Introduction

A Reflection on Hindu Theology

Hindu monotheism may at first sound like an oxymoron. One thing that seems to characterize Hinduism is its plurality of gods. Yet many Hindus will claim that this plurality expresses a single deity, that all the gods are aspects of one power as iconographically depicted in the image of Kṛṣṇa's universal form (*viśvarūpa*) from chapter 11 of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, where he reveals his singular nature with pluriform aspects to the hero Arjuna. This element describes the emergence of the idea of a single deity being the source of all the others and of the universe itself. It charts the rise of theism – and specifically the idea of monotheism – in the history of Hindu traditions through textual sources.

As the example of Kṛṣṇa's universal form demonstrates, there was a monotheism before the influence of Islam or Christianity, and this Element describes this development in the history of traditions that have become known as Hinduism. Hinduism comprises a complex set of traditions that share cultural forms and patterns. The word itself is of recent origin, coming to prominence in the nineteenth century and the word 'Hindu' not being used before the sixteenth century, when it distinguished one group of people from Muslims or Yavanas in Bengal and Kashmir (O'Connell 2019: 188–96). But it is legitimate to use the word anachronistically because the traditions that it comes to denote have their origin in ancient texts regarded as revelation, the Veda, and we can trace a continuity of historical forms through to the present. There are unifying tendencies within Hindu traditions (Nicholson 2010), although the relationship between the category Hinduism and traditions such as Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava is complex (see, for example, Fisher 2017: 5–14). It is also important to note that Hinduism is defined less by belief than by practice. As Frits Staal observed long ago, it is not what a Hindu believes that is definitional but what he or she does (Staal 1989: 389). Hinduism is arguably more of an orthopraxy than an orthodoxy, identified by what Michaels calls an identificatory habitus that regulates, ritually, most aspects of life (Michaels 2016: 3). If there is a thesis in this Element, it is that Hindu monotheism is intimately linked to history, to social and political developments of Indic civilization such as the rise of kingship, but that the philosophical and theological discourse that articulates it cannot be simply reduced to political and sociological factors: we can examine Hindu monotheism as the history of an idea textually instantiated.

This Element predominantly describes and traces the history of an idea, but it also offers some theological reflection. If God is outside of the universe, can he or she be known? Is there anything positive to be said about God or can God only be approached through the negation of all attributes? And so on. The

topic of Hindu monotheism has been addressed by others, in particular the pioneering works of Nicol Macnicol's *Indian Theism* (1915) and Gopikamohan Bhattacharya's *Studies in Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika Theism* (1961), and has also been addressed by Julius Lipner (1978, 2017) among others. This study is a modest contribution to the theme. The predominant language of Hindu scriptures is Sanskrit, but Tamil scriptures are also important and vernacular languages – both Indo-Aryan and Dravidian – come to play increasingly important roles in the development of the traditions.[1]

If by monotheism we mean the idea of a single transcendent God who creates the universe out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), as in the Abrahamic religions, then it is open to question whether or not that idea is found in the history of Hinduism. But if we mean a supreme, transcendent deity who impels the universe (whether created from nothing or not), sustains it, and ultimately destroys it before causing it to emerge once again, who is the ultimate source of all other gods who are her or his emanations, then this idea does develop within that history. The purpose of this Element is therefore not to seek for a monotheism that approximates to the Abrahamic model, with its implicit assumption of an evolution towards that ideal, but rather to use the category as a lens through which to understand important developments within the history of Hinduism in which a single, transcendent deity comes to dominate theological discourse, whose nature is the subject of much intellectual debate, which becomes the focus of devotion, and which attracts royal patronage. It is a *Hindu* monotheism and its nature that is the topic of this Element.

This is not intended to be a controversial claim. In the phrase 'Hindu monotheism', the adjective is used as a shorthand to distinguish the frame of a discourse in which the Veda is generally referenced as revelation and there is a common set of cultural and religious practices, such as making an offering to the image of a god and receiving a blessing. Hinduism is usually characterized in the popular imagination as polytheistic, with a plurality of gods, demons, and other supernatural beings represented in iconic form, to whom offerings are made for appeasement or in return for a favour. It is certainly true that there is an abundance of shrines, temples, groves, rivers, mountains, and trees, all revered as sacred and embodying a deity. Yet the major traditions of Hinduism centred on Śiva, Viṣṇu, and the Goddess are monotheisms in so far as they regard their particular focus as the supreme being, of whom other gods are manifestations or aspects. This idea came to be debated in philosophy and, as in Western philosophy, arguments developed for the existence of such a being, especially in

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[1] I use standard transliteration for Sanskrit terms, except for place names and some modern personal names that are commonly Anglicized.

relation to atheist objectors. What sort of God could this be? Surely not simply another object that exists along with trees and stars but rather the source of all that exists and so, in some sense, beyond existence. Thus, arguments for God's existence were integrated with issues of causation (whether an effect pre-exists in the cause) and the very nature of inference (Lipner 1978: 62–6; Dasti 2011).

The development of Hindu monotheism, suitably qualified to distinguish it from Abrahamic religions, is inseparably linked to the emergence of a social *imaginaire* and view of the human good. The ideal of what it means for a human being to become complete has been articulated through political and social factors that favoured the dominance of a particular deity, along with the development of a philosophical discourse that reflects on the nature of the world, the person, and duty (*dharma*). Hindu monotheism is related to concerns about freedom from suffering as one of the purposes of life; to speculation about the nature of a person, especially in relation to Buddhist and Jain philosophies that rejected an ultimate transcendent source of life; and to concerns about ontology, the nature of the world itself and how the world is to be classified or categorized. All this is set within a political milieu that saw the rise of kingship and varying forms of patronage of different religions throughout the history of South Asia and a social milieu in which caste is the central social reality.

To discern a history of Hindu monotheism we must rely on textual evidence from scriptures along with philosophical reflection, as well as political and sociological evidence from inscriptions bearing witness to royal patronage, land grants to particular groups, and so on. In terms of a brief sketch, we might say that the seeds of monotheism can be found in the earliest scriptures of Hinduism, the Veda, but that it really begins to emerge during the last half of the first millennium BC and early in the first millennium AD. Out of the polytheism of the early tradition, forms of theism arise as explanation of self and world, which become the focus of worship, arguably flowering in the first millennium AD, during which time what we would recognize as modern Hinduism comes into view. From around the sixteenth century, on the eve of modernity (as in Europe), there is a shift in philosophical discourse that continues through the nineteenth century into the contemporary world with the emergence of India as a nation state.

Is Hinduism a Polytheism or a Monotheism?

It is always difficult to make broad generalizations about religions, especially one as complex and diverse as Hinduism, but a short answer to this question is that it is both a polytheism and a monotheism. With some credence, the

nineteenth-century Indologist and comparative religionist Max Müller described the religions of the Vedas as henotheism, the worship of one god at a time in so far as the hymns of the text praise a particular deity as if that god were supreme and above all others (Müller 1899: 53). Certainly, in one sense the history of Hinduism can be characterized as polytheistic, but what this means must be understood in the context of cosmology. Until modernity, the Hindu cosmos, along with that of the Buddhists and Jains, was a hierarchical structure, a vast edifice within which all of life was contained – and indeed it remains so even today. The forms that we see and experience in our everyday going about the world, the plants, animals, and other people, along with invisible forms, the spirit of the tree, the guardian goddess of the village, the spirit of the spring, snake deities, the innumerable malevolent supernatural forces that seek to disrupt our life, and the benevolent deities that bless us are within this vast cosmos. At the top of this great chain of being, to use Lovejoy's apposite phrase (Lovejoy 1936), is the highest deity, variously conceptualized in different traditions. This hier-archical structure is made more complex within the history of Indic civilization through its relation to the abstract metaphysical systems of the philosophers and the political harnessing of theological ideas: a 'scale of forms' in Collingwood's phrase adopted by Inden (Inden 1990: 33–6).

This general picture of the kind I have just sketched was in place by the first millennium AD and probably much earlier. To take a brief example, the *Netra Tantra*, composed during the eighth century in Kashmir but an important text used by royalty in Nepal, introduced in 1200, lauds the deity Amṛteśvara and his consort Amṛteśvarī as supreme, forms of Śiva and the Goddess, and much of the text is about how to protect oneself and one's family, especially the royal family, from malevolent supernatural forces: to protect one's children from the evil eye through magical utterances and ritual. Much religious observance is concerned with attempting to control the interactions between humans and invisible beings, particularly the malevolent ones whom we wish to keep away. And it would be inaccurate to think that this world view is a thing of the past. Anecdotally, I can give an example of my once foolishly praising the baby of a young woman and her husband who had kindly invited my colleague and I for tea. Immediately the young woman left the house and smeared dirt on the baby's face lest my praise should attract the jealousy of an invisible demon.

This practical polytheism, the everyday religion of most Hindus, entails an understanding of what a person is that Charles Taylor has characterized as 'porous' (Taylor 2007: 35–43). The porous self is a person whose boundaries are not closed and in which external, invisible powers can come into the person – especially demonic forces – and which can also leave. This is in contrast to what Taylor calls the 'buffered self' of modernity, in which we no longer believe in

such forces and the boundaries of the person are closed as an individual along with other individuals in a disenchanted world or a world of modernity characterized by the dislocation of person from wider cosmos, which Taylor calls a 'great disembedding' (Taylor 2004: 49–68). India as a modern nation state participating in a high-tech, global economy has millions of people just as 'disembedded' as everywhere else, but it also contains millions of Hindus who still live within an 'enchanted' cosmos, such as my young hosts, for whom invisible deities and demons are real; these invisible beings interact with the visible human world. Indeed, the social reality of most people in India perhaps questions a hard and fast distinction between Taylor's porous and buffered self.

But let us grant the force of the idea of the porous self for a moment. Let us call this kind of porous self, in the Hindu context, permeable. By 'permeable self' I mean that a person is embedded within a society and within a cosmos, and interacts with not only other people but with invisible powers both because of the desire for protection, that is the appeasement of those powers, and for enhancement and well-being, ultimately for the greatest enhancement of salvation from this world of suffering. The permeable self is less an individual in the sense of the modern, urban, buffered self, and more of what Marriot has called 'dividual' (Marriot 1976: 109–42). The dividual person is embedded within a social network in which duties and obligations to others are well defined, social roles are clear, and that network within an Indic or caste context is hierarchical, based on a scale of purity with some groups, the Brahmins, regarded as ritually pure while other groups, often the most economically downtrodden, are regarded as ritually impure, such as the Dalits at the bottom of the traditional scale of purity. The sociologist Louis Dumont famously distinguished between purity and power in relation to caste, with the image of the king exemplifying power and the Brahmin exemplifying purity but in which the political realm of sovereignty does not become wholly distinct from the realm of religion (Dumont 1980: 312). On this view, the king can become an analogue of deity and, indeed, is thought to embody the qualities of God. Thus we have a complex social network, a hierarchy of supernatural agency, and a politics of divine kingship in the history of Hinduism.

It seems to me that the plurality of the Indic social network is linked to the plurality of cosmic beings. Hindu polytheism is populating the cosmos with a hierarchy of supernatural entities that reflects the hierarchy of the human social order throughout history. The transactional nature of the person in that social hierarchy is akin to the transactional nature of the person in the cosmological hierarchy. As ritual procedures control interactions between people – forms of comportment towards others as well as more formal ritual procedures such as rites of passage, especially birth rites, initiation, marriage, and funeral

rites – so ritual procedures control human interactions with invisible beings. Rituals protect us from evil – such as my young friend's smearing dirt on the face of her baby – honour deities, and gain liberation. Hindu polytheism is thus linked to social hierarchy as the model, the dominant theme in the social *imaginaire*, along with modes of ritual that control the interaction of the person and community with invisible cosmic powers. This is, of course, not unique to India but found throughout Asia and, indeed, throughout much of the world.

But what of monotheism, the topic of this Element? Hindu monotheism must be understood within the context of a social and cosmological *imaginaire* that is hierarchical and within a cosmos replete with invisible powers. That there is a force, the source of the universe and the beings within it, that in itself transcends that universe and social order is attested throughout the history of Hinduism. The relation of such a supreme being to the human community is mediated through the cosmical hierarchy and articulated at the human level through images, incarnations, and human embodiments. Thus, God incarnates in the world in forms such as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa and can be accessed through the media of icons in temples, and through holy men and women as themselves icons of the divine. God appears in the world in iconic and aniconic forms; simply seeing the deity is regarded as transformative of persons. Such a transcendent God has been understood through the model of sovereignty. God is like a great king ruling a kingdom or sphere (*maṇḍala*), whose kingdom is the whole universe. With God as king at the apex of the universe, below him, or sometimes her, are arranged a hierarchy of gods, anti-gods, supernatural beings such as Nāgas (the supernatural snake-persons), demons, people, animals, and plants. As we will see, this hierarchy was even conceptualized bureaucratically, as in the religion of Śiva, with different departments governed by different deities. But images of God also emerge in which he is not so much king as lover or friend.

We might generalize that Hindu monotheism is distinct from monotheism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in a number of important ways. It is a clear doctrine of Abrahamic religions that God is the creator of the universe from nothing. In Christianity, this God is a trinity and there was some debate about the relationship between God and his creation, God being present within it, while maintaining a transcendence from it. The interesting theological issue arises, therefore, that God is the creator of existence and so is distinct from existence: God is not just another object in the universe. We cannot understand God as an object in a way that there are other things in the universe that can be named. So, in what sense can we say that God exists?[2] Christian theology came up with a number of responses to this

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[2] For a succinct discussion of this issue, see Denys Turner 2002. The atheist denial of God is a denial of understanding God as an object in a way that there are other things in the universe that can be named.

question, particularly that God does not exist in any conventional sense, but is a being only known as analogous to creatures. Hence for Thomas Aquinas, we can know that God exists but not what God is (Turner 2004: 169). God is essentially unknowable, which led the fourteenth-century Orthodox theologian Gregory Palamas to claim that God in essence is incomprehensible yet can be known in the energies that proceed from it (Manzaridis 2015: 23). Interestingly, this directly parallels the eleventh- or twelfth-century Hindu theologian Rāmānuja's claim that God in essence (*svarūpa*) is unknowable but can be known in his power (*vibhūti*) (Flood 2019: 144; Hunt-Overzee 1992: 75). In Abrahamic religions, God intervenes in history, becoming incarnate according to Christianity. In Hindu monotheism God likewise incarnates in different animal and human forms to restore righteousness. So, in very general terms, we might say that the similarities between Hindu monotheism and that of the Abrahamic religions are the following:

1　God in essence is unknowable because transcendent and so beyond human powers of understanding.
2　This transcendent God, while being beyond the universe, yet either creates or emanates it.
3　God intervenes in history through incarnations: the unique incarnation of Christ in Christianity, for example, or a variety of human and theriomorphic forms in the religion of Viṣṇu.
4　God is the controller of time: in Hindu monotheism, God governs the endless cycles of destruction and rejuvenation of the universe; in Abrahamic monotheism, God sustains the universe having created it, and destroys it at the end of time.
5　God bestows grace on devotees, saving them in the end: God has a soteriological function.
6　God is good. God is identified with the highest good in the Abrahamic religions and Hindu monotheism, although in the latter God is also ultimately the source of time, suffering, and death (as we see in the *Bhagavad-gītā* chapter 11).

Some differences between the concepts of God in Abrahamic monotheism and Hindu monotheism are the following:

1　God in the Abrahamic religions creates the world from nothing, in contrast to Hindu monotheism, where such a claim could be contested, and where God is often thought to act upon eternal, insentient matter.
2　Hindu monotheism is affirmative of images of God, whereas the Abrahamic religions are not, with some exceptions, such as icons in Orthodox Christianity.

3 The Abrahamic religions often believe that God has a purpose (*telos*) for
   creation, in contrast to Hindu monotheism, in which the only purpose to
   creation is for God to express his/her nature (and so the universe is God's
   'play') or in order that bound souls can be liberated.
4 In Hindu monotheism, God rules over reincarnation through the cycles of
   time, the various ages of the world which repeat, an endless process although
   individual selves can be liberated. This is in contrast to the Abrahamic God,
   who will render collective judgement at the end of time.

There are other differences and similarities but at the risk of making massive
over-generalizations, these seem to me to be the most significant.

Yet Hindu and Abrahamic monotheisms developed in quite distinct histories,
polities, and geographies. Jan Assmann has argued that the emergence of
monotheism in Egypt for a short time, and particularly in what was to become
Judaism, marked a revolutionary event (Assmann 2008). But this revolutionary
event was accompanied by the eruption of violence with which monotheism is
associated. Assmann distinguishes pagan violence in which the king acts as
God's deputy, in which there is no distinction between religion and state, with
monotheistic violence that was directed against paganism (including 'the Pagan
within') (Assmann 2008: 29): once there is only one God, there is intolerance
of others and of pluralist views. This contrasts markedly with India, where it is
not so much the rise of theism that is revolutionary but its rejection in the
renunciate, and often atheist, Śramaṇa traditions such as Buddhism. As we will
see, the emergence of theism in Hinduism was tied to the development of the
kingdom: the king embodies the most powerful God, along with the need for
magical protection of the king (and thereby the kingdom) along with narratives
of royal descent (Pollock 2006: 144). This imperial monotheism was not so
much a revolutionary force as a consolidation of social and political values
rooted in cosmic law (*dharma*), which dealt with other traditions by absorbing
them within it at a lower level.

Difference in Identity

While we can speak of Hindu monotheism, God as transcendent source, never
far away in the Hindu *imaginaire*, is the idea of immanence, that God pervades
the universe or is identical with it, both panentheism and pantheism. That there
is one being with which all forms are ultimately identical, a single substance
within which difference is conceptualized either as illusory or as aspects of that
single divine substance, has been a dominant trope in Hindu discourse. Such
monism or non-dualism can be strict in its denial of the reality of difference or
the many; only the one is real, or its purity can be compromised in the view that

the many does indeed possess some independent reality but always pervaded by the one, supreme reality. On this view, God is transcendent but nevertheless not distinct from the universe, a participative theism in which the innumerable forms of the universe are expressions of divine power that might even be conceptualized as the body of God, as in the theology of the theologian Rāmānuja.

The strict ontological distinction between God and creation that we have in the Abrahamic religions is generally absent in Hinduism, with the exception perhaps of Madhva's monotheism, in which God is wholly other and external to the universe. The universe participates in the nature of God, who, in his or her essence, may remain unknowable and beyond the universe (*viśvottirṇa*), yet whose energies either pervade matter or who is transformed as matter. In this model, the *telos* of the universe is the spontaneous manifestation of God's nature. It is this difference in identity, that God is transcendent yet also all-pervasive in and as world, that is arguably the dominant metaphysical model in the history of Hindu monotheism. The roots of this metaphysics are in the ancient texts of revelation, the Upaniṣads, a metaphysics which continues into the first millennium AD. Even strict non-dualism such as the Advaita Vedānta of the famous Śaṅkara or Abhinavagupta's Śaiva non-dualism, which holds that the only reality is consciousness, have a tendency to fall into the language of emanation. For a strict non-dualism, any distinction is ultimately a distortion of the truth, but even such strict systems tend to articulate the idea of the world as an emanation, manifestation, or appearance of the one true reality. And even dualistic metaphysical systems, such as the Śaiva Siddhānta, have an account of the universe in which the universe and selves are pervaded by God's power or energy, even though they are regarded as distinct substances. God affects the incipient substance of the universe, causing it to manifest and ultimately to retract back into itself. The difference in identity position is in some ways not far removed from Christian metaphysics, in which the universe, created by God, is pervaded by God's power; God is both transcendent and immanent although with the important qualification that in Christianity, God creates the universe from nothing, whereas in Hindu metaphysics generally God acts upon pre-existing substance and the ontological distinction is never absolute, although there is room for debate here (see Lipner 1978).

Within the spectrum of Hindu views, on the one hand we have strict monism, such as Śaṅkara's non-dualism, in which difference is an illusion due to ignorance, or Abhinavagupta's non-dualism, in which the world simply is identical with absolute consciousness, which we might even designate as ultimately atheistic positions. On the other hand, we have dualist metaphysics in which God is conceptualized as a substance distinct from world and from self

and yet nevertheless acts upon world through power, as in the Viṣṇu theology of Madhva (AD 1238–1317) or the Śiva theology of Rāmakaṇṭha (*c*. AD 950–1000). Between these views we have the idea that God, while being transcendent, also emanates as universe and selves: the universe is a transformation of divine substance, as in the theology of Jīvagosvāmin (sixteenth century). This position is distinct in maintaining the relative reality of the many, of difference, while wishing to adhere to the view that God becomes cosmos and the forms of the universe are not distinct from the divine reality of which they are transformations.

In this picture, monotheism can be distinguished from monism. Monism or non-dualism, while being a very important metaphysical position, might be distinguished from monotheism in which God is conceptualized as transcendent to world, but nevertheless pervades world, immanent within it. God, outside of the universe, self-contained and wholly transcendent, is also present in the universe that he has created. The relationship between God and his or her creation is therefore either one of strict separation or one of transformation in which the universe is a transformed part of God, an emanation of God. We might therefore restrict the term 'monotheism' to dualist metaphysics and to emanationism, which conceptualizes the universe as an emanation or transformation of God, who nevertheless retains transcendence; it is this latter position that is arguably dominant in the history of Hinduism. We might offer the following diagram to represent these ideas:

	Monotheism	**Emanationism**	**Monism**
God	transcendent	transcendent and immanent	immanent
Universe	distinct and real substance	real but part of God	one substance
Self	distinct and real substance	distinct but part of, or equal to, God	identical with God

Seeing the Divine

A distinctive feature of Hinduism is the proliferation of images or icons of deities that are the focus of worship. The theological importance of the image is that through it the devotee has a glimpse of God, a fleeting sight of the divine. This seeing of the image, or *darśana*, is a key practice performed before images of deities and before holy persons. Through seeing, the devotee is thought to be transformed and enriched because seeing the image makes the mind resonate with it. Seeing can also be accompanied by hearing, and hearing the names of God or singing God's praise is the aural equivalent of the visual.