious history, a question-and-answer format, and data from the New World and from his conception of Islam, Ross concluded that religion is the cement of any society.

Others include Vossius's mid-seventeenth-century *De Theologia Gentili*, a work of comparative mythology, which aimed at rooting out idolatry, but used data referring to Brahmins of Calcutta, as well as natives of Peru and Mexico, and where the focus was on idolatry and searching out its roots. Such a search informed the work of seventeenth-century Edward Herbert, seen by some as the father of Deism. Others took the idea that priests were the problem, as worship of God in a rational way occurred before priests emerged in various societies. As Peter Harrison mentions, "The precondition for the appearance of these plural 'religions' was the emergence of a generic conception of religion ... whereas the religions of Europe had been generated out of the objectification of interior states, the world religions were, in a sense, reverse engineered from the newly constructed Western religions."²² In India, two significant contributions to religious thought emerged in the mid-seventeenth century. One is a detailed categorization of philosophies in India in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, under the section titled "The Learning of the Hindus." Second, we find the *Dabistan-e-Mazahib*, a Persian text written by an unknown author in the 1640s CE, during the reign of Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658). The text was first made available in English in 1843, translated as *The Dabistan, or the School of Manners*. A remarkably and wide-ranging comparison of religions, the text features twelve chapters and descriptions of various religions, with chapters dedicated to Jews,

Hindus, Christians, Parsis, and various other groups, with a firm foundation in Zoroastrian India. A chapter about the “Ilahi” faith, based on “Din-i-Ilahi,” or Religion of God, was represented by “Ilahi” philosophers who rejected miracles and pointed out that reason “renders it evident that the world has a Creator, all-mighty and wise.” Furthermore, the work concludes that truths proclaimed by “Hindus, Jews, Magians, Nazarenes, and Musalmans” all contain associated dogmas, notions, and customs, to be assessed by human capacity for reason.²³

The *Dabistan* and the *Ain-i-Akbari* draw on a tradition alive since at least the 1580s under the emperor Akbar, of *sulh-i kull*, or peace for all. This term, used throughout Indian circles as a general policy of acceptance of religious and cultural difference, was first used in the 1590s in the *Ain-i-Akbari* and the *Akbar Nama*, chronicles of Akbar. It was first used as a catch-all category to refer to the practice of Akbar both suspending the Islamic poll tax on non-Muslims and initiating a policy of accepting his marriages to Hindu women, who did not convert to Islam. It is also a term that refers to a broader perspective, as mentioned in a translation of the *Mahābhārata* into Persian, of critical inquiry, into the nature of religion through comparison and translation. These two texts are the product of the same Persianate Neoplatonic impulse that became the dominant governing philosophy of the Mughal Empire from Akbar to Shah Jahan. Aimed at promoting peace, the impulse behind both explicitly opposed the idea of declaring any religion false or idolatrous.²⁴ The eighteenth century offered another layer into the long discussion of comparative religion relevant for modern India. Perhaps the most well known is the eighteenth-century European set of works titled *Religious Ceremonies and Customs of All the Peoples of the World*, with seven folios and with over 3,000 pages and 250 engravings, published in the Netherlands by French engraver Bernard Picart, and the editor and compiler Jean Francois Bernard, from 1723 to 1737. Through extraordinary illustration as well as detailed description, the work tackled religions from Judaism and Catholicism to the Americas, India, Asia, and Africa, and transformed familiar terms common in European discussions of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and “heathen.”²⁵ This survey of all the world’s known religions from an early-eighteenth-century European point of view delimited the sacred to specific times and places, but of course had antecedents like the Protestant Reformation itself. Those working in its wake sought analogues in Jewish and New World idolatries for the Catholic practices they opposed. As a part of the search for toleration, in the late seventeenth century when religion was a matter of life and death, the frontispiece presents reformers, Catholics, and Muslims not negatively, but as a part of a broader tableau as well as a particular version of Islam at the foreground of a collection of the world’s religions.²⁶ Islam in particular holds

a complicated place in that tableau, as Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, stands in the foreground of a diverse audience of Sufis, janissaries, and princes, but also in front a depiction of hell. Various other traditions appear in the background in smaller size and, perhaps, significance, yet the existence of the Ottoman Empire as a powerful, multi-ethnic empire presented an issue that could not be addressed based on earlier understandings of religion. This text focused on great cultic differences but also the relativity of religion, the common theism of humankind, and comparative methods in the study of religion. A 1783 edition mentioned that natural religion was the original and purest form of religion that underlay all rituals and practices.

Two late-eighteenth-century Indian works of comparative religion and early ethnography also comprise important precedents for the nineteenth-century history I trace in this book. One is Rai Chatar Man Khayasth's *Chahar Gulshan*, which includes accounts of Hindu *faqirs* and Muslim saints, finished in 1759 and commissioned by the Mughal Empire. The other is Sital Singh Bikwund's *Silsila-i-Jogiyan* (Chain of Yogis), completed by the end of the century. It includes a description of groups in Banaras, including forty-eight illustrations. One of the few available works of eighteenth-century comparative religion produced within India, this text shows a vast diversity, including mention of groups such as Vaiṣṇava, Saiva, Sakta, Nanakshahis/Sikh, and Sravaka/Jain communities. This book formed the basis for H. H. Wilson's "A Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus" (1828) in *Transactions of the Asiatic Society*. As discussed by Carl Ernst, the entire production was framed by a defense of Vedanta though functioned as a work of comparative religion.²⁷ These texts inhabit the same genre as the *Dabistan* and *Ain-i-Akbari*. In other words, these are Mughal-era texts.

Structure

This broader history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century comparative religion forms the immediate background of the thematic contours of the nineteenth century I tackle in the book, which tracks the rise of comparative religious thought by Indians across the century. These themes include translation and canon formation, emphasized by Rammohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore from the opening of the 1800s through the middle of the century. The second half of the book focuses on the creation of a universal religion by Keshab Chandra Sen and tensions between universalism and pluralism as seen in the work of Swami Vivekananda. My first chapter, titled "Methods for Modern Indian Religion: Translation," begins with a discussion of polyglot and polymath Rammohan Roy and global revolutionary change from the 1790s to the 1830s. During these years,

increasing attacks on trans-Atlantic slavery and a rise in missionaries throughout the British Empire coincided with the rise of new conceptions of religion and comparative methods, which informed new approaches to religion in India. At this time, the older dispensation of the Mughal Empire, which had ruled over much of the subcontinent since the early sixteenth century, began to crumble. Bengal was conquered by the end of the sixteenth century, only about seventy years after the Mughal Empire began its expansion. In the immediate period before the rise of Rammohan Roy, Bengal was ruled not by a clear sovereign authority, but rather through a congeries of power brokers. This condition of uneven power relations, undoubtedly, contributed to the vitality of the educational and intellectual options available to the educated classes of Calcutta of the 1790s and 1800s. In chapter 1, “Methods for Modern Indian Religion: Translation,” I explore Rammohan’s emphasis on translation as a vital approach to religion, the influence of Islam, and the sources he assembled, from a variety of sources in Sanskrit, Bengali, and various other languages. These efforts by Rammohan flow from the paradigm of the *Ain-i-Akbari* and the *Dabistan*.

Chapter 2, “Texts for Modern Indian Religion: Canon Formation,” continues from the death of Rammohan Roy to the rise of Debendranath Tagore and a changing form of Christian presence in the guise of an aggressive proselytizing force, not as visible in the earlier period. Also, this period of the 1830s to the 1850s saw the creation of a specific institution, the Brāhmo Samaj, as well as the articulation of a new religion, the *Brāhmo Dharma*, the title of Debendranath Tagore’s landmark 1848 text. This chapter explores the meanings and references in *Brāhmo Dharma*, as partially a continuation of Rammohan Roy’s work on specific Upaniṣads and a further specification of true religion, which lay outside of ritual and included intuition and experience. The chapter also shows how *Brāhmo Dharma* linked directly to discursive developments in North America through the Transcendentalist movement.

Chapter 3, “Institutions of Comparison: Creating a Universal Religion,” investigates the period of the mid-1860s through the mid-1880s, which saw the rise of Keshab Chandra Sen as a leader of the Brāhmo Samaj. During this time, comparative religion arose as a full-scale project in the new dispensation under Sen’s leadership. This component of the Brāhmo Samaj’s efforts emerged after the 1857–1858 mutiny/rebellions. A reorientation of the British imperial state from Company state to territorial empire marked a substantive shift in political power, which in turn shaped how arguments about religion changed vis-à-vis the sovereign authority of the British Empire. Related to but distinct from a focus on intuition and experience in Debendranath Tagore’s period, comparison emerged as pivotal