Book Review: Hindu Pluralism: Religion and the Public Sphere in Early Modern India

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BOOK REVIEWS


The discipline of Hindu-Christian Studies is arguably premised on the existence of “Hinduism” and “Christianity” as discrete, interpretable realities. The basis of this premise has been complicated of late by disputes about the historical integrity of Hinduism prior to its encounter with colonial Christianity. Andrew Nicholson’s monograph _Unifying Hinduism_ (Columbia, 2010) marks an inflection in this debate, excavating an emerging, differentiated sense of Vedic unity in the late medieval and early modern doxographies of various scholastic traditions. In the last decade, the collaborative efforts of Valerie Stoker, Anand Venkatkrishnan, Ajay Rao, Yigal Bronner and others have brought further definition to this fertile period of Hindu self-definition. Elaine Fisher’s _Hindu Pluralism_ belongs securely to this body of scholarship, as well as engaging in direct comparison at several key points in its argument.

In content, _Hindu Pluralism_ traces the consolidation of Śmārta-Śaivism, or Tamil Brahminism, as one of several overlapping, contested “sectarian publics” (19) in early modern Madurai. The chief protagonist in the narrative is the seventeenth-century poet and Śaiva theologian Nilakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, and the high point of its development is the _Tiruviḷaiyāṭal Purāṇam_ (TVP), or “Sacred Games of Śiva,” a local epic (sthalapurāṇa) that proliferated in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit variants and deeply marked the public architecture and calendrical festivities associated with Madurai’s great Mīnākṣi-Sundaresvara Temple. Chapter 1 traces the emergence of Śaivism from a fully independent tradition that rejected the Vedas and significant Brahminical institutions into one of several competing Vedic “sects,” fully integrated with the theology of Advaita Vedānta, between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. This process of transformation culminates in the great Advaita works of Appaya Dīkṣita and Appaya’s grandnephew, Nilakaṇṭha. The next two chapters treat the writings of Nilakaṇṭha and selected contemporaries in more detail to trace the contours of their sectarian community, both in its internal, deep imbrication with the Advaita Śāṅkarācārya lineages of Sringeri and Kanchipuram and the esoteric practice of Śrīvidyā goddess worship (Chapter 2) and in its external contestation with rival schools through a shared framework of religious philology and sectarian identity-markers (Chapter 3).

Chapter 4, the longest in the volume, focuses directly on the _TVP_, including its initial provenance among Tamil literary elites, its sudden explosion in multiple vernaculars in the seventeenth century, and its eventual prominence in popular and material cultures of Madurai.

Through her painstaking reading and analysis of a range of manuscript traditions—many of them unpublished—Fisher successfully illustrates not merely “the historical facticity of the Śmārta tradition,”...
but also “the process of its emergence” in precolonial late modernity (189). This is an impressive achievement by itself, but embedded in the historical narrative are two additional, constructive claims likely to be of interest to readers of this journal. First, *Hindu Pluralism* undertakes a sophisticated comparative engagement of “public” as an interpretive category across Christian and Hindu intellectual histories. Notwithstanding the volume’s subtitle, Fisher questions whether any conception of a single, purportedly a-religious “public sphere” can be sustained outside the Western context. Instead, in precolonial South India, one discovers multiple publics, each defined by its “internal coherence” as a discrete “meaning-making system” (13, citing Niklas Luhmann). Though mutually independent, these publics nevertheless interpenetrate one another through vital, “intersectarian” (105) contestation across a shared scriptural canon and shared rules of philosophical debate. There is a real unity in this emergent pattern of “Hindu” or “Vaidika” identity, Fisher contends, but it is a “unity qualified at its core by plurality” (48).

This distinctively Hindu imaginary of overlapping sectarian publics in early modernity, in turn, shapes what Fisher suggests is “a genuinely emic religious pluralism, one that is neither founded upon universalism or exclusivism, nor modeled as a modular transplant of European civil society” (193). This second constructive claim is developed allusively, by anecdote rather than primarily by argument. The “Hindu pluralism” of the volume’s title is illustrated by one research informant, described in the introduction, who views initiation into Śaiva tradition as an independent religious marker, one that rests as easily on a Christian devotee as a Hindu one (1-2). It is captured by Nilakaṇṭha’s comfort with authoring a manual on Śrīvidyā esoteric practice for internal consumption, while also contending fiercely for such public markers of orthodox Śaivism as the *tripuṇḍra* or three lines of ash on the forehead. It receives popular expression in the short aphorism, “A Vaiṣṇava in public, a Śaiva in the home, a Śakta in the heart” (136).

If Fisher is less than fully convincing on this score, this may stem less from any particular weakness in her argument than from her interpretive perspective as an historian rather than a theologian, and the simple limits of what one can accomplish in a single monograph. The argument itself coheres quite well with those advanced more systematically by other scholars, notably by Muthuraj Swamy in *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue* (Bloomsbury, 2016). In *Hindu Pluralism*, Fisher’s constructive claims take second place to her efforts to bring out a neglected history of early modern Smārta-Śaivism and its vital role in the construction of modern and contemporary Hinduism. The detailed textual studies of Chapters 2-4 are not for the faint of heart, but they amply reward patient engagement. Given the book’s open access through UC Press’s Luminos publishing program, moreover, there is no reason why Fisher’s study should not become a widely shared point of reference for scholars and advanced graduate students in Hinduism, South Asian Studies and the Theory of Religion.

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