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Book Review: *Public Hinduisms*

George Pati
Valparaiso University

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for their work and hopeful that human compassion will be increased by their analytic efforts that are ultimately in service of the least ones.

Michael McLaughlin
Saint Leo University

***Public Hinduisms.* John Zavos, Pralay Kanungo, Deepa S. Reddy, Maya Warriar, and Raymond Brady Williams, editors. New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2012, 507 pp.**

THE volume *Public Hinduisms* is a compendium of essays that demonstrate various aspects of contemporary Hinduism as a religion being continuously produced and challenged in a variety of public spaces. More significantly, the two issues under consideration are the relationship between Hinduism as practiced in India and diaspora, and the shaping influence of public spaces on Hinduisms. Despite the different topics on public Hinduisms discussed from different perspectives in this text, all the essays articulate the variety of Hinduisms represented in different contexts shaped by different public spaces. It is the different perspectives of the contributors that make the volume valuable. The volume is organized into five sections all edited by a co-editor of the volume: *Researching Public Hinduisms* by John Zavos; *Ecumenical Constructions* by Raymond Brady Williams; *Traditions and Transformations* by Maya Warriar; *Community Mobilisation* by Pralay Kanungo; and *Mediating Hinduisms* by Deepa S. Reddy. Through the excellent collection of essays authors present Hinduism as a “dynamic and engaged part of a complex social environment or habitat,”

emphasizing the heterogeneity of Hinduism in the diverse public spaces it is practiced (pp.17).

The essays in the first section provide a methodological framework to comprehend various representations of Hinduism in its varied social and political contexts at home and diaspora by highlighting the importance of asking how ideas of Hinduism are constructed in different contexts (John Zavos, “Researching Public Hinduisms”). Such an inquiry can be fruitful when one understands the binary distinction of practitioner and scholar, insider and outsider, as more practitioners read and respond to scholarly works as illustrated by Maya Warriar in her essay on “Engaging the Practitioner.” Warriar argues that as challenging as it may seem, new paradigms have to be generated based on dialogue between the scholar and practitioner rethinking theoretical concepts, analytical categories, insider-outsider divisions, and facilitate a better understanding of, and respect for the other (pp.53-4). Along the same thought, Shana Shippy in her essay “Will the Real Mango Please Stand Up?” delves on the issue of who has the right to represent Hinduism through her transnational discussion

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of Hinduism. Raymond Brady Williams in his reflection draws attention to the two realms of discourse—practitioner and academic scholar, and argues that for understanding critically representations of Hinduisms the lines between practitioner and academic scholar must be maintained (pp.61).

The four essays in the second section focus on recent ecumenical constructions of Hinduism in diverse national contexts intertwined with umbrella Hindu organizations. These umbrella Hindu organizations, especially, in the context of Britain, are related to multiculturalism functioning as “translation institutions” (pp.86) employing “Hindu views” to shape public sphere and by that extension to represent Hinduism. Prema Kurien in her essay, “What is American about American Hinduism? Hindu Umbrella Organizations in the United States in Comparative Perspective,” argues that the development and articulation of public Hinduism in the US has been shaped by the American historico-socio-religio-political context and migration patterns, and in the context of Hindu American mobilization, Hindu umbrella organizations serve as a way of portraying Hinduism distinctive of the Hinduism depicted in academia and among scholars of South Asia. Pralay Kanungo examines the operation of Vivekananda Kendra and highlights how the Kendra has fostered Hindu ecumenism while promoting Hindu nationalism. A similar pattern can be observed in Chad Bauman’s chapter on Sathya Sai Baba center at Indianapolis, IN, in Midwestern America as he argues “Sai’s *semiotic flexibility*,” because “Sai means many things to many people” and despite the differences, the lack of semantic rigidity facilitates the formation of a

coherent and supportive community (pp. 142). But such coherency can be observed in the Hindu identity formation in North America, and the public discourse has produced “syndicated Hinduism,” as Balmurli Natrajan accentuates (pp.164).

The essays in the third section discuss *gurus* and *guru*-centered organizations that deploy various modern organization and technological means to construct, interpret, and transmit religious meanings and values to followers in India and abroad and by that extension represent different identity and public self-representation in contemporary India’s transnational landscape. For example, despite the diversity within the Swaminarayan *sampradaya*, in the transnational context, it portrays a clear “Hindu identity” through the construction and maintenance of religious and ethnic identity, as Raymond Brady Williams contends. On the other hand, the Shirdi Sai Baba movement as a “spiritual” movement propels religious tolerance and brotherhood and remains syncretistic in Indian public sphere, as Karline McLain proves. Such representation of Hindu identity posits a challenge regarding authenticity. In this regard, Kiyokazu Okita sheds light on the Madhva *sampradaya* in comparison with that of ISKCON and articulates that the Madhva *sampradaya* claims itself to be more authentic, as it transformed their tradition by democratizing and challenging ISKCON’s claims to belong to Madhva lineage. Such themes of authenticity and creating a Hindu identity resonate in Gérard Toffin’s analysis of Krishna Pranami sect (Nijananda *sampradaya*), a *bhakti* reform movement close in India and Nepal. Toffin argues that despite the “Pranamis’

universalistic theology,” national boundaries are maintained within the sect (pp. 234).

The fourth section throws light on yet another aspect of Hinduism in the public sphere, that is, community mobilization. Community Hindu mobilization becomes apparent in different sites involving multiple agencies in India and diaspora context. Tanika Sarkar argues that Hindutva mobilizes Hindus not on the basis of Hindu religiosity but through discourses and spectacles of communal violence as “war becomes worship, the new ritual” (pp. 278), and though Hindutva distances itself from Hindu religiosity, it deploys Hindu faith to construct Hindu identity. Namrata Ganneri and Atreyee Sen demonstrate mobilization of women within the Rashtra Sevika Samithi, a women’s affiliate of the RSS comprised of upper-and middle class/caste women, and the women’s group affiliated with Shiv Sena, consisting of lower-class/caste women, beyond the confines of their home and connecting them to a history of Hindu nationalism through iconization in Mumbai. Arun Chaudhuri highlights that American Hindu activism focuses on American Hindus and nationalism and transnationalism theoretical dynamics form the substratum of “ideological continuity” between India and diaspora (pp. 341). Rita Khandhuri observed Hindu mobilization in the growing popularity of images of Hindu deities, games, and etc. in the United States. Here, of significance is, as Deepa S. Reddy argues, that transnational Hindutva takes shape at the nexus of multiculturalism and Indian/Hindu community in India and elsewhere, “the space that multiculturalism opens up for the forthright expression of religious certainties is equally a space where ‘representations’ circulate and

grievances about ‘misrepresentations are routinely aired” (pp. 314).

The fifth section articulates mediating of contemporary Hindu devotional praxis through process of re-situation, reinterpretation, and transposition of religious and political issues to new media changing the associative ecology (pp.367). Such associative ecology can be observed in Veronique Bouillier’s discussion of Nath Yogis, where old *sampradaya* adopt some modernist religious trends, an eclectic practice pattern. Gwilym Beckerlegge highlights the use of media and technologies among the Ramakrishna Math to represent itself and Hinduism as a “universal form” in the public sphere. Another representation in the public can be understood, as Hanna Kim contends, in the pragmatic approach BAPS Swaminarayan temple organization follows on a politics of flexibility, and, as Christiane Brosius argues, the use of “globalized ethno-media” plays a vital role in the very existence of BAPS, as it emphasizes the “idea of *sampradaya* as a transnational ecumenical community” (pp.437; 460). Maya Warriar argues that ISKCON in the UK repositions Hinduism in the multicultural context and represents a “respectable” and *brahmanised* and Sanskritized version of Hinduism that suits the goals of ISKCON and Religious Educators in UK schools at the cost of marginalizing many Hindu realities (pp. 484).

Through this detailed study of representations of Hinduisms in the public spheres the contributors successfully provide the readers with a better understanding of Hinduism in its native as well as diaspora contexts, emphasizing the complexity and diversity in Hinduism. By focusing our attention on the various representations of Hinduism in the public sphere, the volume

certainly elicits further dialogue and productive debate in the public sphere.

George Pati
Valparaiso University

Journal of Vaishnava Studies 20.2 (Spring 2012). Steven J. Rosen and Graham M. Schweig, senior editors.

THE *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* has produced a fine volume of interfaith reflection that covers fifteen years of Vaishnava/Christian dialogue, most of which has taken place at an annual conference at Rockwood Manor in Potomac, Maryland. This volume is an edited anthology. Brief reviews of edited anthologies, such as this one, present certain difficulties to the reviewer, since each article cannot be treated equally or even fairly. I will proceed by providing an overview of the anthology, then addressing some (for me) salient articles in the volume. Naturally, the salience of these few articles has to do with my own personal interests. The volume itself is remarkably even.

The anthology is divided into three parts. Introductory articles explain the genesis and nature of the annual Vaishnava/Christian conference in Maryland, as well as the theological and ethical motivations for the dialogue. The second section offers some exemplary presentations from those conferences and is more academic and theological in nature. Finally, the last section presents participants' spiritual experience of the dialogue—how it transformed their understanding of the divine, of the religious other, and themselves. The last section is perhaps the most interesting since such heartfelt, honest, autobiographical reflections rarely seep into our academic thinktanks.

One of the great benefits of such an anthology is the variety of methods used. The

authors variously emphasize scripture, theology, experience, imagery, conversation, and friendship. Most articles present a Vaishnava or Christian perspective, but some are internally comparative. Some are academic and erudite, others deeply personal. The multiple approaches allow the reader to compare and contrast methods. Perhaps more importantly, they allow the reader to discover the importance of a variety of approaches. The collection is eclectic, and its success lies in its eclecticism.

In the Introduction, Steven Rosen talks about the origins of the Vaishnava/Christian dialogue in Maryland and the decision by *JVS* to produce an edited volume celebrating the first fifteen years of the conference. In the Prologue, Francis X. Clooney discusses his own conversion to comparison as a young teacher in Kathmandu, and the transformative effect that comparison has had on his academic and spiritual life. John Borelli confesses the Roman Catholic call to dialogue with the religious other through historical, doctrinal, and documentary (primarily *Nostra Aetate*) arguments.

Anuttama Dasa is the North American Director of Communications for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and the principal initiator of the annual conference, so I would like to consider his entry more lengthily. In his article "Thoughts on the Vaishnava-Christian