Truth, Diversity, and the Incomplete Project of Modern Hinduism

Jeffery D. Long

Copyright © by Jeffery D. Long, 2005

Into the Hornets' Nest: A Hindu Alternative to Hindutva

This constructive philosophical and hermeneutical project seeks to begin the reconception of Neovedāntic thought in order to better approximate modern Hindu aspirations towards universality and pluralism, as well as to facilitate the translation of Hindu categories into the terminology of the modern Western world. Focusing first on such representatives of the Hindu tradition as Swāmī Dayānanda Sarāswatī (the founder of the Ārya Samāj), Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and Mahatma Gandhi, I explore the compatibility of their thought with Alfred North Whitehead's system of process thought and Jain philosophy. I then develop a preliminary outline of a pluralistic Hindu process theology.[1]

The compatibility of both Jainism and process thought with Neovedānta will be examined, as well as the ability of a synthesis of all three to articulate, in a way that is both logically elegant and compelling, some of the deeper assumptions underlying the views of modern Hindu thinkers, specifically on the issue of truth and religious diversity.

The larger goal to which this project aspires is the initiation of a pluralistic Hindu cross-cultural hermeneutics that can contribute to the full development of Hinduism as a world religion. By "the full development of Hinduism as a world religion," I mean, first of all, the development of Hinduism as a religion—not unlike Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam—to which any human being, regardless of nationality or ethnicity, may belong. By *universalism* I mean essentially the aspiration of any religious tradition to be universally relevant, to speak to global concerns rather than restricting itself exclusively to the local concerns of a single national or ethnic group.

Secondly, the full development of Hinduism as a world religion means developing to the fullest degree possible its ethos of *pluralism*, by which I mean a way of envisioning religious diversity that allows for a plurality of approaches to and expressions of truth.

This vision of Hinduism is a deliberate contrast with restrictive *Hindutvavādī* conceptions of Hinduism that identify being a Hindu with being Indian. In other words, this project is a critique of recent formulations of Hinduism that have been labeled "right wing" or "fundamentalist." To be sure, these labels are not altogether accurate. The term "right wing," for example, is misleading because, apart from its hostility towards other communities, the substantive worldview of Hindutva bears little resemblance to the right wing ideologies of the West.[2] The term "fundamentalist" is even more misleading still, because of its associations with scriptural literalism and soteriological exclusivism, both of which are largely absent from Hinduism. Adherents of Hindutva do not typically claim that the Vedas are the literal word of God and that the Bible and Qur'an are false scriptures, or that all non-Hindus are will suffer eternal damnation after death.

But while such labels are not altogether accurate, and will not be employed in this paper, they do point to an elective affinity between Hindutva ideology and analogous exclusivist movements in such traditions as Christianity and Islam. The ideology of Hindutva runs counter to universalism in the obvious sense that it identifies being Hindu with being Indian, thereby limiting the relevance of Hinduism to the Indian subcontinent. Because it also tends to cultivate and nurture hostility towards non-Hindus, it is also difficult to reconcile with religious pluralism. It is not, strictly speaking, exclusivist in a *theological* sense—as are Christian and Islamic exclusivist theologies—because it does not involve a denial to Christians or Muslims of ultimate religious goals. Again, its claim is not that Christians and Muslims are going to hell. Its exclusivism is of a more socio-political nature, relegating non-Hindus in India to a second-class religio-cultural status.

This project, however, is undertaken from a Neovedāntic *Hindu* perspective. It is a project that seeks to reclaim the term "Hindu" for the universalist and pluralist "wing" of the tradition. All too often, criticisms of Hindutva arise from outside of Hinduism, inadvertently fueling the very ideology that they seek to critique by reinforcing a sense of Hinduism as a tradition under attack. But this project does not suffer from this defect.

This project seeks to advance a *Hindu* alternative to Hindutva, and thereby to advance Hinduism, and indeed, all of humanity, towards a greater pluralism. Religious pluralism could yet be Hinduism's greatest gift to the world, a way not only for Hindus, but also for people of all religions to conceive of their diversity not in terms of competition, but complementarity. It is ultimately in the service of such an ideal that I have written this essay. If every religion in the world could be reduced to a single central concept—Christianity, for example, to the idea that God is love, or Buddhism to impermanence—I think the Hindu ideal would be pluralism. This is not meant to be chauvinistic, to assert that Hinduism is uniquely or wholly pluralistic. But the Hindu *ideal* of pluralism is an ideal from which all humanity could benefit.

I am quite aware that I may potentially be opening a very large can of worms—or, to employ another metaphor, stepping into a nest of extremely ill-tempered hornets—by taking on the subject of Hindutva in the way I am; for I have noted two unfortunate polarizing trends—one in the academy, and the other more predominant in lay Hindu circles. Both involve demonizing those who dissent from the dominant ideology and who identify themselves in more complex ways, with multiple and overlapping allegiances and commitments.

Specifically, claims to espouse and to promote a Hindu worldview—to be, to put it simplistically, "pro Hindu"—are not infrequently met in the Western academy with the accusation, or at least the suspicion, that one is pro Hindutva. This implies that one is a religious fascist seeking to foment violence against Muslims and Christians in India, or at least a Hindu chauvinist, promoting the superiority of Hinduism over other religions. It is not contemplated that being "pro Hindu" need not mean being anti-non-Hindu, or that it could even *imply*—as it does in my case—a *positive* regard for other traditions, albeit in Hindu terms. At the very least, such a commitment raises questions about one's scholarly objectivity, despite the fact that Christian theologians, operating out of their Christian convictions, have participated actively in the academy for centuries.

This last point is one with which I am especially concerned. Hindu theology, unlike Christian theology, is not yet a widely accepted category in the modern academy of religion—a state of affairs that this project is intended to help modify.

On the other hand, criticism of Hindutva is similarly met, in at least some Hindu circles, with the accusation that one is anti-Hindu, meaning one is in league with Islamic, Christian, or secular forces antagonistic to Hinduism, or that one has capitulated to such forces. This accusation arises out of a simplistic "with us or against us" mentality.

Given such a polarized situation, I wish to clarify from the outset that I am neither pro-Hindutva nor anti-Hindu. Indeed, I *am* Hindu, and a significant personal agenda that underlies my scholarship is the defense of the legitimacy of this self-identification, both to the modern academy and to the Hindu community.

I am, specifically, a Western Hindu, a convert to the Hindu *dharma*, and the Hinduism that I espouse teaches *ahiṃsā*—nonviolence in thought, word, and deed—as one of its core values. Therefore I certainly have no desire to denigrate Hinduism or to offend Hindus—the religious tradition and the community, respectively, with which I have come to identify and which have had profoundly positive impacts on my life and my spirituality. Indeed, I am in complete sympathy with the fear that underlies the Hindutva ideology. There *are* Islamic, Christian, and secular forces that are avowedly antagonistic to Hinduism. But I am also convinced that violence is not the answer to these forces. On purely pragmatic grounds, an examination of the recent history of religious violence around the world quite clearly demonstrates that such violence leads only to more violence, proving Gandhi's frequently quoted adage about "an eye for an eye making the whole world blind." But there are also principled reasons—Hindu reasons—not only for eschewing violence, but for rejecting any ideology that strongly affirms a temporal, material identity in opposition to the deeper unity and interdependence that underlies the existence of all beings. One of my aims here is to articulate these reasons and the principles that underlie them.

With regard to the communal violence that breaks out from time to time between Hindus and other religious communities in India, I find myself in a position quite similar to that of an Irish Catholic in America who detests the violence that is being committed against her fellow Catholics by Protestants in Northern Ireland, but who equally detests the violence of the IRA committed in the name of a distorted, nationalistic vision of her faith.

My project is therefore critical of Hindutva. But it is a *Hindu* critique, a critique that is based on a sense of the inadequacy of Hindutva to the universalist and pluralist aspirations of the modern Hindu tradition. In this way, it is analogous to the pluralistic theologies that have arisen in the Christian tradition in response to Christian exclusivism, such as the pluralistic philosophical theology of John Hick, the theologies of interfaith dialogue developed by Raimon Panikkar and John Cobb, the pluralistic feminist theology of Rosemary Radford Reuther, and the pluralistic liberation theology of Paul F. Knitter. It is also a project undertaken in close dialogue with these pluralistic theologies, seeking to learn from their mistakes and to perfect their arguments in ways appropriate to the new historical situation of Hinduism—a situation that is increasingly global and multicultural. Hindus benefit, I believe, from the work of the Christian religious pluralists.

For a growing number of Christian theologians over the last two to three decades or so have become highly sensitized to the fact that Christian exclusivism—the doctrine that outside the Christian faith there is no salvation, that all non-Christians are doomed to die and spend eternity in hell—has fueled, and continues to fuel, untold violence against the non-Christian world in the form of crusades, inquisitions, holocausts, and religiously sanctioned imperialism. An awareness is dawning—though still resisted by many—that an exclusivist and triumphalist understanding of Christianity is deeply inadequate to the message of love proclaimed in the teachings of Christ, and attempts have been made to develop pluralistic theologies that conceive of the world's religions as many paths to a common destination, or expressions of different, yet complementary, facets of one truth.

These pluralistic theologies, particularly Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis, have taken much of their inspiration from modern Hinduism, with its pluralistic self-understanding, as found, for example, in the teachings of Ramakrishna and Gandhi:

> God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up a bamboo poleñ You may say that there are many errors and superstitions in another religion. I should reply: Suppose there are. Every religion has errors. Everyone thinks that his watch gives the correct time. It is enough to have yearning for God. It is enough to love Him and feel attracted to Him.[3]

> Religions are different roads converging upon the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? …I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe that they are all God-given, and I believe that they were necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed. And I believe that, if only we could all of us read the scriptures of different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of those faiths we should find that they were at bottom all one and were all helpful to one another.[4]

The irony of the current situation of Hinduism is that this tradition, which inspired the pluralistic turn in Christian theology, now stands in need of its own pluralistic turn—or rather, a *re*turn, a reassertion and a re-articulation of the pluralistic vision at its core, or at least at the core of its modern, Neovedāntic incarnation (although it has premodern antecedents).[5] That is my goal here: a new Neovedānta for a new age, a Vedānta for a truly universalist and pluralist Hinduism, a constructive postmodern Vedānta.

Conflicting Ideals: Modern Hindu Universalism and Modern Hindu Nationalism

Hinduism, like all religions today, is undergoing a crisis. Like all world religions, Hinduism is faced with challenges, both external and internal. The external challenges take the form of secular ideologies, like the materialist ideology predominant in the modern scientific community, and the ideologies of other religions, seeking to advance their various claims against those of Hinduism, particularly the aggressive missionary faiths. The internal challenges include such issues as the advancement of the rights of women and Dalits, but also include, prominently, internal divisions over *how* the Hindu community ought to address the external challenges to the Hindu tradition.

The still more fundamental challenge that underlies and informs all of these other challenges, both external and internal, is the challenge of defining what Hinduism is, and, more urgently, what it is going to be in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Two competing visions of Hinduism seem to be recommending themselves in the writings of Hindu thinkers of the modern period. These two visions are not always clearly distinguished from one another in the work of any given author, though some do clearly gravitate in one direction or another.

The first of these visions, which I am advocating, is universalist and pluralist in its outlook. This vision is probably represented most clearly and explicitly in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna on the validity of all religious paths and of Mahatma Gandhi on what he calls the "equality of religions." On this understanding, Hinduism has nothing to fear from other religions or ideologies as such, for all can find a place within its expansive worldview.

To be sure, there have been numerous attacks on this pluralist view that claim that it is actually a veiled triumphalism, intended to assert the superiority of the "tolerant" Hindu tradition over the exclusivist Christian and Muslim traditions, and ultimately, to subsume them; and there are certainly cases in which it has been so used. But it is not at all clear that Hindu pluralism is *necessarily* triumphalist, even if there have been, and continue to be, Hindus who have put it to triumphalist rhetorical uses. It can also simply be a truth claim which many Hindus take to be constitutive of Hinduism; for there have been, and continue to be, Hindus whose pluralistic understanding of Hinduism has been sincere, and not connected with attempts to assert the superiority of Hinduism over other traditions, as evidenced in their dealings with people of other communities. I can cite the example of my own father-in-law, a devotee of Ramakrishna who regularly worships in a church, a mosque, and a gurdwara, as well as a Kālī mandir. He is not, so far as I can tell, exhibiting Hindu triumphalism. In his own mind, he is exhibiting the truth that God is one and comes in many forms, and that we would all get along better if we thought this.

To the degree that this pluralistic understanding is reflected in Hindu movements such as the Ramakrishna Mission and Transcendental Meditation, one can see that it is also universalist, that it allows for—while not aggressively *promoting*—conversion, that it permits entry into the tradition to all who seek it, regardless of ethnicity or nationality. A Hindu, on this understanding, is one who practices Hinduism, whether Indian or not.

The second competing vision of Hinduism is highly particularist, nationalist, and exclusive. This vision, expressed with its greatest clarity and force in the writings of V.D. Savarkar, conceives of Hinduism as the religion of the people of India. To be Hindu is not only to live a particular way of life and view the world in a particular way. It is also to identify with a particular nation and ethnicity.

What is the history of these two visions of Hinduism? Both visions can claim justification in the texts and practices of the premodern traditions of South Asia that have gradually merged over the centuries and coalesced into the complex entity that is known today as Hinduism. But there are also important respects in which both are distinctively modern. My most basic thesis in this essay is that it is the first vision—the pluralist and universalist vision—that is preferable, both on the basis of its potential to positively transform humanity, and in terms of its fidelity to the premodern tradition. In this essay, I shall focus on the positive transformative potentials of a pluralist and universalist view of the Hindu tradition. The case for the fidelity of this view to the premodern tradition is a more complex one to make, but abundant materials are certainly available in its favor.[6]

For centuries, what is now called Hinduism consisted of many divergent schools of thought, loosely held together by a common commitment to the Brahmanical or Vedic tradition. But in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Hindu intellectuals began to conceive of Hinduism—one could even argue that they began to “reconstruct” or to “reinvent” it—as the *Sanātana Dharma*—that is, the “eternal” or “universal religion” or “perennial philosophy” believed to underlie all of the world’s religions. The commonly held Vedic tradition, and Vedānta philosophy in particular, came to be seen as universal.

A fairly typical illustration of this universalist understanding of Hinduism would be Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's statement in *The Hindu View of Life* that, "The Vedanta is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance."[7] Vedānta is not, for Radhakrishnan, a merely local reality, a type of Indian philosophy. It is the basis of all human religious experience.

This is what is meant, in part, by the term "Neovedānta"; for this universalization of Hindu categories, though having strong roots in the premodern tradition, is still a *new* development. As articulated by authors like Radhakrishnan, it is decidedly modern; for it is based, as will be discussed shortly, on a thoroughly modern epistemology.

This universalist understanding of Hinduism has been profoundly influential upon the thinking of Western theologians and philosophers of religion. Such Western thinkers as Aldous Huxley, John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Paul F. Knitter, and Huston Smith have developed pluralistic and perennialist models for conceptualizing truth and religious diversity based on the Hindu pluralistic principle that *Ekaṃ sadanekāḥ panthāḥ*—"Truth is one, paths are many." The religions of the world, according to this Vedic principle, are many paths to a common goal, or, a still better formulation—the one advocated in this essay—they reflect many complementary facets of a universal truth. Its appropriation by Western scholars, as mentioned in the previous section, reflects a disenchantment with the more limiting, exclusivist models more typical of traditional Christian thought on the topic of truth and religious diversity.

The emergence and the eventual predominance of this conception of Hinduism, at least among Western-educated Hindus, was due largely to the influence of such figures of the "Bengal Renaissance" as Rammohan Roy, Sri Ramakrishna, K.C. Sen, Vivekānanda, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, and Paramahāṃsa Yogānanda, as well as Mahatma Gandhi, Rāmaṇa Mahārṣi, and Radhakrishnan—all Hindus in conversation, although to varying degrees, with Western thought. Such Western aficionados of Hinduism as the Transcendentalists and Theosophists played a prominent role in this development as well.

Significantly, many of these thinkers—including the Western Theosophists—also played key roles in the development of the idea of the Indian nation-state. Hinduism, conceived as the national religion of the people of India, played a prominent role in the emergence of the concept of India. A tension thus exists in the writings of some of these figures, as well as in the minds of many contemporary Hindus, between their sense of Hinduism as something universal and eternal, while being, at the same time, something distinctively Indian.

On my analysis, this tension is at the heart of the crisis that Hinduism faces today. It was in reaction to this very ambiguity in the meaning of the term "Hindu" that Savarkar, the founding figure of Hindutva ideology, wrote his essay, *Hindutva*, in which he defines a Hindu, unambiguously, as a person who is Indian by ethnicity, by national allegiance, *and* by religious affiliation. In order for one to be a Hindu, all three of these criteria must be met. Consequently, Indians practicing religions of non-Indian origin and practitioners of Hinduism who are not Indian are excluded. At best, non-Indian Hindus, like the Irish Sister Nivedita, are the exception rather than the rule.[8]

Savarkar does, indeed, clarify the situation. The ambiguity of the term "Hindu" rests precisely in the fact that it is sometimes used to denote an ethnicity, sometimes a nationality, and sometimes a religious affiliation. Savarkar's solution, though—to insist that a true Hindu must be all three—dispenses with Hindu universalism: a dear price to pay, I would argue, for clarity. Such universalism is badly needed in a violent world.

The emergence, at least as a widespread understanding, of the more universalist self-conception of Hinduism coincides with a shift within Hinduism from a premodern, tradition-based episteme, an episteme based on the authority of the Vedic scriptures, to a modern episteme, based on a conception of these scriptures as a record of the experiences of the *ṛṣis*, or Vedic sages, who composed them—experiences available, in principle, to any who are willing to undertake the requisite yogic disciplines.[9]

This is analogous to the historical shift in Western thought from premodernity—in which what counts as knowledge is that which is sanctioned by the authority of either scripture or church tradition—to modernity—in which what counts as knowledge is that which is redeemable in terms of common human experience and reason.

Just as Western modernity has been critiqued by postmodern writers for assuming the universality of rational principles and experiences that are, in fact, local to European culture, and as, in the words of Jürgen Habermas, "an incomplete project" that has failed to deliver fully on its promises of human emancipation, similarly, modern Hinduism fails to live up to its self-conception as a universal dharma inasmuch as it remains bound to the concepts of the Indian nation-state and an Indian ethnic identity—in short, to the idea of *Hindutva*.[10]

The contradiction inherent in the notion of Hinduism as a "universal religion" *and* as the religion of the people of India is, again, a contradiction found both in the writings of major figures of the modern tradition and in the minds of many contemporary Hindus. One sometimes hears the same person refer to the universality and the all-inclusiveness of Hinduism, only to make a statement, moments later, identifying Hinduism exclusively with Indian culture, and even with the Indian nation-state.

Savarkar resolves this contradiction, again, by opting for the more restrictive of the two possible definitions—to be a Hindu is to have a threefold relationship with India: a relationship of blood ties, of national allegiance, and of affiliation to a faith that claims India as its *puṇya bhūmi*, or "holy land." This approach has the advantage of removing the ambiguity of the term "Hindu," but at the cost of Hindu universalism.

I propose that this contradiction be resolved, though—and I would also claim that the weight of the modern and premodern Hindu tradition would have us resolve it—in favor of a universalist, Neovedāntic conception of Hinduism. The impulse of the Hindu tradition toward the articulation of universal truths, particularly in the modern period, is too basic to the tradition to be dispensed with so easily.

One could, of course, ask why this contradiction needs to be resolved at all. Why force the issue? All religions, if one may generalize, possess, to varying degrees, an impulse toward the universal, toward the articulation of general metaphysical truths, in creative tension with a sacralization of particular local realities: a particular sacred land or book or person. As Alfred North Whitehead describes it:

> Religion should connect the rational generality of philosophy with the emotions and purposes springing out of existence in a particular society, in a particular epoch, and conditioned by particular antecedents. Religion is the translation of general ideas into particular thoughts, particular emotions, and particular purposes; it is directed to the end of stretching individual interest beyond its self-defeating particularity… Religion is an ultimate craving to infuse into the insistent particularity of emotion that non-temporal generality which primarily belongs to conceptual thought alone.[11]

Religion, on a Whiteheadian understanding, inevitably involves a tension between the universal—the general—and the particular. Religion is much more than a mere set of propositions. In Hindu terms, a *dharma*, or way of life, is not reducible to a *darśana*, a philosophy or point of view, though it may include or imply one. As Whitehead says, "non-temporal generality…primarily belongs to conceptual thought alone." If promoting a Neovedāntic universalism means to utterly divest Hinduism of its cultural particularity, then this is not a desirable goal at all.

But holding the universal and the particular in tension does not mean dispensing with the universal either. For, as Whitehead also says, religion "is directed to the end of stretching individual interest beyond its self-defeating particularity." Particularity is self-defeating to the degree that it renders itself irrelevant to the concerns of the larger world. An exclusively local Hinduism cannot address global issues. It is, in this sense, impotent.

But this is not the only reason to opt for a more universalist understanding of the Hindu tradition as opposed to a more restrictive one. A restrictive definition of Hinduism is also divisive—not unlike the exclusivist theologies of Christianity and Islam, with which it is often lumped as a type of "fundamentalism." It fuels a sense of otherness—an "us and them" mentality—rather than a sense of solidarity among human beings.

As Whitehead asks rhetorically, "Must 'religion' always remain as a synonym for 'hatred'? The great social ideal for religion is that it should be the common basis for the unity of civilization."[12] If the utter denaturalization of Hinduism, its reduction to a mere abstract philosophy, represents one extreme approach to the question of the relation of Hinduism's universalistic impulse to its cultural particularity, Hindutva, I would suggest, represents the opposite extreme. If the one renders Hinduism bereft of emotional appeal, the other invests it with *too much* emotion—emotion of the most destructive variety. It is an ideology, again, of division rather than solidarity.

The problematic nature of Hindutva is highlighted by the experiences of religious minorities within the Indian nation-state—those who do not identify themselves as Hindu, such as Muslims and Christians, and some members of the Dalit community, many of whom have faced violence in the name of Hindutva nationalist exclusivism.

On the other hand, though, the possibility for the emergence of a truly universal Hinduism of the kind envisioned in the Neovedāntic movement—the completion of the incomplete project of modern Hinduism, and its emancipation from such problematically restrictive notions as race and nation—is highlighted by the existence of ever growing numbers of converts to Hinduism (such as myself) who are, by origin, neither culturally nor ethnically Indian, but who are drawn to what we take to be the wisdom and beauty of this tradition and its ability to enrich and give greater depth and meaning to our lives.

The common thread uniting the two distinct concepts operating in a universalist understanding of Hinduism as I see it—that of viewing other religions as complementary to Hinduism (i.e. religious pluralism) and of opening Hinduism to non-Indians—is that both employ Hinduism as a principle of unification, of human solidarity, rather than as a principle of division. A Hindu identity, on such an understanding, is paradoxically, an anti-identity. If identity is normally conceived as operating on a principle of exclusion—"I am this and therefore *not* that"—a Hindu identity operates on the basis of a principle of *in*clusion—"You and I are part of each other, and of a Reality that transcends us both."

My goal here is not to dwell at length upon the tension between universalist and nationalist conceptions of Hinduism. Is a proper conception of Hinduism a universalist one—that is, is Hinduism *essentially* the universal religion, the *Sanātana Dharma*? Or is Hinduism *essentially* the national religion of the people of India? If the self-critique of the study of India and of Hinduism spearheaded over the last decade or so by Ron Inden, among others, has proven anything, it is that essentialist definitions are figments of the scholarly imagination, and have done far more harm than good both to the study of India, and to Indians themselves.[13] My argument is not for a "true" definition of Hinduism, as though Hinduism was a thing that could be objectively defined. My argument is based, rather, on the desirability (or otherwise) of the *effects* of particular definitions.

My proposal is not that Hinduism is *really* the universal religion and that those who construct it in more local terms are wrong. Nor, again, am I proposing that a wholly denaturalized Hinduism, completely divorced from the cultural context of its emergence, is either possible or desirable. Hinduism will always be bound to Indian culture, just as Christianity remains bound to its Jewish and Greco-Roman roots, Islam to Arabic culture, and Buddhism to Hinduism. But just as these other religious traditions have claimed a more universal relevance that has given them purchase far beyond their cultural points of origin, similarly, Hinduism, I would argue, conceived as the *Sanātana Dharma*, has the potential to embody just such a universal relevance.

My specific proposal is that Hinduism, conceived as a universal religion, has great potential to be a model for imagining a harmony and a unity-in-diversity of the religions and the peoples of the world—a potential that remains untapped to the degree that this tradition continues to be identified with an Indian ethnic and national identity.

Intriguingly, Savarkar also acknowledges this potential at the end of *Hindutva*:

> A Hindu is most intensely so when he ceases to be a Hindu and with a Shankar claims the whole earth for a Benares…or with a Tukaram exclaims… 'My country! Oh brothers, the limits of the Universe—there the frontiers of my country lie!'[14]

Whitehead, Jainism, and Neovedānta: Grounding a Pluralistic Hindu Hermeneutics

The goal of the larger project of which this essay is but a summary is to begin the process of reconceiving modern or Neovedānta, to develop a constructive postmodern Vedānta that can better approximate the aspirations of its adherents that it be universal and pluralistic—as many modern Hindu authors claim it to be. Focusing first on Swāmī Dayānanda Sarāswatī, Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and Gandhi, I will explore, as a possible philosophical basis for a more genuinely universal and pluralistic Hinduism, an interpretation of Neovedānta in light of aspects of both Whiteheadian process thought and Jain philosophy.

My hope is to outline the compatibility of these systems of thought with more traditional Vedānta, as well as their ability, in combination, to articulate in a logically elegant and compelling way the deeper assumptions underlying the views of the major Neovedāntic thinkers in question on the issue of truth and religious diversity. The goal to which I hope to contribute with this project is the development of a postmodern, process-based Vedāntic philosophy, and of a hermeneutic that will disclose a Hinduism that is a world religion in the fullest sense, as discussed above.

This goal, in turn, is intended to feed into three other goals. By Hinduism "as a world religion in the fullest sense" I mean, again, a religion not restricted to a particular national or ethnic community. I want to argue for a Hinduism that opens up its doors to all people who wish to be affiliated with it. Secondly, should such a concept of Hinduism become popular, it might also help defuse the communal tensions in India. The equation of Hindutva, or "Hinduness," with Indianness problematizes both the Indianness of non-Hindu Indians and the Hinduness of non-Indian Hindus. As a non-Indian Hindu, the second concern has great personal immediacy for me; but the by far more urgent concern, from a humanitarian perspective, is for the non-Hindu minorities of India. An ideology that problematizes the patriotism of fellow citizens on the basis of religion or ethnicity is intrinsically violent, and conducive to acts of actual physical violence and persecution.

Hindutva, in other words, is a kind of Indian McCarthyism, a paranoid "homeland security" mentality directed against Muslims and Christians—or at any who sympathize with them, such as Mahatma Gandhi, assassinated by a partisan of Hindutva ideology.

These two goals—the opening up of Hinduism to non-Indians and making India a safer place for non-Hindus—are desirable effects of this project—again, should such a re-envisioning of Vedānta ever reach the popular consciousness. The third goal, though, to which a process-based Vedāntic philosophy might hopefully contribute is the one that is both the most ambitious and also the one to which it is most directly addressed: namely, the development of a pluralistic hermeneutics that can act as a model for harmony among *all* religions, globally, and not only for Hindus.

One among no doubt many questions that such a project raises is—What is the need for reconceiving Vedānta in the manner described? Why does one need to invoke Whitehead or Jainism in articulating Vedānta? If Vedānta already contains within itself the resources—the potential, to use my earlier term—to act as a model for interreligious harmony, why invoke other traditions?

The short answer to this concern is the following. As I mentioned earlier, the idea of Hinduism as a universal religion, with its accompanying notion that the religions of the world are all paths to a common goal, has been a great inspiration to Western perennialist and pluralist writers who have used this idea to articulate their own models for conceptual harmony among the world's religions. Because of the prominence of Advaita Vedānta in modern Hindu accounts of Hinduism and the resulting misconception among Westerners that Advaita represents the dominant consensus of the Hindu tradition on the nature of the universe and of ultimate reality, these perennialist and pluralistic models of truth have tended to be conceived in, broadly speaking, Advaitic terms. The prime example here is the Pluralistic Hypothesis of John Hick, according to which all religious experience is ultimately an experience of what he calls "the Real," which is conceived in Kantian terms as the inexperienceable ground or noumenon of all experienced religious phenomena.

On Hick's account, theistic experiences—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu—of the love of God, Buddhist experiences of Emptiness, and nature-oriented religions' experiences of cosmic harmony are all ultimately experiences of the same inconceivable and indescribable One.

This, of course, is structurally and substantively not unlike an Advaitic conception of theism, according to which the experience of *bhakti*, the experience of Īśvara, like all phenomenal experience, is really an experience of *Nirguṇa Brahman*. Since phenomenal experience as such is deluded, even the experience of *bhakti*, although it has a salvific value inasmuch as it reduces attachment to the ego, is ultimately a derivative experience, an experience of divine reality not as it truly is in itself, but only as it appears to the deluded consciousness. Hick, of course, sees all religious experience, theistic and non-theistic, as being of equal value, inasmuch as he conceives of salvation as transformation from a state of "ego-centeredness" to one of "Reality-centeredness," whereas Śaṅkara's Advaita subordinates the personal to the impersonal, as just described. But Hick's Real is also, ultimately, impersonal—or, to be more precise, beyond distinctions of personal and impersonal, which can be said of Śaṅkara's *Nirguṇa Brahman* as well.

There are problems, however, with Hick's model that become particularly evident when one examines it from the perspective of Whiteheadian process thought. The chief of these inadequacies is its tendency to reduce all three of the major types of religious experience—experience of ultimate reality as a personal deity, as an impersonal universal principle or nature of being as such, and as the natural world itself—to one. This is problematic because it is simply adequate to the complexity of the phenomena for which it seeks to account. Process thinkers representing a variety of religious traditions have been seeking to articulate a model of religious pluralism that does not reduce the various kinds of experience to which the world's religions attest to a common type—suggesting thereby that only one type of religious experience is ultimately authentic, a type of which the others are merely derivative or to which they point beyond themselves.

John Hick's model has proven to be enormously influential in the disciplines of comparative theology and the philosophy of religions. But it has also given ammunition to those who are opposed to the very idea of religious pluralism—religious exclusivists in particular—who have exploited its inadequacies in order to argue that religious pluralism as such is an untenable position.

The goal that Whiteheadian religious pluralists have set for themselves is to articulate, from the positions of their respective religious traditions, a type of religious pluralism acceptable from within those religious traditions, but also reflecting a process interpretation of reality. In a Whiteheadian worldview, all the major forms of religious experience are possible as genuine experiences of the nature of reality without being in any way reduced to one another; for within a Whiteheadian worldview there is both a personal deity—what process thinkers call "God"—an impersonal universal principle that informs all entities—the principle of creativity—and a universe of actual entities striving for maximal harmony.

As a Whiteheadian Hindu, it is my view that process thought is especially helpful in articulating a Hindu worldview—and especially in articulating the premises underlying Hindu religious pluralism. Similarly helpful is Jain philosophy. I have argued elsewhere that the worldview expressed in process thought is compatible with that presupposed by the Jain doctrines of relativity—*anekāntavāda*, *nayavāda*, and *syādvāda*.[15] According to these three doctrines, respectively, all entities are multi-faceted, due to the character of an entity as a nexus of positive and negative relations to infinite possibilities. All entities, accordingly, can be viewed from infinite perspectives; and the truth or falsity of a claim made of an entity is dependent on the perspective from which it is made. These doctrines provide a hermeneutical tool for the interpretation of seemingly incompatible truth claims as harmonious, and of the world's religions as neither incompatible nor reducible to a common set of truths, but as complementary, and capable of synthesis into a more comprehensive worldview.

I find a Whiteheadian worldview, again, helpful in envisioning what this more comprehensive picture of reality might, in its broad features, be like, as incorporating the elements of theism, acosmic impersonalism, and naturalistic perspectives, as well as, along the lines of Jain thought, harmonizing metaphysical antinomies like permanence and impermanence and unity and diversity.

But what does all of this have to do with Hinduism? Again, the larger question is, "How can Hinduism be reconceived so as to fulfill the potential to which it aspires, at least in the writings of modern, Neo-Hindu or Neovedāntic authors, to universality, as a comprehensive model of universal truth and interreligious harmony?" It seems that if a Hindu approach to truth and religious diversity is necessarily an Advaitic one, along the lines of what Hick has developed, then Hindu affirmations of religious pluralism are doomed to repeat the platitude that truth is one and paths are many without being able to give an adequate, non-reductive account of religious diversity. This also, I would argue, puts Hindu pluralists at a disadvantage in debate with Hindu nationalists over what is to be a mainstream understanding of Hinduism. Hindutva, for all its faults, is coherent and clear. Universalist and pluralist Hinduism must display an even greater coherence if it is to win at least the intellectual debate. The problem, again, is not with Advaita as such, but with the tendency to articulate Hindu religious pluralism solely in Advaitic terms.

But Advaita is not the only, or even the predominant, school of Vedānta, and Vedānta is not the only form of Hindu philosophy, being only one of the six "orthodox" schools, which include Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, as well as Vedānta. And, of course, there are also the "heterodox" schools of Jainism, Buddhism, and Lokāyata or Carvāka materialism, generally not regarded as Hindu due to their not being Vedic, but nevertheless holding a great many Vedic assumptions, and certainly being products of the larger Vedic *dharma* culture of ancient India. There is no reason, therefore, that Hindu religious pluralism needs to be articulated solely in Advaitic terms, or even Vedāntic, terms.

Among the schools of Vedānta, Śaṅkara's Advaita is, of course, the standard-bearer of monistic unity, and Mādhvācārya's dualistic or *Dvaita* Vedānta represents a rigorously pluralistic theism (pluralistic in an ontological, but not a soteriological, sense) affiliated with the Vaiṣṇava theistic tradition. But most schools of Vedānta attempt—some more successfully, in terms of logical and experiential coherence, than others—to reconcile the twin polarities of our experience: unity and diversity.

The most famous of these is probably the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta system, or the "Non-dualism with Difference," of Rāmāṇuja. But there is also the Bhedābheda, or the "Separateness and Non-Separateness" school of Bhartṛprapañca (who lived long before Śaṅkara), Bhāskara, and Yādavaprakāśa; the Dvaitādvaita, or "Dualism and Non-Dualism" of Nimbārka and Śrīpati; the Acintya Bhedābheda, or "Inconceivable Separateness and Non-Separateness" of Bāladeva, as well as the Advaita Īśvaravāda, or "monistic theism" of the Śaiva Siddhānta school, described by the twentieth-century master, Satguru Śivāya Subramuniyaswāmī, in terms that are strikingly reminiscent of Whiteheadian thought, as "dipolar panentheism."[16] Clearly, the simplistic identification of Vedānta with Śaṅkara's Advaitic monism that has been such a prominent feature of Western understandings of Hinduism is not adequate to the very real internal diversity of this tradition. It should also be clear that Vedānta, in its totality, is far closer to process thought than one might otherwise guess to be the case; for, like process thought, most forms of Vedānta seek to affirm the reality of both the personal and impersonal, temporal and eternal, relative and absolute, multiple and unitary, ultimate realities.

This is also true of Vedāntic and Vedic thought in the modern period. Dayānanda Sarāswatī, the founder of the Ārya Samāj, made the following affirmation, not unlike the Whiteheadian affirmation of a plurality of ultimate realities: "There are three things beginningless: namely, God, Souls, and *Prakriti* or the material cause of the universe. These are also ever-existing. As they are eternal, their attributes, works and nature are also eternal."[17]

A Whiteheadian would, of course, reject the hard-core *ontological* dualism that this quotation suggests between the soul and matter, seeing soul and *prakṛtī* as different arrangements of the same fundamental type of experiencing actual entity—a "soul" being a personally ordered series of such entities and *prakṛtī* being an aggregate of such entities experienced as an object. Process thought, in a basic ontological sense, is monistic, but dualistic with respect to the kinds of structures which actual entities can constitute. But Dayānanda Sarāswatī's basic ontological pluralism, and his rejection, in no uncertain terms, of the Advaitic monism of many of his Neovedāntic contemporaries, definitely places him closer to Whitehead than to Śaṅkara: "The *Neo-Vedantists* look upon God as the *efficient* as well as the *material* cause of the universe, but they are absolutely in the wrong."[18] Dayānanda Sarāswatī affirms the basic theistic God-World distinction.

Ramakrishna, too, affirmed a distinction between the personal deity—his favored form of divinity, or *iṣṭadevatā,* being Kālī, the Divine Mother—and the impersonal Absolute. Throughout the course of his many famous *sādhanas*, or spiritual practices, Ramakrishna is said to have experienced forms of *both* acosmic realization *and* loving union with divinity—sometimes simultaneously. Furthermore, and in direct contrast with the Advaitic tradition with which his teachings later came to be identified, he is also said to have recommended *both* as valid salvific and liberating experiences, reducing neither to the other, nor seeing one as derivative from the other. In fact, even Ramakrishna's student, Swāmī Vivekānanda, who is widely perceived as being largely responsible for the primarily Advaitic form in which Ramakrishna's teachings have been cast, says in several contexts that the personal and the impersonal are simply *different* ways of perceiving the same reality.

For his own part, Ramakrishna preferred to remain in the literally indescribable state of *bhāvamukha*, in which he is said to have been aware *simultaneously* of *both* the one eternal substance at the foundation of existence— Śaṅkara's *nirguṇa Brahman— and* the ongoing personal presence of divinity, thus affirming the essential reality of both.

Another Bengali sage of the modern period, Sri Aurobindo, is also known to have experienced all three basic kinds of ultimate religious object. He also developed a system of "Integral Yoga" with considerable affinities to process thought, intended to incorporate all three, without privileging one over the rest. "In contrast with Śaṅkara's version of Vedānta, which relegated Īśvara 'to subordinate or inferior phases of the Brahman-idea,' Aurobindo affirmed the position of the *Gītā*, which 'represent[s] the Ishwara…as higher even than the still and immutable Brahman…as containing within himself the opposition of the Brahman with qualities and without qualities… Aurobindo did not deny the experience of *Nirguṇa Brahman*. Indeed, his first mystical experience was of 'the spaceless and timeless Brahman.' Rather, Aurobindo denied only that this was the sole or the highest experience. Put otherwise, Aurobindo spoke of Brahman, the impersonal supercosmic existence, and Īśvara, the personal cosmic spirit, as co-equal and co-eternal, rejecting all ideas of any hierarchical ordering between them."[19]

Finally, Mahatma Gandhi similarly affirmed the validity of both theistic and non-theistic religious experiences and ends—despite the monistic implications of many of his pronouncements on religious pluralism. Indeed, what is especially interesting about Gandhi is the fact that he draws explicitly upon the Jain doctrines mentioned earlier in the formulation of his view. Again, as I have argued elsewhere, these doctrines imply a relational ontology that is essentially identical to that affirmed by Whitehead. Gandhi's willingness to draw upon these ideas is thus suggestive of a *logical* compatibility between his religious pluralism and process thought.

While Gandhi did embrace, in many of his writings, Advaita philosophy, he also spoke and wrote frequently of a personal God—distinct from humanity and from the rest of the universe—and of the importance of discerning and behaving in accordance with God's will, and of the actions of God as an agent in human history—theistic concepts more in line with Vaiṣṇava Dvaita philosophy, or Abrahamic monotheism, than with the ultimately impersonal and formless Brahman of Advaita Vedānta.

In early 1926 or late 1925, this apparent inconsistency in his thought was pointed out by a reader of Gandhi's English-language newspaper, *Young India*, in a letter to the editor. Gandhi's response to this letter, in the January 21, 1926 issue, is highly revealing and useful; for in it he uses the Jain *syādvāda* doctrine to reconcile his commitment to the reality of both the personal and the impersonal aspects of Brahman: "I am an *advaitist* and yet I can support *Dvaitism* (dualism). The world is changing every moment, and is therefore unreal, it has no permanent existence. But though it is constantly changing, it has a something about it which persists and it is therefore to that extent real. I have therefore no objection to calling it real and unreal, and thus being called an *Anekantavadi* or a *Syadvadi*."[20]

Much more can, of course, be said on this topic; but this preliminary survey of the tradition should suggest that Hindu religious pluralism is eminently compatible with a Whiteheadian worldview, despite the tendency to cast such pluralism in Advaitic terms, as involving a common divine object to which all religious experience is reducible. Indeed, Hinduism is far more "Whiteheadian" than is generally recognized.

This means, therefore, that a Whiteheadian Hinduism is possible, which implies, in turn, that a Hindu religious pluralism is conceivable which is capable of addressing the objections that have been raised against existing forms of this position that have taken their basis on a more exclusively Advaitic understanding of reality. The Hindu tradition contains the conceptual tools for articulating a pluralistic model of truth and religious diversity that balances these two—truth and diversity—without reducing the many to the one, or the personal to the impersonal, or the relative to the absolute. These conceptual tools, moreover, are amenable to being articulated in Whiteheadian terms. Hindu and process thought are inter-translatable.

But what would a Whiteheadian Hinduism look like? How, specifically, are the terms of Whiteheadian process thought and Hinduism inter-translatable? It is to these questions that the remainder of this essay is dedicated.

A Hindu Process Theology

Translation, even between languages, is never simply a matter of making one-to-one correspondences between terms; for perfect correspondence never exists. Translation always involves a reconstruction and creative transformation of the original term in the idiom of the new language. A Whiteheadian, or *process*, Hindu theology is therefore not just a re-statement of Vedānta using the terminology of process thought. It is something new—an addition to the diversity of the already diverse Hindu tradition, a new Vedānta for a new age. It is also, simultaneously, a new *process* hermeneutics, a new application of process thought to a new context, and ultimately, a new kind of process thought.

The consciousness of a Hindu process theologian is the locus of the convergence of two cultures, systems of thought, and methods of metaphysical inquiry, and a Hindu process theology a hybrid of these. A Hindu process theology is a conceptual statement and a reflection of the new global Hinduism seeking to have relevance beyond the local concerns of the Indian subcontinent. It does not supersede or try to replace these local concerns, or the more ancient formulations that have traditionally reflected them. In fact, it draws upon these more traditional formulations as resources and guides for its own new reflections. But it also tries to go beyond the existing tradition and speak to the new transnational and multicultural situation of the Hindu tradition and community.

Which Vedāntic concepts does a Hindu process theology seek to translate and to understand using the terminology of process thought? A close examination of Vedānta reveals several concepts with which a Hindu process theology needs to be concerned: *Brahman*, in both its Nirguṇa and Saguṇa aspects, *Īśvara*, or God, and the relationship of God to the myriad entities that constitute the universe, *Māyā*—meaning illusion, but also creativity, and corresponding in the Tāntric Śaiva and the Śākta traditions to *Śakti*, or creative power—*Karma*, *Saṃsāra*, the cycle of rebirth—and *Mokṣa*—liberation from this cycle.

Similarly, process thought has certain fundamental concepts that a process thinker of any religious tradition will inevitably need to deploy, and that will need to be brought into harmony with the concepts of the religious tradition in question. In fact, one could even say that it is the deployment of these concepts that defines a process thinker as such, that the proper deployment of these concepts, as developed in the writings of seminal process philosophers such as Whitehead and Hartshorne, constitute the rules of the game of process thought. To again use the metaphor of translation, fidelity to the meanings of the terms of both systems—in my case, Vedānta and process thought—as understood by native speakers, is a prerequisite to a successful correlation of concepts. And yet, as with translation, the meanings of the terms of both systems will inevitably be transformed and stretched beyond their normal native usage in the attempt to correlate them.

The fundamental concepts of process thought, as outlined by Whitehead in the foundational text of the process tradition, *Process and Reality*, are creativity, the many, and the one. Another central, but derivative, notion in process thought (and surprisingly so for those accustomed to more conventional forms of theism), is the concept of God, and of God's two natures: the *primordial* and the *consequent*.

Creativity "is the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact."[21] It is the absolute of Whitehead's system, the unchanging ultimate reality that underlies all things, connecting the many and the one. "It is that ultimate principle by which the many, which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the universe conjunctively. It lies in the nature of things that the many enter into complex unity."[22] The unity to which Whitehead refers, "the one" of which he speaks, is not the totality of all existence, but the unity of a particular actual entity—another central process concept. The universe is made up of innumerable actual entities, each of which is a unification, in a unique moment of experience, of the relations of that entity to the rest of the entities that make up the universe—"the many," or "the universe disjunctively." In the Whiteheadian worldview, every entity participates in every other, through relations.

The role of God in process thought is to act as that entity through which the abstract principle of creativity becomes actual for the actual entities that make up the universe. According to Whitehead, an actual entity can only be related to another actual entity. How, then, does the principle of creativity, which is not itself an entity, become available to actual entities in order to make possible their interrelation and mutual participation? Why, to put the question in more conventional terms, is the universe not simply a chaos of unrelated, uncoordinated entities? What holds this universe together, making it a *uni*verse, a coherent unity? This is the role of what Whitehead calls "God."

God, in a Whiteheadian worldview, is not the creator of the universe—at least not in the conventional sense of a creator *ex nihilo* that one finds in classical Christian theism. God, rather, is the *coordinator* of the universe. God envisions all possibilities—called by Whitehead "eternal objects"—and organizes them through a "conceptual valuation," bringing order to what would otherwise be a chaos of potentials. God's "unconditioned conceptual valuation of the entire multiplicity of eternal objects" is called, by Whitehead, the "primordial nature" of God.[23] Through the relations that the entities have to God, the possibilities that God has envisioned become available to them for actualization. This is the sense in which God "creates" the universe in process thought: by making possibilities available to entities for actualization in an ordered fashion that makes a universe possible. But the entities are free to determine how they will actualize the possibilities available to them. God, though supremely powerful, is not omnipotent in process thought. If God can be said to exert creative power over the entities through the conceptual valuation of possibilities, the entities, too exert creative power over God. Through their choices, they collectively foreclose certain possibilities, and open up others. God's choice of actions in attaining the divine end of maximal harmony are therefore also affected by the actual entities that make up the universe. God both acts and is acted upon. This is what process thinkers mean when they say that God is *relative*. God as acted upon, as affected by the universe, is called, by Whitehead, the "consequent nature of God."[24]

So how, precisely, do the categories of Vedānta and of process thought translate into one another? My preliminary explorations of both systems of thought suggest the following set of correlations: Brahman is an overarching unity that encompasses all of the categories of process thought, and for which process thought has no precise equivalent. Nirguṇa Brahman corresponds to creativity inasmuch as it is abstract and non-actual—the absolute—while Māyā corresponds to creativity as actualized in the activities of God and the entities that make up the universe. Saguṇa Brahman corresponds to the complex that consists of both God and the universe together. Karma represents the collective influence of the past—the many—upon the emergent actual entity—the one. Saṃsāra stands for the journey of a personally ordered society of actual entities—a soul—through time, and Mokṣa, or liberation, represents a radical transformation of the way a soul experiences its temporal journey. In the remaining sections, I shall unpack the thought process that has led me to these preliminary conclusions.

"Sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ Brahman"

What exactly is *reality*? What is the ultimate character of existence? *Brahman*, the foundational concept of Vedānta, is the most commonly found Hindu answer to these two questions. Reality is Brahman.

In most Hindu systems of thought, at least the majority of the Vedānta schools, the whole of reality, encompassing all actuality and possibility, is designated by the term *Brahman*. Brahman—"the Real" (*sat*)—is coextensive with reality as such. It is that which is real pre-eminently, and of which the existence of all other entities is derivative and in which it participates. It is that, by knowing which, all things are known.[25] It is also the ultimate object of religious aspiration, of the ancient Upanishadic prayer, "Lead me from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality."[26] It is eternal. "It is immortal; it is Brahman; it is the Whole."[27] So central is this concept that it is probably not an exaggeration to say that to understand Hindu metaphysics is to come to grips with the idea of Brahman, the ultimate unity underlying all of existence.

How else is Brahman characterized? *Brahman* is a Sanskrit term that can be translated as "the expansive" or "that which makes things great." It is described in the Upanishads as the sweet essence of all that is, the "honey of all beings."[28] It is Brahman that has become all things. It is that in which they live, move, and have their being. It is from Brahman that all have emerged and to which all shall inevitably return. And it is Brahman that all things *are*, in their essence, throughout the course of their existence. This is possibly *the* central Vedāntic doctrine: Brahman is our very self. *Tat tvam asi*, according to one of the most celebrated of the great formulations, or *mahāvākyas*, of the *Chandogya Upanishad*. "You are That." There is nothing that is not Brahman. As the Upanishads also say, *Sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ Brahman*. "All this is indeed Brahman." Of all the Vedāntic traditions, the one that gives by far the most emphasis to the unity of all things in Brahman is the Advaita tradition; but Brahman is a central concept in all of the Vedāntic systems (including Dvaita, where it is identified with God, Vishnu).

Brahman as the One Infinite Being, Consciousness, and Bliss

Brahman is a universal, all-pervading substance that has become all things. An image used in contemporary Vedānta to explain this is of Brahman as a vibrating energy field. The vibrations of Brahman correspond to the whole range of existing entities—from solid to liquid to gas to energy to consciousness—conceived as quantum realities vibrating at different frequencies, modifications of the same basic "stuff" of reality. In premodern Hindu texts, these modifications of Brahman are referred to, respectively, as earth, water, air, fire, and *ākāśa* (translated variously as "space" or "ether," the medium of sound, but conceived in the contemporary tradition as the medium of consciousness).

The essential characteristics of Brahman, according to Vedānta, include, first and foremost, unity. Brahman is "one alone, without a second,"[29] and is consistently referred to in the singular as "that" (*tat*) or "that one" (*tadekam*). But Brahman–or *ātman*, Self, with which it is ultimately identical–is also described quite frequently as infinite being, consciousness, and bliss (*anantaram sat-chit-ānandam*).[30]

This set of characteristics raises several complex philosophical questions. If Brahman is the totality of all that exists—if there is nothing that is *not* Brahman—then how can consciousness and bliss characterize Brahman? Can Brahman be the same as its qualities, if there is nothing that is not Brahman? Moreover, regarding the characteristics themselves, consciousness and bliss, as generally understood, are types of *experience*. As types of experience, they must necessarily involve a subject and an object–that is, an experiencer and that which is experienced. Consciousness, or awareness, thus involves a knower and a thing that is known, and bliss an enjoyer and a thing that is enjoyed.

But Brahman is "one alone, without a second." What is there outside Brahman for Brahman to know or enjoy? If Brahman is all that exists then the answer must be "Nothing." But then how can Brahman be characterized by consciousness and bliss?

Because there is nothing else for Brahman to know or enjoy, the inescapable conclusion is that Brahman must know and enjoy itself. This is the Hindu answer to the question of creation: Why does the universe exist? This is not the same as Heidegger's metaphysical question, "Why is there anything at all?" The answer to this question is that it is in the very character of reality to exist; for existence, as well as consciousness and bliss, is one of the essential characteristics of Brahman. The real cannot not be.

But why *this* universe? Why a universe of infinite variety, of manifold entities, of human beings and plants and animals, of stars and planets and galaxies, of atoms and quarks? The very nature of Brahman is being, consciousness, and bliss. For Brahman, therefore, to be fully what it is—for it to *be* being, consciousness, and bliss—it must become many. That One, by its very nature, by its own internal necessity, must manifest as a plurality—indeed an infinity—of conscious, enjoying, existing beings—or, to use the terminology of process thought, *actual entities*. The One *is* the many. And, of course, as we have already seen, in the process worldview, the many also become the one—though by "the one," Whitehead means not the totality of all existence, but each unitary actual entity, which includes all the others within itself through its relations with them.

Nirguṇa Brahman: Formless Creativity/Saguṇa Brahman: Informed Theocosm

Seeing Brahman from an eternal perspective, the perspective of its own nature, it is a unitary state of infinite being, consciousness, and bliss. But the very nature of these essential characteristics necessitates the manifestation of Brahman in—or rather, *as*—the space-time continuum and the multitude of varied beings therein. From the perspective of time and space, then—from our finite temporal perspective, that is—Brahman can be seen as a kind of inner necessity or dynamism in all things which sustains them in their existence and gives them a trajectory in the direction of the realization of infinite bliss and infinite consciousness. The Hindu tradition calls this internal dynamism within all things *Māyā*. Māyā is Brahman as perceived from the perspective of time and space, as well as that in Brahman which necessitates its manifestation *as* time and space.

This inner dynamism and trajectory towards the intensification of experience that characterizes all things, a trajectory involving the evolution of increasingly complex types of experience (like consciousness) and a drive towards beauty (the experience of which one could call "bliss") is called, in process thought, the principle of *creativity*. This is also another meaning of the Hindu term *Māyā*. The principle of creativity is the principle that, according to process thought, underlies all existence, potential and actual. In this function, therefore, as a metaphysical absolute, it would seem to correspond not only to Māyā, but also to Brahman itself. The first contribution of a Hindu process hermeneutics to the Hindu tradition is the insight that Brahman *is* creativity, an insight already implicit in Advaita Vedānta and Tāntric thought, but made explicit here.

Creativity, however, in process thought, is not, as Brahman is, at least in Advaita Vedānta, the sum total of all existence. Creativity is an abstract, eternal principle that *informs* all things. It is the fundamental principle of existence that underlies all forms; but it is, itself, formless. It is not conceived, in process thought, as an actual entity. In contrast with the entities that make up the universe of time and space, creativity, "can be called the *formless ultimate*," the "ultimate behind all forms."[31]

A process theologian, then, would not say that creativity *is*, like Brahman, all things. Brahman *is* creativity, but is not exhausted by it. A process Hindu theologian, it seems, would need to say that the sum total of reality—Brahman—contains within itself a formless aspect, corresponding to the process concept of creativity in the abstract, but that Brahman also possesses an aspect *with* form, corresponding to the universe of actual entities, Brahman's manifestation as the space-time continuum and the entities therein. But is such a postulation of a dual nature of Brahman warranted in the Hindu tradition?

In fact, Brahman, according to most forms of Vedānta, *does* have a dual nature. It possesses a *Nirguṇa* aspect and a *Saguṇa* aspect, corresponding to the aspects of reality in question. *Nirguṇa* literally means "without qualities"—Brahman as unqualified and unconditioned by any form or limitation. *Saguṇa*, in contrast, means "with qualities"—Brahman qualified by the limitations of time and space, the sum total of all actual entities.

Nirguṇa Brahman corresponds to Whitehead's understanding of creativity as non-actual and formless. Saguṇa Brahman corresponds to the two realities which Whitehead calls "the contrasted opposites in terms of which Creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjoined multiplicity, with its diversities in opposition, into concrescent unity, with its diversities in contrast"—namely, God and the World, or, to return to my earlier language, God and the universe.[32]

Because God and the world are conceived, in Vedānta and in process thought, as realities that necessitate one another, realities which, in Whitehead's terms, "stand to each other in mutual requirement," I suggest, as a term for referring to the joint entity that they together constitute, the word *theocosm*—the God-World complex; for no such term currently exists in Western thought (at least not to my knowledge). This Western, Greek term would correspond to the Vedāntic concept of Saguṇa Brahman, and allow for easier translation between Vedānta and Western philosophy. But apart from being dependent, in some respect, upon the world, what precisely is God in process thought? This was briefly summarized earlier, and shall now be discussed in greater detail.

Īśvara as Paramātman: God, the Soul of All Beings

The central doctrine of process thought is its doctrine of God. God is also central to most forms of Hinduism. But God, or Īśvara, and Brahman, at least according to most schools of Vedānta (the main exception being Dvaita, as noted earlier), are not identical. Like creativity, God is a subset of Brahman, which is the sum total of reality, the Whole. Brahman is generally conceived as ultimately impersonal—or, more accurately, beyond or encompassing both personal and impersonal qualities. Brahman is Being Itself. Īśvara, on the other hand, although the Supreme Being, is nevertheless *a* being, an inhabitant of the spatio-temporal realm—albeit the most important one, and the only metaphysically *necessary* one, without whom no possible world could exist. God, or Īśvara, is therefore dependent, ultimately, upon Brahman. God is a derivative reality from Brahman. This metaphysically derivative character is seen as being in no way in conflict with the absolutely central role which God plays in Hindu piety (though a Dvaitin would disagree).

The same is true of God in process thought. God is the pre-eminent exemplar of the principle of creativity, the one who makes creativity available to the other beings that make up the universe, mediating between the realms of form and formlessness. It is through God that unmanifest creativity—which we have identified here with Nirguṇa Brahman—becomes manifest creativity, or Māyā.

But God did not create creativity. God, in both Hinduism and process thought, is not a creator *ex nihilo*, as mentioned earlier. The inner logic of creativity, rather, has necessitates God. This is why Whitehead, in terms strikingly reminiscent of an Advaitic understanding of divinity, calls God a "derivative notion."[33] This apparent reduction, from the perspective of classical Christian theology, of the role of God—that is, a conception that makes God subject to, and indeed dependent upon, a logical necessity beyond the control of the divine will—is one of the primary reasons Christian theologians have given for rejecting process theology as incompatible with the Christian tradition. Even modern Christian theologians usually make God ultimate in all respects.[34]

But this same formulation places process thought squarely in the mainstream of Hindu thought, and gives Hindu thinkers all the more reason to be comfortable with process theology and with a process hermeneutics as a vehicle for the expression of an authentic Hindu self-understanding. Process thought is already very "Hindu."

But why is God necessary to process thought or to Vedānta? As Whitehead explains, the universe, as a closed system, a self-contained whole, without a creator or an imposition of order from outside—a conception of the universe that Whitehead calls "the doctrine of Immanence"–necessitates some *internal* principle of order that guarantees the universe will not slide into chaos and that creates the conditions for the very possibility of a universe:

> In fact, the Universe, as understood in accordance with the doctrine of Immanence, should exhibit itself as including a stable actuality whose mutual implication with the remainder of things secures an inevitable trend towards order.[35]

This "stable actuality" is what is meant by *God* in process theology.

It is important to point out that God, in both process thought and in Hinduism, is a being that is *internal* to all things, and is yet, at the same time, distinct from them.[36] Both systems could be called *panentheistic*. Panentheism is, of course, the belief, not that God *is* all beings (which is called pantheism), but that God is *in* all beings, and all beings, at the same time, are in God. All beings are Brahman, but all beings are not God. God is *in* all beings, at their deepest core, as their deepest, most authentic self, or *ātman*.

This view is expressed by Hindu thinkers like Swāmī Muktānanda, known for his expression, "God dwells in you as you." Swami Vivekānanda refers to God as "the soul of our souls,"[37] and another Vedāntic term for God is *paramātman*, or the Supreme Self, the Self or soul of all beings. The same panentheistic understanding is expressed in the *Bhagavad Gītā* when Bhagavān Sri Krishna says, "He who sees Me everywhere and sees all in Me, to him I am not lost, nor is he lost to Me."[38] It is from the *Gītā* that the often heard Hindu injunction is derived to "see God in all beings."

Though Hindus will often use language that sounds more literally pantheistic than panentheistic, this observation should be balanced by the equally valid observation that the distinction between deity and worshipper is absolutely vital to popular Hindu practice, like the performance of *pūjā*, or devotional worship addressed to a personal manifestation of God in a particular form, or *mūrti*—a practice decried for centuries by Muslims and Christians as idolatry. The God-World distinction is especially central to Vaiṣṇava traditions. It might be accurate to say that Hinduism as a whole, if one may generalize, sees God and the World as neither wholly distinct nor wholly identical, but as existing in symbiotic continuity. My invented term *theocosm* again comes to mind.

The concept of the relationship between the individual self and God in Hinduism, dating back at least to the *Upanishads*, is neither one of simplistic identification, nor of absolute separation. Living beings are depicted in such texts as the *Taittirīya Upanishad* as being made up of multiple layers or levels—the *kośas*—with the outermost, physical layer being the most changeable, the most superficial, and the inner layers being, as one progresses inward, successively more and more permanent, more and more real.[39] Even deeper than the physical self, for example, is the personality we have developed over the course of our experiences in this life—our habits, memories, predispositions, etc., known as our *saṃskāras*. But even deeper than this personality would be the traces of the personalities and memories that we carry in our subconscious minds—in our souls—from our previous lives. Going beyond even this level—and others, still more profound—God exists within and experiences through us from our fundamental core or center. A well-known metaphor for this divine indwelling is given in the *Bhagavad Gītā*: the metaphor of a string of pearls, with God dwelling within and connecting all beings just as the string connects the pearls that rest upon it. "On me all that is here is strung like pearls upon a thread."[40] This image of God dwelling within all beings is perfectly compatible with a process understanding of God influencing actual entities from within by providing them with their subjective aim at the initial phase of their concrescence.

Infinite Beings Seeking Infinite Consciousness and Bliss

Turning now, though, from the vast, cosmic scale of God and Being to the more modest scale of human existence, what is the meaning and purpose of life in the universe as conceived by a Hindu process theology? To summarize briefly what we have seen thus far, the sum total of all reality is conceived in Hinduism as Brahman. Creativity as unmanifest corresponds to the concept of Nirguṇa, or formless, Brahman. But manifest creativity, the manifestation of creativity as the propelling force underlying all things, corresponds to the concept of Māyā, or Śakti in the Śaiva and Śākta traditions. Finally, the totality of actual entities, including God, or Īśvara—the theocosm—corresponds to Saguṇa Brahman. In both Hindu and process thought, as we have seen, God is postulated as a necessary element of Saguṇa Brahman, a kind of bridge between the Nirguṇa and the Saguṇa realms of form and formlessness, respectively. God makes available to all beings the creative potentials which they have the ability to embody.

According to process thought, as mentioned earlier, an actual entity can only be related to another actual entity. In order for a universe to exist for more than a mere instant—and that by sheer chance—in order for it to have stability and continuity, an actual entity is necessary that is able to embody and present to the rest of the actual entities making up the universe the sum total of future possibilities that they are capable of actualizing. This necessary being is a necessary condition for the existence of any possible future. This necessary being is God. God's envisionment of possibilities at any given moment is called, in process thought, God's *primordial nature*.

But what is our role—we, the actual beings who make up the universe? Our role is to make Brahman, in actuality, what it is capable of becoming as a pure potentiality. Our role is to manifest the unmanifest: infinite being, infinite consciousness, and infinite bliss. In process terminology, our role is to evolve forms of experience capable of the potentially limitless enjoyment of potentially limitless beauty. God, in turn, by means of the divine relativity, or *consequent nature*, experiences all of this *through us.*

God's role in this cosmic process is to act as a center of universal consciousness, to coordinate the experiences of the many beings making up the universe such that they constitute a unity—a universe—to bring unity and order from the chaos of the multitude of individual decisions made by the actual entities at each new moment of the creative advance in response to the possibilities disclosed to them through the divine primordial nature. God already embodies infinite being, consciousness, and bliss, and by so doing lures us to do the same, and is the surest route, at any given moment, to our achievement of it. This is what Whitehead calls the "divine persuasion," and our harmonization with it would correspond to the Hindu concept of *bhakti*.[41] *Bhakti*, often translated simply as "devotion," is actually a mutual participation of being between God and the individual.

The situation from which we begin, however, as human beings, makes our role in the actualization, the ongoing creation and self-expression, of the universe far from self-evident. We do not always *feel* that the fundamental basis of our existence is a potential for infinite being, consciousness, and bliss. We do not always *feel bhakti*. We do not always *feel* like beings in whom God perpetually dwells, and whom God is perpetually calling, from the depths of our pre-conscious experience, to higher and higher levels of awareness and enjoyment. We feel, to use a term from the philosopher Heidegger (whose philosophy has many affinities with process thought), "thrown" into this world, with little or no sense of our purpose or of our connectedness, through God, with all other beings, save what our culture and our society give to us. We arrive into this world in a state of *avidyā*, or ignorance of our true nature and potential. This primal ignorance characterizes the existential condition of most ordinary human beings.

From this ignorance arises suffering—the fear of death, of losing oneself, which gives rise to the fear of losing one's loved ones, and one's property, whatever one sees as an extension of oneself, and so to fear, and eventually hatred, of the Other, whom one views as a threat—a fear and hatred fueled by ideologies like Hindutva. This is possible because we are unaware that God dwells within all beings, including ourselves.

But what is the cause of this ignorance? What is Hindu process theology's response to the problem of evil?

The fact of primordial spiritual ignorance, of *avidyā*, is a necessary side effect of the process by which Brahman is actualized, by which creative potential is transformed, through us and through God, through the beings making up the universe, into a spatio-temporal field of experience. Recall the earlier discussion of the problem raised by the nature of Brahman as both one and as infinite being, consciousness, and bliss. In order for the One to become fully—actually—what it already is in it eternity—in potential—in order for it to manifest its nature in time, it is necessary for the One to become the many, to take on the limitation of being a finite subject experiencing the finite objects of the spatio-temporal world.[42] Put another way, there can be no consciousness or bliss—much less infinite consciousness and bliss—without the experience of finitude. The purpose of our existence is to move from our current state of *avidyā*, ignorance, to *vidyā*, or wisdom, from the finite to the infinite—or, to again invoke the ancient prayer of the Vedic sages, from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality.

The fact that the nature of the creative process necessitates the state of "original ignorance" in which we find ourselves is expressed through the ambiguity of the term *Māyā*. Māyā, as we have already seen, is translatable as "creative power." But it is also translatable as "illusion." Māyā is the creativity that makes all of our strivings possible, but it is also, paradoxically, that which we are striving to overcome. The basic concept of Māyā is that the creative process by which God—Īśvara —coordinates the experiences of the entities constituting the world and guides them to the realization of their potential—the realization of Brahman—is also the process by which ignorance and darkness arise; for this process necessarily veils from us the true nature of reality. It is precisely by overcoming and learning to see through and beyond this veil that our true potential can be realized, our realization of the ultimate aim of all creativity, the actualization of infinite being, consciousness, and bliss.

A metaphor may be useful for grasping this concept. Imagine Brahman is an invisible man. It is only be wearing a mask and clothes that he can be seen. The mask and the clothes are not the man. They hide his true nature. But without them, he would remain invisible. The mask and clothes of Brahman are *Māyā*.

The invisibility of the man—Brahman's non-actuality, its Nirguṇa nature, its formless form—is what necessitates the clothes—or Māyā—that make his shape manifest. The clothes, however, do not *create* the man's form. This invisible form is ontologically prior to the clothes that make it manifest. But in our experience, both are mutually dependent. As far as our eyes are concerned, there would be no form of the man if the clothes were not there to make it evident to us. In the same way, we can only reach Brahman through Māyā—a conclusion which places a process interpretation of Hinduism quite close to the Tāntric tradition, as does its emphasis on the immanence and the non-omnipotence of divinity.

Māyā, as creative power, has a purpose—the coordination of the experiences of the entities making up the world such that they can eventually realize their true nature and experience the infinite consciousness and bliss that is their ultimate destiny. This, of course, is the function of God, and it is through Māyā that God performs this function. Māyā is God's creative power—a common theme found throughout the Hindu scriptures, across a wide array of sectarian boundaries. Through Māyā, God manifests a world of regularities–universal laws or *dharmas*–like the laws of physics, or the laws of morality.

The fundamental principle of regularity on which Māyā operates is the principle of action, or *Karma*. Karma can be understood as the sum total of the effects of all of the previous actions undertaken by the entities constituting the universe—including our own past selves, both immediate and distant—and the future effects that we are currently creating with our present choices, our present actions. Karma, one could say, is an extension of creativity—the creativity in which we, ourselves, with our decisions, have a share.

The idea that one sometimes finds in the Hindu tradition that karma is an inexorable law, which even God must respect, fits well with the process doctrine of the non-omnipotence of God—that God coordinates and persuades, but that the power of decision of the actual entities is inviolable.

But the retributive nature of karma is also compatible with God's coordinative activity operating in such a way as to aid us maximally in our efforts toward self-realization, with the idea of life as a classroom, in which we learn from our experiences, which guide us, gradually, toward our goal. By engaging in activity, by making choices, by exercising our freedom, we gradually learn, through trial and error, the deep truths of existence. God's coordinating action and our free will cooperate to produce the optimal result. A similar concept is found in the Śaiva *Āgama* literature, in its doctrine of divine grace, or *karuṇā*, as summarized by S.N. Dasgupta:

> Ordinarily the idea of grace or *karuṇā* would simply imply the extension of kindness or favour to one in distress. But in the *Śaivagamas* there is a distinct line of thought where *karuṇā* or grace is interpreted as a divine creative movement for supplying all souls with fields of experience in which they may enjoy pleasures and suffer painful experiences. The *karuṇā* of God reveals the world to us in just the manner as we ought to experience it. Grace, therefore, is not a work of favour in a general sense, but it is a movement in favour of our getting the right desires in accordance with our *karma*. Creative action of the world takes place in consonance with our good and bad deeds, in accordance with which the various types of experience unfold themselves to us. In this sense, grace may be compared to the Yoga philosophy, which admits a permanent will of God operating in the orderliness of the evolutionary creationṇ̄for the protection of the world, and supplying it as the basis of human experience in accordance with their individual *karmas*.[43]

According to Hindu thought, the process of spiritual evolution can take an entity many lifetimes—and the compatibility of this doctrine of rebirth, or *punarjanma*, with process thought is something that David Ray Griffin, among others, has affirmed.[44] In process thought, the soul is a serially or "personally" ordered society, or sequence, of actual entities that inherit experiences from one another in succession, and is capable of non-corporeal existence. The process of rebirth—literally "wandering about"—through which the soul gradually realizes its true nature and purpose is called *Saṃsāra*.

Mokṣa: Liberation

The ultimate goal of most Hindu religious practice, and certainly of Vedānta, is *Mokṣa*, or liberation from Saṃsāra, from the process of wandering from rebirth to rebirth in search of one's true self.

This, of course, naturally raises the question frequently asked by my students, namely, "What happens next?" What is the fate of an entity who has escaped the process of rebirth? The answer to this question varies a great deal within the Hindu tradition, depending on which system of belief and practice one consults.

In Advaita Vedānta, which emphasizes the "illusion" part of the concept of Māyā, and claims that Nirguṇa Brahman is ultimately all that there is, liberation from rebirth involves a loss of personal identity—or rather, a realization that one never had a separate personal identity to begin with (also a strong theme of Buddhism). From the perspective of time and space—which is, from the point of view of Advaita, a deluded perspective—the liberated soul, in effect, ceases to exist. The more dualistic, theistic, and devotional schools, however, such as those that are part of the Vaiṣṇava tradition, envision liberation as a loving union with divinity. They even speak of a heavenly afterworld—called Vaikunṭha—in which the liberated soul lives forever enjoying the infinite beauty of God, not unlike the Heaven of Christianity or the Paradise of Islam.

From a process perspective, I would postulate that liberation would mean taking part with God, as a fully conscious participant, in the never-ending creative process of the actualization of infinite being, consciousness, and bliss in the universe. Much like in Mahāyāna Buddhism, as articulated in the writings of Nāgārjuna, as well as the Tāntric tradition, the distinction between Saṃsāra and Liberation, on this understanding, is not so much an ontological difference between two different realms, but a revolution in the consciousness of the liberated being. When one is liberated from Saṃsāra, we could say, one does not thereby "go" anywhere. One, rather, is transformed *within* the realm of Saṃsāra, which, for oneself, becomes a qualitatively different kind of realm.

A being "in Saṃsāra" is subject to Karma—which on a process understanding means that such a being is minimally free with regard to the collective influences of the past. Such a being, unaware of its interconnections with all other beings, or perhaps only dimly so, can be seen as a perpetual victim, an *object* of experience. Life happens *to* such a being. But a liberated being, having attained a higher degree of cognizance of the causal relations between past and present—and the potentials for the future existing in the present—becomes a master of the karmic process.

What does this mean? Rather than drowning again and again in the ocean of Saṃsāra, such a being learns to surf the waves of cosmic consciousness. In tune with the divine will—perhaps through meditation, or some other yogic or devotional practice—as well as with her fellow beings, the liberated master becomes a conscious co-participant with God in the unfolding of the divine vision of creative potential, an instrument of God in the world. God acts *through* such a being. For such a liberated being, God becomes, as the *Gītā* says, the only true doer of action, and the ultimate enjoyer of its results. Such a being has, in effect, merged with God—not ontologically, but their *wills* have become one.

Such a conception of liberated beings as still active within the universe allows for a robust sense of polytheism in a Hindu process theology. The numerous devatās of Hinduism are conceivable as liberated souls, going about the work of the Supreme, not unlike the celestial Bodhisattvas and cosmic Buddhas of Mahāyāna Buddhism, who work spontaneously for the welfare of all beings.

Religious Pluralism

A pluralistic approach to religious practice and expressions of truth can be seen to be a natural corollary of the Hindu process worldview as I have outlined it here. I have already had occasion to mention the internal diversity of Hinduism—the great variety of approaches to and conceptions of ultimate reality present within the Hindu tradition. The validity of this diversity is confirmed by a process Hindu hermeneutics.

If variety is acceptable within Hinduism, both in theory and in practice—if all the paths that exist within the tradition are viewed as equally "Hindu," despite their particular theological differences—then it does not take much of a logical leap to conclude that religious variety in general is acceptable, that a variety of approaches to ultimate reality may be possible. Such variety is affirmed, for example, in the classical Hindu doctrine of the four *yogas*, or spiritual disciplines, of action (*karma*), wisdom (*jñāna*), and devotion (*bhakti*), with Patāñjali's eight-limbed, or *aṣṭāṅga* yoga, also known as the royal or *rājā* yoga, as the fourth. Each corresponds to a different temperament. And we have already seen pluralism affirmed in modern Hinduism.

Specific to a process Hindu theology, moreover, is its conception of a variety of ultimate realities—the impersonal principle of creativity, the personal deity, and the universe of actual entities. These could be seen to correspond to the ultimate realities of different types of religion, without reducing these ultimates to one: the impersonal principle to that of the contemplative *jñāna* paths like Advaita Vedānta and Theravāda Buddhism, God to the Gods of the devotional, theistic religions of the world, and the universe of actual entities to the sacred cosmos of indigenous nature-oriented religions. Hinduism, on this understanding, is a microcosm reflecting the religious diversity of the entire world, just as an actual entity, on a Whiteheadian understanding, is the "one" in whose nature is reflected "the many."[45]

Conclusion

In a Hindu process theology, Nirguṇa Brahman is unmanifest creativity. Saguṇa Brahman is both God and the entities making up the world—what I have called the theocosm. Īśvara, or God, is essentially God as conceived in process thought—the bridge between unmanifest creative potential and the world. Māyā is manifest creativity, creativity in its role as limiting factor, giving rise to limited, finite beings precisely so the infinite can thereby be realized. Karma is the regularity, the "inevitable trend towards order" that the divinely coordinated universe exhibits by the divine power of Māyā.

Saṃsāra is the process of rebirth, of wandering through the karmically ordered universe and learning from one's experiences until one reaches Mokṣa, which is a state characterized by a true understanding of the interdependence of all beings, including their mutual implication with divine existence, a conscious participation in the divine creative process. In the state of Mokṣa, one becomes, consciously and joyfully, what one has always been unconsciously (and not so joyfully)—a co-creator, with God, in the ongoing unfoldment of the universe.

This, of course, is all highly experimental and preliminary. But through such an experiment, and further, future elaborations thereon, it is hoped that the Hindu tradition can begin to articulate its vision of reality with a greater clarity to the wider world, and to draw out its implications of respect for both the diversity and the interdependence, as well as the potential divinity—the divine, cosmic, or *theocosmic* consciousness—of all beings.

By way of conclusion, then, I would re-affirm my original proposal. Hinduism has a great potential to act as a model for imagining a harmony and a unity-in-diversity of the religions and the peoples of the world. It contains the conceptual tools for articulating a pluralistic model of truth and religious diversity that balances these two—truth and diversity—without reducing the many to the one. I have simply used process thought to highlight and bring out this already present potential and to translate it into the conceptual terminology of the modern Western world.[46]

NOTES

[1] In this essay, I have used diacritical marks, where appropriate, in translating Indic words and names, except in cases in which a name is frequently found in English without such marks (like Mahatma Gandhi, Vishnu, and the *Upanishads*).
[2] David Frawley (Vamadeva Shastri), *Hinduism and the Clash of Civilizations* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 2001), pp. 170-179.
[3] Cited in Glyn Richards, ed., *A Source-Book of Modern Hinduism* (Curzon Press, 1985), p. 65.
[4] Ibid, pp. 156, 157.
[5] Many such antecedents could be cited—from the *Ṛg Veda* to the *Bhagavad Gītā* to the universalist *bhakti* poets of the late medieval period, such as Kabir and Guru Nanak.
[6] Speaking in particular from a Vedāntic perspective, a strong case can be made that the practices that lead to *Mokṣa*, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth, are conceived in the premodern tradition as available universally to all human beings who are desirous of liberation. An excellent argument to this effect is made with respect to Advaita Vedānta by Roger Marcaurelle in his study of Śaṅkara, *Freedom through Inner Renunciation* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000).
[7] Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), p. 18.
[8] V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva* (New Delhi: Hindi Sahitya Sadan, 2003), pp. 83-131.
[9] Though the premodern tradition, as Marcaurelle argues, would accept the idea of yogic experience, and the liberation arising therefrom, as available to all who would be willing to undertake the requisite disciplines, the conception of Vedic scripture as the *product* of such experiences, rather than as the ultimate *norm* in terms of which all such experience is to be evaluated, is thoroughly modern.
[10] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New Press, 2002).
[11] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Corrected Edition) (New York: The Free Press, 1978—first published in 1929), p. 15.
[12] Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967—first published in 1933), p. 172.
[13] Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Cambridge and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990).
[14] Savarkar, p. 141.
[15] Jeffery D. Long, *Plurality and Relativity: Whitehead, Jainism, and the Reconstruction of Religious Pluralism* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 2000).
[16] Satguru Shivaya Subramuniyaswami, *Merging with Shiva: Hinduism's Contemporary Metaphysics* (Himalayan Academy, 1999), p. 1186.
[17] Cited in Richards, p. 55.
[18] Ibid.
[19] David Ray Griffin, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 279.
[20] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Young India: 1919-1931* (Vol. VIII, 1926) (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1981), p. 30.
[21] Whitehead 1978, p. 21.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid, p. 31.
[24] Ibid.
[25] *Chandogya Upanishad* 6:1.
[26] *Asato mā sad gamaya, tamaso mā jyotir gamaya, mṛtyor mā-amṛtam gamaya*.
[27] *Bṛhadaraṇyaka Upanishad* 2:5.
[28] Ibid.

[29] *Chandogya Upanishad* 6:2.
[30] Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *Vedānta: A Simple Introduction* (Hollywood: Vedānta Press, 1999), p. 2.
[31] Griffin, p. 261 and Whitehead 1978, p. 20.
[32] Whitehead 1978, p. 348. It is important to note that Whitehead conceives of creativity in terms of the resolution of multiplicity into unity, within the being of a single actual entity—which is what he means when he says "the one"—whereas the Hindu tradition tends to come from the opposite direction—beginning with an original metaphysical unity and moving from there to the universe of perceived multiplicity. The idea that the East begins from within, with the essence of a thing, and moves from there to the empirical reality, from the abstract to the particular, and that the West begins with the perceived reality and moves from there to a generalized ultimate unity, from the particular to the abstract, is one way of characterizing the difference in philosophical styles between the West and India. To the degree that this is a valid observation (albeit all such generalizations have important exceptions—e.g. Plato—and run the risk of becoming stereotypical), the correspondences between Hindu and process thought that I am outlining in this essay support a case, I think, for the Hindu idea that many paths can lead to the same truth, and that the path one takes, the path that is most appropriate for one, depends upon one's starting point—that, regardless of our starting points, we can still end up reaching the same conclusion.
[33] Ibid, p. 31.
[34] Paul Tillich, for example, famously identifies God with "Being Itself"—a role reserved in process thought for creativity, God being, instead, the Supreme Being. The trend of much recent non-process Christian theology, such as the work of Bishop Spong, has accordingly been towards a depersonalization of God, which is arguably even less orthodox, from a traditional Christian perspective, than process thought!
[35] Whitehead 1967, p. 115. The importance of what Whitehead calls the "doctrine of Immanence," in contrast with classical Christian and Islamic notions of the universe as wholly dependent upon an external reality for it existence, is that only such a doctrine of can guarantee the coherence of a metaphysical system. As Whitehead says elsewhere, "God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification." Whitehead 1978, p. 343.
[36] It is significant that the name of one of the most important Hindu deities, Vishnu, means, literally, "the pervader," "the one who pervades all things."
[37] This phrase is Swāmī Vivekānanda's gloss on *Kena Upanishad* v. 4.
[38] *Bhagavad Gītā* 6:30, translation of Sri Aurobindo.
[39] *Taittirīya Upanishad* 2:1-5.
[40] *Bhagavad Gītā* 7:7, translation of Sri Aurobindo.
[41] Whitehead 1967, p. 160.
[42] The language of "becoming" and "taking on" of finitude does not imply a temporal process—that there was a "beginning" when there was only the One, after which the One "became" the many. Though the tradition utilizes anthropomorphic—and so necessarily temporal—language and imagery to describe it, this process of divine unfoldment occurs at each and every moment.
[43] Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy, Volume V* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975—first published in 1922), p. 4.
[44] See David Ray Griffin, *Parapsychology, Philosophy, and Spirituality: A Postmodern Exploration* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).
[45] The pluralistic implications of a Hindu process theology are more thoroughly explored in my essay "Anekānta Vedānta: Toward a Deep Hindu Religious Pluralism in *Deep Religious Pluralism,* edited by David Ray Griffin (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005)

and make up the main theme of my forthcoming book, *Pluralistic Hinduism: Seeking Unity in Diversity* (I.B. Tauris, 2006).

[46] Portions of this essay, specifically parts of those sections in which I outline a Hindu process theology, appear in another essay of mine entitled "A Whiteheadian Vedanta: Outline of a Hindu Process Theology" in *Process Theology: A Handbook*, edited by Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman (forthcoming from Chalice Press). My argument that modern Hinduism has more resonances with process thought than with Advaita, which draws upon the works and experiences of Swāmī Dayānanda Sarāswatī, Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and Mahatma Gandhi, appears in summary form in my aforementioned essay "Anekānta Vedānta: Toward a Deep Hindu Religious Pluralism" in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, edited by David Ray Griffin (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). Both are included with permission.