

Challenging Advaitic and Universalist Notions of Hinduism

by

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the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Within the academic study of Hinduism, there is a tendency to misrepresent Indian religion by portraying it as entirely Advaita Vedānta, the monistic ideology commonly associated with Śāṅkara. By looking at reasons for Advaita Vedānta's popularity as well as the history of Vaiṣṇavism, this paper will challenge claims that Hinduism is best represented by Advaita Vedānta. Ultimately, what I find is that Hinduism is better used as a broad category for the varieties of diverse Indian religious expression, rather than as a single unified ideology that defines itself in terms of Advaita Vedānta.

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1. Introduction: Problematizing Academic Notions of Hinduism

Within the academic study of religion, Indian religions have largely become subsumed under the category of Hinduism, which itself has come to be viewed a singular religion, often through a Universalist lens. It has also been viewed through the lens of the modern doctrine of Advaita Vedānta, the monistic philosophy commonly associated with Śaṅkara. This doctrine of Advaita Vedānta also later became identified as consistent with the Universalist notion that all forms of religious expression ultimately had the same goal and end, which in turn perpetuated Universalistic notions of Hinduism.

However, such depictions of Hinduism are problematic for a number of reasons. First of all, Hinduism itself is a recent construction that was motivated by the need for national unity during Muslim and British occupation within India. Therefore, the attempt to render Hinduism into a single unified category is problematic because it fails to account for the diverse nature of Indian religion prior to the construction of Hinduism. Additionally, many elements of Universalism have been read into Hinduism due to European influence during its construction, even though this doesn't accurately depict the various Indian religions that get subsumed under Hinduism. Moreover, though Advaita Vedānta has been seen as the predominant Hindu ideology, much of Advaita Vedānta's popularity has been acquired only recently due to the emergence of Neo-Vedānta, which developed as a means of unifying Indians against the British during their rule in the India. Therefore, the current popularity of Advaita Vedānta does not reflect the actual position of Advaita Vedānta in India's religious history prior to the 19th century. Furthermore, the

current understanding of Advaita Vedānta, Neo-Vedānta, departs radically from the original doctrine, thus problematizing the idea that Advaita Vedānta speaks for Hinduism since the recent manifestation of it fails to maintain any continuity with its predecessor. Lastly, the idea that Indians throughout history have unanimously held on to the beliefs of something like Advaita Vedānta is also wrong, which is exemplified by adherents of Vaiṣṇavism, whose views are often contrast those of Advaita Vedānta.

This thesis will analyze India's religious history to illustrate the various problems present in depicting Hinduism through a Universalist lens and identifying it with the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta. Current views on Hinduism see it as one unified religion where most adherents have the same worldview though manifest it differently. My reading of history will show that these notions of Hinduism require a serious, critical reevaluation. Though Neo-Vedānta and Universalism speak for Hinduism and consequently Indian religions today, they certainly don't represent Indian religions as they have existed throughout history. The actual history of India reveals that its religious landscape differs greatly from what it is perceived of as today. I will argue that we as scholars should view Hinduism as a broader term for the varieties of religious expression in India, which contains many sects and groups whose groups can differ dramatically from one another.

This thesis will also illustrate the dangers our preconceived notions have on our representations of Indian religion. When we view Hinduism in a particular way, our ability to critically study Hinduism is obscured because we will try to look at our religions of study in the way we think they operate instead of how they actually operate.

This in turn perpetuates our faulty preconceived notions and further distances us from being able to accurately study religions.

2. The History of Hinduism and Issues With Its Construction

2.1 The Initial Construction of Hinduism as a Response to Muslim Rule In India

To understand the concept of current Universalist models of Hinduism and why they are problematic, it's important to see how Hinduism developed as a category for Indian religions. The significance of Hinduism as a category in any terms, however we understand it, is that it is an attempt to situate India as if it were one unified nation or polity. Most scholarship locates the initial construction of Hinduism as a general category for India in relationship to Muslim rule in India. The classification of Hinduism itself is not a native term. It is a recent construct that was first used by the Persians, who used the term to classify the people of India, and they derived the term from the word "Hindoo," which itself is a Persian variant of the Sanskrit *sindhu*, referring to the Indus River. In fact, Hindus themselves didn't start to use the word themselves until the 15th and 16th centuries (King 1999, 98-99).

Only when there was a need for a unified Indian identity during the invasion of the Muslims in the 15th and 16th centuries was there a push from within Indian polities to use the term "Hinduism" as a way to distinguish themselves as a group from the Muslims, whom Indians viewed as the "Others" (Lorenzo 2005, 68-70). Hinduism thus fulfilled the role of a common banner that provided a convenient form of group cohesion and identity while also setting Hindus apart from the Muslims. This usage in play, Hindus therefore began to identify themselves as "Hindutva" (Frykenberg 2005, 126). However,

during this time, the term Hindu did not have the same religious connotations that it later developed, even when the term was used by indigenous Indians (King 1999, 99). Rather, at this time, Hinduism was more of a political or ethnic term created for the sake of including as many Indians as possible within a unified category. This definition of Hinduism was so broad in fact, that it even included Indian Muslims within it (Frykenberg 2005, 130).

2.2 British Influence on the Construction of Hinduism

Upon the arrival of the British, British Colonialists began to use the term Hinduism as a means to categorize all the distinct religions of India into a single, coherent religion (King 1999, 100). Richard King explains that the British idea of the unity of “Hinduism” is influenced by the religious presumptions of the Judaeo-Christian colonists and missionaries. He describes that because these colonists and missionaries couldn’t understand the religious liberality found within India and the fact that different religions could co-exist harmoniously with one another, the British colonists and missionaries thus felt that the differences amongst Hindus could only be explained if Hinduism had an underlying unity to it. Thus, they constructed Hinduism as a singular religion, adding in various elements that will be discussed in greater depth later on (King 1999, 105). Of course, it should be mentioned that such a construction of Hinduism also had colonial administration interests in mind as well, for it enabled the Western colonialist “to make sense of the fluid and diverse culture that it was their job to explain, classify, manage, and control” (King 1999, 132). Ultimately, these British conceptions of Hinduism in turn influenced the way that native Indians viewed their own religion.

2.3 Indian Influence on the Construction of Hinduism

With the advent of the British as well as modernity, native Indians tried to recast Indian religion in a new light. These Indian religious actors tried to construct and depict Indian religion in a way that conforms to notions of modernity by attempting to show that Indian religion meets the terms of legitimacy for a modern religion, and these actors became motivated to work to figure out how to address such issues within the perspective of a common Hinduism. As Frykenberg mentions, Indian scholars were one group who participated in the colonial construction of Hinduism. For instance, numerous native Indian scholars worked for the East India Company from the late 18th century onward. For example, one group of scholars was Indian *brāhmaṇas*, who worked closely with British administrators. These *brāhmaṇas* imparted their own views of Hinduism to British, thus influencing the British. According to Frykenberg, These Indian scholars were able to co-construct and establish a structure for Hinduism with the following characteristics:

- (1) Hinduism as a nativistic synonym for all things Indian (or pertaining to India);
- (2) Hinduism as an ancient civilization, some clearly identifiable before 1800 and going back five thousand years;
- (3) Hinduism as a loosely defined label describing all socioreligious phenomenon found or originating in India (comparable to, but less pejorative than paganism as a label for nonmonotheistic religions in the Ancient Greco-Roman world);
- (4) Hinduism as an institutional/ideological instrument for the sociocultural and sociopolitical integration of an all-India (imperial or native sway); and
- (5) Hinduism as a single religion which, with the coming of Swami Narendranath Datta Vivekananda to the First World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893, was gradually recognized and then elevated by liberal minded and eclectic western clerics into the rank of a world religion as a pragmatic and sometimes romantic blending of

these five representations that Hawley has argued, helped to reify Hinduism in popular imaginations (Frykenberg 2005, 135).

Thus, this illustrates that many common notions of Hinduism today have their root in the views of these Indian scholars.

The Indian influence on the British reveals much about the development of the construction of Hinduism in the 19th century. While the British certainly had their own motivations and reasons for constructing Hinduism the way that they did, the process of creating Hinduism was not solely due to the agency of the British alone. Indians themselves were also agents in the process of creating Hinduism. This is especially noticeable by the end of the 19th century when India became increasingly focused on its own independence and consequently discourse became more nationalistic. During this period of increased Indian nationalism, Indians themselves start to use the term Hinduism in order to create a unified identity so that they can fight against British colonialism. Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), one of the early Indian reformers, started to use the term “Hinduism” himself, thus suggesting that Indians began to claim the term for themselves, which further illustrates how Indians themselves also acted as agents for the construction of Hinduism (King 1999, 100). Thus, I consider Hinduism today to have come from a process of co-construction where all agents involved contribute and work off of each other’s notions of Hinduism to create the kinds of representations of Hinduism we see today.

2.4 Significance of Hinduism as a Construct

Nevertheless, even though native Indians participated in the construction of Hinduism, there are still key issues present within Hinduism as a category for Indian religions. Conceptualizing Hinduism as a singular religion is problematic because the supposed unity of Indian religions was read into them as Hinduism was constructed. If someone were to construct a new religious concept called Abrahamism that consisted of the Abrahamic religions Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, that would be a situation similar to what happened with Hinduism. Due to the need to classify India as a single, united, polity, various groups and sects became amalgamated into one religious entity, even though there were significant differences among the various groups. Therefore, I believe we need to reconsider how to study and categorize Indian religions without classifying them all as the same religion. As my later research will show, the various Indian religions can hold diametrically opposed theological conceptions, thus making it crucial to distinguish amongst the various Indian religious sects rather than treat them as if they are all part of the same religious ideology. Unfortunately, due to various politically motivated conceptualizations of Hinduism on the part of the Europeans as well as various Hindu reformers, the diverse nature of Indian religions became underemphasized, and more energy became invested into reinforcing the notion of Hinduism and its apparent unity. A major reason for this is the advent of Universalist ideas, the influence of which still affects the academic study of Hinduism today.

3. The Influence of Universalism on Hinduism

3.1 Contextualizing Universalism

To help contextualize the importance of Universalism to Hinduism, I begin by explaining what Universalism (in a religious studies context) or Universal Religion is. According to proponents of Universalism, Universalism is the idea that all religions are valid and have an underlying unity to them, and it seeks to arrive at the understanding of the unity and oneness of God (Pandiappallil 2006, 192-193; 206). Swami Vivekānanda, responsible for introducing many Universalist ideas into Hinduism, sums up this Universalist attitude in the following statement: “therefore, we believe in all the religions that were, all that religions that are, and all the religions that will be in the world. We also believe that we ought not only tolerate these religions, but to accept them” (Vivekananda 1999, 499-501). Thus, according to a Universalist worldview, the different religions we see are only different in their approaches, for every religion is true and leads to God, the absolute, and to salvation (Pandiappallil 2006, 197). In fact, Universalists would argue that every religion has the same God, and all religions are good and equal since their essentials are the same (Pandiappallil 2006, 200).

Currently, these Universalist attitudes are prevalent throughout contemporary scholarship of Hinduism. I can provide examples just based off of some of the books I have sitting on my desk. This is by no means a comprehensive list of representations of Hinduism, but it illustrates the extent to which scholarly definitions of Hinduism are often reflected in a Universalistic light. For instance, one such definition of Hinduism is “the historical evidence is that Sanatana Dharma [Sanskrit for “eternal religion”] is a non-

centralized, evolving composite of variegated ways of worship, with as many ways to the Ultimate as there are people” (Fisher 2002, 124). According to this definition, although Hindus may have variegated ways of worship, ultimately all such modes of worship lead to the same end, a view commonly held by 19th century Hindu reformers and some contemporary Indian scholars.

Another viewpoint I came across is: “when one sees someone worshipping a god other than one’s own, one knows he is not worshipping a false god, but only another form of one’s own deity” (Embree 1988, 320). This same point is repeated earlier by Monier Williams, who reached a similar conclusion. He insisted that “Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism are not opposite or incompatible creeds, rather, they represent different lines of religious thought...quite allowable within the limits of one and the same system” (Monier-Williams 1877, 97)

These types of a Universalistic, “every approach leads to the same goal” mindset have thus led scholars such as Ward Fellows to conclude “‘Oneness’ is not the one word to describe the essence of Hinduism, but it is as close as we can get to a one-word characterization. For there is a strange and fascinating unity to this religion of the nation and the people of India” (Fellows 1998, 41). This oneness or unity is indeed a notion that Europeans have liked to read into Hinduism. In fact, during the construction of Hinduism, there was a strong push to read many aspects of Universalism into Hinduism.

3.2 European Universalist Influence

One cause for the insertion of Universalist ideas into Hinduism is the emergence of perennial philosophy within Europe (King 1999, 120). The Perennial philosophy was an attempt to arrive at a unity of thought entertained by thinkers trying to make sense of globalized contexts of culture. Perennial thought had gradually been gaining popularity amongst European intellectuals. Neo-Platonists were influential in discussing the idea of perennial philosophy in the late medieval era, and later the scholar Agostino Steuco (1497-1548) discussed it in greater depth (Schmitt 1966, 517). The perennial philosophy then became popularized and developed further by various other thinkers, the most influential of whom was the thinker Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) (Schmitt 1966, 530). Then, around the nineteenth century, perennial thought started to gain even more popularity, and there were a number of influential thinkers such as Schopenhauer who talked about perennial thought and the idea that all spiritual traditions essentially have the same teachings (King 199, 125).

According to Aldous Huxley, one of the major recent proponents for perennial philosophy, the definition of perennial philosophy is: “the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal” (Weidenbaum 2012, 7).

Other authors such as Rene Guenon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Huston Smith, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr have also promoted the perennial philosophy. In

essence, this perennial philosophy “interprets all faiths as both expressions of, and vehicles toward, the same spiritual reality” (Weidenbaum 2012, 3). Another perennial philosopher, Frithjof Schuon, describes the multitude of religions as varied expressions of the same God, just as the multitude of colors are varied expressions of light (Weidenbaum 2012, 3).

In their process of constructing Hinduism, the British were influenced by this perennial philosophy and its Universalist emphasis. They thus tried to categorize Hinduism through a Universalist lens. In doing so, various elements were read into it. For instance, the British added in elements of Judaeo-Christian religions to Hinduism, a process that Veena Das has described as the “semitification” of Hinduism in the modern era (Thapar 1985, 228). Das explains that since the nineteenth century, “Hinduism” has developed numerous Judaeo-Christian religious characteristics due to the pressure on Indian religious actors to look at Indian Religion the same way as Western religions (see upcoming footnote for specific examples). This also entailed that that Indian religion became subject to the same kinds of interpretive problems and questions as Western religions.¹

1. The developing notion of Hinduism then begins to possess certain features as Indians and British begin to view it as a unified, singular, religion. According to Romila Thapar, this emerging form of Hinduism: “seeks historicity for the incarnations of its deities, encourages the idea of a centrality sacred book, claims monotheism as significant to the worship of deity, acknowledges the authority of the ecclesiastical organization of certain sects as prevailing over all and has supported large-scale missionary work and conversion. Such changes allow Hinduism to transcend caste identities and reach out to larger numbers” (Thapar 1985, 21).

3.3 Issues with Universalism

While Universalism is certainly a current and popular current of thought within Hinduism and Western scholarship of Hinduism, I will later argue by drawing on the tradition of Vaiṣṇavism that such Universalistic categorizations of Hinduism are not factual representations of it. Rather, the different religious groups commonly classified under Hinduism are distinct religious traditions that distinguish themselves from other sects and ideologies. For example, groups such as Vaiṣṇavism do not follow Universalist notions of Hinduism and even refute such notions. In fact, the main reason such Universalist notions exist within Hinduism is due to the influence of the British and other Europeans, who were motivated by several reasons to view Hinduism as if it were a Universalist religion. Interestingly, this itself is a type of religious colonialism because the British are able to define Hinduism in their own terms, which then influences Hindus themselves to see their own religion in the same way as the British view it. However, once such Universalist ideas became prevalent, it was difficult to extricate Hinduism from such ideas, which religious actors began to accept as true without a critical examination of its origins. As a result, Universalist ideas have continued to influence the way in which both native Hindus and outsiders view Hinduism. One of the longest lasting impacts of Universalist ideas is seen in the popularization of the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta, particularly in its most recent manifestation as Neo-Vedānta.

4. The Popularization of Advaita Vedānta

4.1 Interest by Perennialists

Since the early 20th century, Advaita Vedānta has often been seen as the prevailing ideology for Hinduism. Advaita Vedānta's status as a prevailing Hindu ideology is due to the influence of Universalism and a number of different Western actors. One group of such actors was the perennialists. The same perennialists who were motivated by Universalist ideas were drawn to the views of Advaita Vedānta. Perennialists felt that Advaita Vedānta was the highest form of Indian religious thought because it aligned with Universalist views, which perennialists felt was the pinnacle of religious views. Though the acceptance of Advaita Vedānta as the Hindu example of the perennial philosophy was challenged from the outset, perennial philosophy nevertheless continued to play a significant role in Western interpretations of Vedānta, particularly of the *Upaniṣads* (King 1999, 120). For example, Deussen (1845-1919), an avid disciple of Schopenhauer, believed Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta represented the apex of Indian thought and provided evidence that perennial philosophy was at the heart of Indian religion. Later on, other European forces such as the works of the Theosophical Society in the early twentieth century and New Age literature in the late twentieth century continued to popularize the perennial attitudes found in Vedānta (King 1999, 120).

4.2 Interest by Intellectuals

Western intellectuals, such as scholars and philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) from the late eighteenth century onwards were another group who wanted to

see Indian religion through a Universalist lens, and like the perennialists they also advocated that Advaita Vedānta be seen as the prevailing Hindu ideology. Specifically, these intellectuals emphasized the ‘mystical’ nature of Hindu religion by referring to Vedānta texts like the *Upaniṣads* and *Gītā* (King 1999, 119-121). These texts also seemed to have appealed to Western intellectuals because they could support their various interests. For example, one reason there was interest in such texts is because they supported the anti-clerical and anti-ritualistic mindset of Western intellectuals. Furthermore, Western scholars also liked how the *Upaniṣads* treated the Vedic rituals as allegories, an idea they could apply to their own Western institutionalized forms of spirituality.

4.3 Interest by Christian Missionaries

Christian missionaries were another group that created pressure to view Indian religion through the lens of Advaita Vedānta as if it were the unifying ideology for Indian religions. One reason for these missionaries’ interest in Vedānta is because they liked key Vedānta texts like the *Upaniṣads* and the *Gītā* since they could be interpreted to substantiate the fundamental Christian teachings of monotheism by showing that these already existed in ancient Hindu scriptures (though, these missionaries felt that these teachings were in a crude, distorted, and unclear form) (King 1999, 120). Liberal Christian missionaries also appreciated Advaita Vedānta because they felt it provided a means by which they could participate in inter-faith dialogues with Hindus to recognize the similarities between Hinduism and Christianity (King 1999, 122-123). Interestingly, less liberal Christian missionaries had an interest in Advaita Vedānta as well because

they believed that Advaita Vedānta provided an easy “monistic” target that they could attack in order to establish the moral superiority of Christianity over Hinduism. As King describes, “this usually involved the projection of the antipathy felt towards the apparently monistic trends of Christian mysticism onto the Hindu tradition” (King 1999, 132).

4.4 The Role of the British in Popularizing Advaita Vedānta

Additionally, the British also played a part in establishing Advaita Vedānta as the ideology that represents Hinduism. One reason the British did this is because they had the perception that Advaita Vedānta represented the central thought for Hindus. In his 1977 work, *Vedānta and the Bengal Renaissance* Niranjan Dhar explains one reason why there was an emphasis on Śaṅkara’s version of Advaita Vedānta as the central philosophy of the Hindus, despite the fact that most Hindus were not Advaitins (King 1999, 130). Dhar argues that Vedānta first became identified as the “philosophy of the Hindus” due to the efforts of Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765-1837), who was the head of the Sanskrit Department at the College of Fort William in Calcutta, established by Lord Wellesley in 1800. Colebrooke argued that early Vedic scriptures placed forth the idea of the “unity of the Godhead” (Dhar 1977). Ironically there didn’t seem to be too many Vedāntic schools or scholars in Bengal at this time (Kopf 1969, 58-59). Dhar thus argues that the choice to make Advaita Vedānta the central philosophy of the Hindus’ was partly because the British feared political revolt, which they had previously seen in the form of the French Revolution. Wellesley frequently spoke out against the French prior to establishing the College of Fort William. As David Kopf notes, “a root cause of Wellesley’s actions was,

by his own admission, his fear and hatred of France and the very real danger of French expansion into India” (Kopf 1969, 46-47).¹

Wellesley also made it an explicit aim of the College “to fix and establish sound and correct principles of religion and government” as the “best security which could be provided for the stability of British power in India” (Lord Wellesley). Dhar argues that this resulted in the identification of Advaita Vedānta as the central teaching of Hinduism, since the British believed its world-denying and ascetic ideology would prevent social activism, revolutionary tendencies and challenges to the status quo. By eliminating such opposition to their rule, the British felt that they could control Indians more easily (King 1999, 131).²

4.5 Indian Popularization of Advaita Vedānta

King also posits that there may also be other factors at play for behind why these colonialists viewed Advaita Vedānta as the main Hindu ideology. One reason as we have seen is influence from native Indians themselves. For instance, as mentioned above, Rammohun Roy, the Indian reformer, offered praise to Colebrooke for his mastery of the Vedānta philosophy (Haughton 2012, 3). Thus, because Colebrooke got a positive

1. These doubts are not unique to Wellesley. Henry Dundas, chairman of the board control for India from 1784 until 1801, also expressed his doubts about the establishment of the College at Fort William, and his words are: “My chief objection to such an establishment arises from a consideration of the danger attending the collection of literary and philosophical men, which would naturally be collected together in consequence of such an institution. I would not be surprised if it should ultimately resolve itself into a school of Jacobinism, in place of a seminary for education. I hate Jacobinism everywhere, as I know you do, but in India I should consider it the Devil itself, and to be guarded with equal assiduity” (Dundas 1970, 287).

What these doubts demonstrate is the extent to which British authorities feared a revolution in the aftermath of the French revolution. Wellesley in fact attempted to allay concerns about the proposed college, and he replied to Dundas that the best policy would be “an early corrective” as the “most effective barrier” to the spread of Jacobinism in India” (Dundas 1970, 326).

2. Establishing such principles, of course, required the cooperation of the Bengali landowners and intelligentsia, who also would have preferred the ideology of Advaita Vedānta over other forms of religious expression (such as *bhakti*) given its emphasis on minimal social involvement, including social revolt.

response for his acquaintance with Vedānta philosophy, this may have encouraged his belief that Vedānta was indeed the proper understanding of Hinduism.

4.6 Issues with Advaita Vedānta

Therefore, the history of how Advaita Vedānta came to occupy a position of prominence as the prevailing Hindu ideology is problematic and tied to the colonial project. On the European side, the Europeans who got to decide who gets to speak for Hinduism were not Hindus themselves, yet because of their power at the time, they were able to assign which religious ideology gets to speak for Hinduism. This should cause us to be aware that though Advaita Vedānta has taken on the role of the prevailing Hindu ideology, such a role is heavily influenced by European understandings of Hinduism. Moreover, while native Indians also embraced Advaita Vedānta, as we will later see, a major reason for Indian interest in Advaita Vedānta is because its ideology is perceived by them to be the most compatible ideology with European ideas and modernity. This should cause us to be aware that by labeling Hinduism as Advaita Vedānta and nothing else, we can fail to understand how Indian religion has operated throughout history by projecting the notions that we want to see on to them. To better understand how Indians embraced Advaita Vedānta, I will now elaborate on the history of the emergence of Neo-Vedānta, a look at which will illustrate the various flaws in presenting Advaita Vedānta as the prevailing Hindu ideology.

5. The Emergence of Neo-Vedānta

5.1 Neo-Vedānta Background Information

The emergence of Neo-Vedānta occurred throughout the 19th century. Neo-Vedānta, which is Advaita Vedānta in its modern form, became a dominant force in Indian thought due to the efforts of 19th century reformers such as Rammohun Roy, Dayānanda Saraswati, Swāmi Vivekānanda, and scholar as well as one-time President of India Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (King 1999, 135). These thinkers modified the ideology of Advaita Vedānta and fashioned it into an inclusive and nationalistic ideology that united Hindus in their struggle for independence from British rule. These thinkers also contributed to the prevailing perception in both India and abroad that Advaita Vedānta represents Hinduism (King 1999, 135). At the same time, such figures like Rammohun Roy, Dayānanda Saraswati, Swāmī Vivekānanda, and Sarvepelli Radhakrishnan all modified Advaita-Vedānta by eliminating its ascetic component so that their own versions of it could be compatible with social activism and worldly involvement (King 1999, 134).

Neo-Vedāntic rhetoric has been able to support Westerners' notions that Hinduism was one unified religion (Stietencron 2009, 14-15). As mentioned previously Westerners were unfamiliar with the religious liberality within India and presumed that rival sects could not exist harmoniously, they causing them to see Hinduism as a unified religion. Indians appropriated this idea for themselves and welcomed this idea because it provided them with a means to create a unified national identity in the struggle for freedom from British rule (Stietencron 2009, 14-15).

Neo-Vedāntins such as Vivekānanda and Radhakrishnan made claims that Hinduism was the only truly world religion because it acknowledged the importance of diversity and contained a message of tolerance. This was appealing to Hindus because it enabled them to overthrow their conceptions that Hinduism was inferior to Christianity and reversed Hinduism's position to make it morally superior to Christianity. This in turn also provided inspiration to young Hindu intellectuals at the turn of the century (King 1999, 136).

Neo-Vedānta has various components. One such component is that the (Advaita) Vedānta philosophy of Śaṅkara is believed to be the central and mediating philosophy of Hinduism. Another component is that at a global level, Neo-Vedānta attempts to elevate its own status by arguing that all religious traditions point to the perennial philosophy that is perfectly encapsulated within Advaita Vedānta. These strategies have been supported by modern Hindus, largely due to their desire to represent Hinduism as a tolerant religion that contrasts with the dogmatic nature of Judaeo-Christian-Islamic traditions (King 1999, 136).

5.2 Problematizing Advaita Vedānta's Role as a Representative of Hinduism

Though Neo-Vedānta has caused Advaita Vedānta to be seen as the preeminent Hindu ideology, there are several issues with such a depiction. First, once Advaita Vedānta became established as the predominant Hindu ideology, more authority was mistakenly read into Śaṅkara and his school of thought. This was not because most Hindus have been adherents of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. Rather, it is because Hindus

in the 19th century had been educated to believe that Śaṅkara was a major figure in their cultural and religious history. Ironically, this education likely came from the British, who overhauled India's original education system and replaced it with their own system of education, which echoed the same notions of Hinduism that the British had been led to believe (Chatterjee, 1995, 103-127). Therefore, the importance of Advaita Vedānta has acquired significant cultural power despite the fact that most Hindus did not subscribe to its ideology (King 1999, 129-130).

The importance of Śaṅkara is problematized by evidence that suggests that even in his own time, Śaṅkara wasn't as important of a figure as he is today. Historical evidence seems to indicate that until Vācaspati Miśra (tenth century CE), Śaṅkara's older contemporary Maṇḍana Miśra overshadowed Śaṅkara in terms of importance. According to Hacker, Maṇḍana Miśra seems to have been the most important representative of Advaita Vedānta in the centuries after Śaṅkara (Hacker 1995, 30). Therefore, while Śaṅkara is seen as a highly influential figure in today's time, his importance has likely been read back into history, thus making him seen as more influential than he actually was. For Śaṅkara to be treated with greater admiration than he warrants is one example of the ways in which Neo-Vedānta has influenced notions of Hinduism to cause it to over-emphasize aspects of Advaita Vedānta and its importance.

Moreover, even though contemporary Advaita teachers eagerly present Advaita Vedānta as a unifying ideology for Hindus, Śaṅkara himself may not have had such an interest, for he lived in an era when there was no concept of a unified India or sense of a national 'Hindu' identity. Furthermore, there appeared to be no attempt to unify the

varieties of Hindu thought given the existence of varied philosophical positions. In fact, instead of trying to unite the various philosophies of his time, Śāṅkara strongly opposed such philosophies (King 1999, 129). Thus, Śāṅkara's original intents behind composing his philosophy are very different than the intents of those who have appropriated his philosophy to serve their own interests.

What all this reveals is that the representation of Hinduism as Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta ignores the actual history of Advaita Vedānta. First, the fact that more cultural power has been invested into Śāṅkara than what he actually possessed during his time should deter us from considering that Advaita Vedānta is the preeminent Hindu ideology and speaks for Hinduism. Second, the very fact that Śāṅkara is seen as more of an important figure than he really was also illustrates the historical inaccuracy of modern depictions of Advaita and should cause us to question any other historical inconsistencies present in the representation of Hinduism as Advaita Vedānta. Lastly, Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta set out to accomplish much different goals with its doctrine than what has recently been attributed to it, which reveals how modern forms of Advaita Vedānta err in depicting it as a unifying religion.

Interestingly enough however, despite the numerous challenges to Advaita Vedānta's authority, scholars haven't seriously questioned whether or not Advaita Vedānta truly speaks for Hinduism. I believe it's important to be critical of allowing Advaita Vedānta to occupy such an important position and be aware of the historical circumstances that elevated Advaita Vedānta to its current status. What is conveniently ignored in this history is the fact that Neo-Advaita's rise in popularity does not reflect its

historical importance. Rather, as the history of Neo-Vedānta illustrates, the rise of Neo-Vedānta and consequently Advaita Vedānta is largely motivated by nationalism and concerns about enabling Hinduism to become relevant in the contexts of modernity.

5.3 The History of Neo-Vedānta

5.3.1 Rammohun Roy and the Brahma Samaj

While Vivekānanda and Dr. Radhakrishnan were the most important proponents of Neo-Vedānta, there were other thinkers that helped popularize the ideas of Advaita Vedānta, and these were influential figures amongst the elites and national movements. The first of such thinkers was Rammohun Roy, who founded the Brahma Samaj in 1828 in Calcutta. It was founded as a congregation meant to strengthen the doctrine of universal brotherhood through the ideals of love and service towards humanity. The Brahma Samaj also claimed to stand for the promotion of values such as benevolence, charity, morality, and virtue. Roy envisioned the Brahma Samaj as a unifying agent for the different religious groups and sects within India. The Brahma Samaj aimed at the adoration of a single God; though, it attributed no statue or image to him, which is significant because such an ideology conforms to aniconic ideologies found in the Judaeo-Christian traditions as well as Universalist ideals (Banerjee 2006, 22).

Rammohun Roy is important because he is one of the first Indian reformers who helped popularize Advaita Vedānta and therefore lay the foundation for Neo-Vedānta. Roy also helped to solidify Hinduism as a singular religion. As mentioned previously, Rammohun Roy is the first native Indian to use the term Hinduism and claim it for

Indians themselves in order to create a sense of national identity and unity to combat British colonialism.

Rammohun Roy contributed to the popularization of Advaita Vedānta by arguing that monotheism was the essence of the Hindu religion and present in the original four Vedas (King 1999, 123). Roy argued for a return to what he perceived as India's original religious framework. Roy argued that image worship as practiced in India deviated from the original, authentic monotheistic tradition, wherein worship of the "true and eternal God" forbade idolatry (Kopf 1969, 199-200). He divided Indian history into two periods. The first period was a Vedāntic period that provided what Roy felt was the authentic model for Hinduism. The second period was a later period that introduced idolatry with its innumerable gods, goddesses and temples, and Roy felt that this later period was responsible for destroying the texture of society (Kopf 1969, 199-200). Therefore, Roy saw Advaita Vedānta as India's pristine religion, which India had to return back to in order reestablish itself as an authentic religion.

Roy's particular rationalizations for his promotion of Advaita Vedānta prompt a number of questions. First of all, Roy's insistence on returning back to the Vedas, in which he locates the Advaita Vedānta ideology, is notable. Given that Śaṅkara himself drew more from the *Upaniṣads* as a means of legitimizing Advaita Vedānta, it's odd that Roy would wish to draw from the four original Vedas, which is much less favorable to an Advaita Vedānta reading than the *Upaniṣads*. It's possible that Roy was motivated by other factors in deciding to return back to the four original Vedas and its supposed promotion of Advaita Vedānta. One possible reason Roy hung onto the four original

Vedas is perhaps due to its emphasis on caste and class. Given that Roy came from a brahminical background, it's quite likely that his promotion of the Vedas was to continue the caste system, which found its roots in the original Vedas and which also favored the *brāhmaṇas* by giving them the highest position in society. Also, Roy's motives behind promoting Advaita Vedānta over other ideologies also warrant questioning. Firstly, it seems that Roy wanted to promote Advaita Vedānta as India's primary ideology not in order to accurately depict Indian religion, but rather, to shape Indian religion and Hinduism in ways that aligned it with modern concerns as well as the ideals of the Judaeo-Christian religions and Universalist ideals. Secondly, Roy may have wanted to also downplay the significance of *bhakti*, which Roy may have perceived as a threat to his privileged status as a *brāhmaṇa*, given the more egalitarian nature of the *bhakti* movements. His desire to return to what Roy perceived was India's original pristine glory may also have been a further attempt to distance Hinduism from such egalitarian *bhakti* movements.

In summation, Roy's motives for championing Advaita Vedānta should cause us to question Advaita Vedānta's ability to truly speak for Hinduism and Indian religions. If it is indeed the case that Roy's motivation in promoting Advaita Vedānta as India's primary ideology was due to caste concerns and by the desire to portray Hinduism as a religion in line with other Judaeo-Christian religions as well as the pervading Universalist ethos of his time, then we should be aware of this bias. We should also recognize that such a bias has caused the importance of Advaita Vedānta to be overstated and inserted

into a more prominent position in society due to reasons other than its ability to accurately describe Indian religion.

5.3.2 Dayānanda Saraswati and the Ārya Samaj

Another important reformer similar to Roy was Dayānanda Saraswati, who founded the Ārya Samaj in 1875. The Ārya Samaj was a reform movement that hoped to construct an understanding of Hinduism that worked against colonial and Christian prejudice. This entailed removing Christianity and Islam from India as well. Saraswati also reimagined the caste system by emphasizing the importance of one's particular temperament and qualities as criteria for selection into a particular caste in addition to one's birth. Saraswati hoped that the Ārya Samaj could fulfill this role, and in addition, he also hoped to be able to restore Hindu converts to Islam and Christianity back to Hinduism, which he intended to accomplish through purification rituals (Graham 1990, i).

Like Roy, Saraswati also advocated for monotheism, which he felt was also rooted in the four original Vedas (King 1999, 123). Saraswati also felt that the four Vedas contained the true manifestation of Hinduism, which he saw as superior to "younger" religions like Christianity (King 1999, 119). Saraswati also believed that all knowledge could be traced back to India (King 1999, 119). Thus, the original religion of the Vedas, which Saraswati regarded as Advaita Vedānta, was seen as India's superior religious ideology, and as the Ārya Samaj spread, so too did Advaita Vedānta.

Like Roy however, there are certain concerns with Saraswati's emphasis of Advaita Vedānta that warrant careful enumeration. For instance, Saraswati's still

promotes the caste system, though in a modified format that categorizes people according to their particular temperament in addition to birth. Given that in his later years, Saraswati became a *sannyāsī*, this could have been a maneuver to position himself in the highest position within society and therefore acquire greater prestige. Saraswati's desire to remove Islam and Christianity, which also hold no notions of caste, might also have been an attempt to preserve the Vedic values that would have enabled Saraswati to hold an exalted position within society. Moreover, Saraswati's emphasis on Advaita Vedānta also seems motivated by the desire for national unity. Therefore, due to these factors, we as scholars should recognize that Saraswati's decision to describe Hinduism as Advaita Vedānta has other motivations besides portraying Indian religions accurately. Given that Saraswati's promotion of Advaita Vedānta also led Advaita Vedānta to become accepted on a massive scale, we should thus question whether Advaita Vedānta is an appropriate ideology for describing Hinduism and Indian religions.

5.3.3 Vivekānanda's Impact

Perhaps the most influential proponent of modern Advaita Vedānta or Neo-Vedānta is Swāmī Vivekānanda. Vivekānanda considered Advaita Vedānta India's most sublime intellectual accomplishment and felt that it could establish Hinduism as a major world religion. Vivekānanda felt that Advaita Vedānta could unite the various religions of India. Vivekānanda also believed that Advaita Vedānta was synonymous with Hinduism itself. However, Vivekānanda modified Advaita Vedānta to make it relevant to India's national and social problems during his time.

Vivekānanda embraced colonial notions of India as otherworldly and mystical, and he felt that such aspects of Indian religions were India's special gift to the world. Therefore Vivekānanda transformed Colonial conceptions of Hinduism and appropriated them to create a unified, universalistic, and all-embracing Hinduism (King 1999, 93). Vivekānanda also extended the inclusivism of Advaita Vedānta beyond India by subsuming other religions into the Universalist framework of Advaita Vedānta. In doing so, Vivekānanda attempted to establish Advaita Vedānta as the apex of religious expression. Thus Vivekānanda argues that "the Vedānta includes all sects...We are glad to remember that all roads lead to God" (Vivekananda 1997, 254-258).

Vivekānanda also argued that all the world's major religions are essentially the same. He states, for instance, that "I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him" (Vivekananda 1999, 374). This is what Vivekānanda described as the Universal Religion, which is in the heart of every religion. He also stated about the different world religions: "I believe that they are not contradictory; they are supplementary. Each religion, as it were, takes up one part of the great universal truths, and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth" (Vivekananda 1999, 367).

However, upon taking a closer look at Vivekānanda's Universal Religion, it becomes evident that other religions primarily function to complement Advaita Vedānta, which Vivekānanda saw as the highest manifestation of religious truth. Although Vivekānanda did argue that a diversity of religions is necessary for fulfilling the diverse needs of humanity, his own understanding of the universal principles underlying such

religions nevertheless most closely resembles Advaita Vedānta. Vivekānanda's version of Advaita Vedānta also appears to give new emphasis to compassion and social activism, which he draws from Buddhism and Christianity respectively (Vivekananda 1999, 371-372).¹ Vivekānanda's teaching of the Universalism of Neo-Vedānta also appears to be an attempt to establish Advaita Vedānta as the primary ideology of Hinduism as well as a primary candidate for the world's universal religion. He also felt that Neo-Vedānta could revive a materialistic and spiritually deprived Europe, a point he stressed when addressing Western audiences (Vivekānanda 1999, 139). With the founding of the Vedānta Society in the United States by Vivekānanda in 1897, Neo-Vedānta was able to make its way into the West, and it proved to be appealing to modern Westerners given their interest in non-institutionalized and privatized forms of spirituality. The rise of Neo-Vedānta (along with Buddhism as well) illustrates that the West showed an avid interest in the East, which they saw as mystical, introspective, and otherworldly in nature (King 1999, 142).

There is however, one serious issue with how Swami Vivekānanda popularized Neo-Vedānta. In his attempt to promote Neo-Vedānta, Swami Vivekānanda also modified the original ideology of Advaita Vedānta in several significant ways.

1. According to King, for Vivekānanda, each "world religion" is said to have cultivated particular qualities of the Universal Religion. Thus Islam fosters an appreciation of the equality of brotherhood. Christianity is praised for its awaiting the coming of the kingdom of God, while Hinduism is to be lauded for its great spirituality (Vivekananda 1999, 371-372 and King 1999, 242).

5.3.4 How Vivekānanda Modified Advaita Vedānta

Vivekānanda's interpretation of Advaita Vedānta changed the original system of Advaita Vedānta by adding in an ethical implication not present in the original Advaita doctrine, making it compatible with nationalism, causing it to be more inclusive, and to improperly classify other religions. Traditional Advaitins consider the world, as well as all matter, difference, diversity, action, and psychic phenomena to be ultimately unreal. They consider phenomenal reality to be the product of ignorance or *māyā*, the inexplicable power of delusion. Such Advaitins believe that the only ultimate reality is *brahman*, which is pure Spirit, one undifferentiated substance, impersonal and identical with man's true self. When one realizes the oneness of *brahman* one then attains knowledge about the nothingness of *māyā* and its product such as this phenomenal world. This knowledge entails liberation from the world, which causes one to cease taking repeated births and death in the world. In order to attain this goal however, one must completely renounce everything connected with the phenomenal world. This entails not only renouncing one's material goods and secular actions but also all religious ceremonies and attachment to other human beings (Hacker 1995, 240).

Vivekānanda made several changes to this original system of Advaita Vedānta. For example, he added an extra component to Advaita Vedānta in the form of an ethical implication. He argued that if a man realizes his identity with *brahman*, the all-powerful Absolute, then he should feel the power of his abilities is as unlimited as *brahman* itself, giving him boundless self-confidence and irresistible power. Such a person should thus be able to work for the spiritual recovery of India and therefore contribute to a national

construction of the nation (Hacker 1995, 240). Moreover Vivekānanda extended the Advaita Vedānta doctrine of the individual's identity with God by interpreting it to mean that mankind as a whole is God, an ideology that implies that service to humanity is the highest form of worship (Hacker 1995, 241).

Thus, Vivekānanda deviates from the original system of Advaita Vedānta by changing the doctrine to make it more conducive for the fight for national freedom and presenting it in terms that champion a globalist perspective. Vivekānanda's practical application of Vedānta reveals that his commitment to religion was of lesser concern for him than his commitment to Indian nationalism. Therefore Vivekānanda made the preservation of the ideology of Advaita Vedānta subservient to the tackling of India's modern national problems. Because Vivekānanda was more fixated on nationalism than preserving the fundamental beliefs of Advaita Vedānta, his modification of Advaita Vedānta turned it into a different ideology (Hacker 1995, 240-241).

Another erroneous element Vivekānanda added into Advaita Vedānta was inspired by the German philosopher and Indologist Paul Deussen, who was a posthumous disciple of Schopenhauer. Deussen had taught that only monism could provide a solid foundation for moral philosophy, and Vivekānanda learned from Deussen that the purest form of this monism was Vedānta. There are two errors with this view however. First, Schopenhauer's monism was a voluntaristic form of monism, whereby one chooses to become one with God. In contrast to this Vedānta teaches an ontological monism whereby the very nature of the soul is to be one with *brahman*, which is true regardless of whether the soul chooses this identity or not. Second, ethics assumes relationships, which

Advaita Vedānta effaces. Therefore, there appears to be no ethical implication embedded within Advaita Vedānta. On the contrary, Advaita Vedānta aims towards an actionless state beyond good and evil (Hacker 1995, 241).

Vivekānanda's Neo-Advaita is also more inclusivistic than the original Advaita doctrine. According to King, although there were elements of inclusivism within Advaita Vedānta, they did not fully develop until the modern era when inclusivism became the main Neo-Vedāntic response to Western missionary activity and colonialism (King 1999, 136-137).

Such inclusivist approaches tend to underemphasize the diversity of the world's religions and fail to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Indian religion. For example Vivekānanda's theistic proclamation of tolerance doesn't align itself with non-theistic traditions like Buddhism, Jainism, or Taoism even though it's compatible with other theistic traditions such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The problem with a universal perennial philosophy is that the commonalities it attempts to establish among religions become increasingly broader in order to fit all religions within its framework. This in turn then causes adherents of the various religious traditions to no longer be able to locate themselves within such a perennial framework because such a framework no longer remains a meaningful category (King 1999, 140).

Another problem with Neo-Vedānta is the fact that it incorrectly describes other philosophies in an attempt to subsume them into its own religious framework. For example, Neo-Vedāntins argued for the unity of Hindu doctrine by arguing that the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy (the six "*darśanas*") are not differing ideologies

but rather just different perspectives on the same single truth, which is the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta (King 1999, 137). Swami Vivekānanda said in a lecture delivered to the Vedānta Society in New York in June 1900:

The different sectarian systems of India all radiate from one central idea of unity or dualism. They are all under Vedānta, all interpreted by it. Their final essence is the teaching of unity. This, which we see as many, is God. We perceive matter, the world, manifold sensation. Yet there is but one existence. These various names mark only differences of degree in the expression of that One (Vivekananda 1977, 250-251).

This position is also reflected in subsequent Western introductions to Indian thought. For example in Theos Bernard's 1947 work *Hindu Philosophy* we find the following quote: "Together [the *darśanas*] form a graduated interpretation of the Ultimate Reality, so interrelated that the hypothesis and method of each is dependent on the other. In no way are they contradictory or antagonistic to one another, for they all lead to the same practical end, knowledge of the Absolute and Liberation of the soul" (Bernard 1947, 5).

It is important to point out that such a view of the Indian *darśanas* is historically inaccurate, as a quick glance at each school's philosophy demonstrates. Although inclusivism was found within a number of Indian schools of thought, the *darśanas* are highly polemical and remain firmly committed to refuting opposing viewpoints. Indeed as King mentions, "classical Indian *darśanas* have tended to define themselves in opposition to the paradigmatic perspectives of their rivals, thriving upon debate, disputation and defeat of rival philosophies" (King 1999, 138).

Therefore, Swami Vivekānanda's nationalist concerns for nationalism motivated him to modify and reinterpret the ideology of Advaita Vedānta, causing his new ideology of Neo-Vedānta to bear little resemble to the original doctrine. This itself should also cause us to question the importance of Advaita Vedānta historically, because much of its popularity comes from a doctrine (Neo-Vedānta) that arguably fails to continue the original doctrine's essential teachings. This should also cause us to question the validity of Neo-Vedānta itself, since it is a doctrine that was manufactured by Indian Nationalists such as Vivekānanda who wanted to paint Indian religion in a particular way for nationalistic concerns and therefore not an ideology subscribed to by most practicing Hindus.

5.3.5 Radhakrishnan's Importance

Dr. Radhakrishnan also contributed to the widespread popularity of Advaita Vedānta and universalistic conceptions of Hinduism. Dr. Radhakrishnan is important because he is an example of someone with a lot of political power who started to advocate for Neo-Vedānta. Like Vivekānanda, Radhakrishnan claims to follow Advaita Vedānta. He has stated: "every form of Hinduism is related to the common background of the Vedānta" and "the Vedānta is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance" (Radhakrishnan 1954b, 22-23). He also argued that ultimately all religions culminate in the understanding of Advaita Vedānta (Hacker 1995, 245).

Interestingly however, Radhakrishnan's ideology draws heavily from European sources. For example, his understanding of Vedānta is influenced heavily William James' book *the Varieties of Religious Experience* and its notions of mysticism and spirituality.

Nevertheless, despite this Western influence on him, Radhakrishnan does ultimately deeply value Indian spirituality. Radhakrishnan believes that the West represents the scientific approach, whereas the East contains the “religious impulse” (Radhakrishnan 1954a, 120). Radhakrishnan felt that true religion was found in the West but that its origins were ultimately from the East. Radhakrishnan therefore felt that both groups could combine their strengths and synthesize into a form of religion that was scientific, empirical, and humanistic (Hacker 1995, 247 and Radhakrishnan 1954a, 129).

Radhakrishnan knew that allowing Advaita Vedānta to represent Hinduism would inevitably denigrate other diverse forms of Indian religion, and therefore he tried to educate the masses in the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta in an attempt to bring them to what he perceived as a higher level of consciousness (Radhakrishnan 1954b, 25). Due to such attempts, Radhakrishnan helped catalyze widespread adoption of universalistic attitudes within Hinduism.

Radhakrishnan, like other Neo-Vedānta reformers, was heavily influenced by European understandings of religion in deciding to popularize Neo-Vedānta. Such European influence and the desire to present India’s religion as relevant to the West likely influenced Radhakrishnan to value Neo-Vedānta over all expressions of Indian religion and to read Neo-Vedānta into Hinduism. Therefore, in his desire to present Hinduism as a religion compatible with Western ideals, Dr. Radhakrishnan obviously cherry-picked what he felt was the best doctrine to do so, at the expense of properly presenting Indian religions as practiced by its adherents. This should also cause us to question the importance of Advaita Vedānta and its modern manifestation as Neo-

Vedānta, since Dr. Radhakrishnan is one of its major proponents. If Dr. Radhakrishnan's motivations did indeed cause Advaita Vedānta to become overstated, then as scholars, we should be aware that the importance awarded to Advaita Vedānta doesn't reflect its actual historical significance.

5.3.6 Concluding Words on Advaita Vedānta

Therefore, while Advaita Vedānta has gained widespread popularity and has been able to create the impression that Hinduism is a unified universalistic religion, there are many problems at the core of viewing Hinduism through an Advaitic, universalistic lens. First of all, the category of modern Hinduism is a recent construction that was motivated by both colonialism and Indian nationalism. Thus, the concept of viewing the varieties of religious expression as a single unified religion is an idea Hindus themselves didn't subscribe to until recently. Moreover, only recently with the advent of Hindu nationalism has Advaita Vedānta been able to enjoy the popularity and ability to speak for Hinduism as it now does. Therefore, as scholars, we should seriously question Advaita Vedānta's ability to speak for Hinduism given the fact that it has not held much cultural power through history, which undermines its current importance. Furthermore, the contemporary form of Advaita Vedānta that was proposed by Vivekānanda differs in many respects from the Advaita of Śaṅkara due to Vivekānanda's overriding nationalistic concerns. Thus, Advaita Vedānta's significance hasn't even been consistent over time, and its recent popularity is because it served as a tool for Indian Independence and not because it accurately represents Hinduism. Lastly, Neo-Vedānta's spread has been due to

the influence of a handful of prominent individuals, which caused its status to be seen as more important than it actually was historically.

Therefore, as mentioned earlier, I argue against the notion that Advaita Vedānta represents the ideology of Hinduism. To better understand India's religious history so that we may be able to acquire a clearer picture of Indian religious life, I will now take a look at the tradition of Vaiṣṇavism.

6. Advaita Ideology and Vaiṣṇava Challenges Against It

6.1 Understanding Advaita Ideology in Brief

Because Vaiṣṇava thought from roughly 1000 onwards develops and constructs itself in contrast to Advaita Vedānta, I will now begin to describe the ideology of Advaita Vedānta in greater detail so that the arguments and beliefs of Vaiṣṇavism can be better contextualized. As mentioned previously, though Śaṅkara is commonly believed to be the major figurehead for Advaita Vedānta, history shows that there have been other influential proponents of Advaita. Thus, in defining Advaita, I will characterize its core beliefs based upon the views of Śaṅkara (650-700 C.E.), Maṇḍana Mīśra (650-700 C.E.), Padmapāda (700-750 C.E.), Prakāśātman (950-1000 C.E.), Vimuktātman (950-1000 C.E.) and Sarvajñātman (1000-1050 C.E.) (Bartley 2015, 9).

Advaita Vedānta contains the belief that, according to the *Upaniṣads*, all experience of difference is unreal and a product of ignorance (*avidyā*). Reality then, is “autonomous and self-revealing consciousness.” This reality is presented in the *Upaniṣads* as *brahman*,¹ which is “undifferentiated, relationshipless, static, consciousness, and bliss.” Moreover, the soul is believed to be identical with *brahman*, and is only *brahman* (Bartley 2015, 9). Also, according to Śaṅkara, when *brahman* is associated with the potency known as *māyā* (illusion, also used as a term for the physical realm), it appears as the *saguṇa* (with qualities) *brahman* or *īśvara*, who is the cause of

1. Advaitins commonly use the term *brahman* synonymously with God when speaking with reference to Western religions.

creation, sustenance, and destruction of this world, which has relative reality (Doshi 2016, 3).²

The idea that there are multiple selves, events, objects, causes, and effects is considered to stem from ignorance, which creates the misconception that that self is a personal individual subject to social and religious duties. The human being, being a product of matter and spirit, is subject to this illusion of thinking himself or herself an individual actor. The Advaitic view is that instead, we are “causally impotent featureless consciousness” (Bartley 2015, 10).

The ignorance of our true nature as souls and the nature of reality as being undifferentiated is the root cause of the soul’s bondage to repeated births and deaths in this world. The only way that the soul can obtain release from repeated births and deaths within the physical realm is to acquire knowledge, which is preceded by the renunciation of all ritual actions and prescribed caste duties (Bartley 2015, 10).

This saving knowledge can only be obtained in the *śruti* scriptures, which are considered the only authoritative means of knowledge about metaphysical reality. This knowledge, expressed through the *Upaniṣads*, asserts that the soul is identical to *brahman* (Bartley 2015, 10). Ritual action as well as *bhakti* may be able to purify the mind, but people performing ritual cannot of themselves release the soul from its ignorance because

2. Advaita thought has several seemingly problematic features, which became the focus of many of the critiques of Advaita thought I discuss below. According to Śaṅkara’s philosophy, there is only one reality, *brahman*. If there were only one ultimate undifferentiated reality, then this would mean that there could be no scope for anything other than this one reality. However, illusion, *māyā*, is a separate component from *brahman*, which thus contradicts the idea that there is only *brahman*. Furthermore, Śaṅkara’s philosophy also doesn’t appear to have a good response to the question of how illusion or the ignorance by which one falls into illusion came into existence either. In addition, since illusion is also fundamentally unreal according to Śaṅkara, it’s also problematic to characterize it. Such philosophical challenges are examples of how Advaita was not viewed as an undefeatable, unchallenged philosophy, but rather a philosophy that was debated against by later Vaiṣṇava thinkers like Rāmānuja and Madhva.

they assume that differences are real, thus even these activities belong to the sphere of ignorance. Another way of framing of this is: because prescribed actions bind one to repeated births and deaths, they must be given up in order for the soul to attain salvation (Bartley 2015, 10-11).

One can see why this gnostic and renunciation-centered philosophy (many Advaitins were in fact, *sannyasīs*, or world renouncers) is at odds with devotion-centered theologies (several of which will be described later on). Advaita states that only realization of the soul's identity as *brahman* can save the soul from repeated births and deaths. Religious devotion however, assumes that there is a difference between subject and object (or the devotee and God), and thus it is in conflict with the Advaitic view of Ultimate Reality as non-dual and featureless (Bartley 2015, 9,11).

Because Advaita Vedānta entails the realization that one's own self is identical with *brahman* or God, there is no personal God per say³ in its belief system. In fact, as previously mentioned, the original Advaitins believe that devotion only serves to keep one in ignorance because the distinction between God and the devotee is a dichotomy that prevents one from realizing the non-dual nature of reality. Nevertheless, in later Neo-Advaita ideologies such as that of Swami Vivekānanda, we begin to see devotion as an acceptable practice. Devotion holds credibility for Neo-Advaitins because it is a spiritual path, and all spiritual paths are valid means of arriving at the realization of one's divine nature as *brahman* (Vivekananda 2017, 108). Nevertheless, for Neo-Advaitins such as

3. Here, I take a personal God to refer to the idea of God being a person different than us. The connotations of a personal God mean that rather than merge into his existence upon the attainment of spiritual perfection, one reawakens one's connection with God and continues to remain an individual person.

Vivekananda⁴, idolatry, though acceptable because it is an attempt by people to try and reach the proper Advaita understanding (Vivekananda 2017, 16-18) is situated as a lower form of religious expression because the worshipper fails to overcome the distinction between God and himself.

Moreover, because of the non-dual nature of *brahman*, Neo-Advaita is able to argue that it represents a perennial, universalistic philosophy. This is because it resonates with the Universalist claim that all religions are ultimately aiming after the same one God. A Neo-Advaitin would argue that because God is one, then all religions are ultimately the same because they all ultimately reach God, which to Advaitins is not a personal God but an impersonal existence as previously described.

While a popular viewpoint and one that would reconcile many religious differences, I will show that the Advaita viewpoint is in fact not held by all Hindu sects and schools. Certain schools schools of Vaiṣṇavism, as I will later show, in fact vehemently refute notions of Advaita and organize themselves around a specifically Viṣṇu (and later Kṛṣṇa focused theism, which posits the existence of a personal God (as opposed to the impersonal conception of God found in Advaita Vedānta), the worship of whom is the highest religious ideal.⁵ While these Vaiṣṇava sects acknowledge or use the language of Advaita, this is likely done so in order to justify Vaiṣṇavism in what passed then as brahminical terms as well as to argue about the ways that Vaiṣṇavism departs

4. It should be noted that there were differing views on idolatry. Vivekananda was more accepting of the practice, though Rammohun Roy and Dayānanda Saraswati were antagonistic towards it.

5. It's also important to note when devotees attain the ultimate goal of their worship, they do not merge into the existence of God or realize their absolute oneness with God. Instead, the devotee awakens his or her love for God and continues to remain a distinct individual who serves God (Doshi 2016, 4-10).

from Advaita Vedānta (its emphasis on *brahman* as *saguṇa* with qualities and characteristics - as opposed to the Advaitins emphasis on *brahman* as *nirguṇa* - without qualities being one example). This therefore challenges the idea that Advaita Vedānta is the predominant ideology among Hindus or that Advaita Vedānta can effectively categorize the beliefs of the various sects and groups that comprise modern Hinduism.

7. A History of Vaiṣṇavism and Vaiṣṇava Thought

7.1 Vaiṣṇava History Beginning With Rāmānuja

7.1.1 Background Behind the *Bhakti* Movement

Following Śāṅkara, there was a rise of Vaiṣṇava movements that challenged the idea of Advaita Vedānta and instead argued for a more devotional, personal theology. Admittedly, the history surrounding the spread of Vaiṣṇava movements is not a clear one. John Hawley has analyzed and challenged the idea of three different theories of how Vaiṣṇavism spread. One theory put forth by Raghavan Iyer suggests that Vaiṣṇavism spread from South India in a clockwise fashion until it reached Bengal. Another theory comes from the *Bhāgavata Māhātmyam*, which suggests that Vaiṣṇavism went mainly from South India to North India. A last theory of how Vaiṣṇavism spread (at least one form of it) hinges on Rāmānanda's journey from the South to Benares (Hawley 2015, 21-22). However, John Hawley also questions these notions of how *bhakti* spread and challenges idea that *bhakti* spread from South India to North India in a unified movement. He describes that the “history of south-to-north progression turns out to be the history of a wish – a northern wish that required the invention (or perhaps reinvention) of an earlier south” (Hawley 2015, 100). What he argues for instead then, is that the *bhakti* movement was “a web of perceived connections across the full breadth of northern India that one might indeed, on reflection, [we] call a movement or a series of movements” (Hawley 2015, 100). A lengthy investigation into every single one of these *bhakti* movements within India is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will discuss the Vaiṣṇava movements (beginning after 1000) in order to illustrate the anti-Advaita

ideologies the *bhakti* movement exhibits. I will first describe the history of these various Vaiṣṇava schools in order to illustrate on a macro level the ways in which these Vaiṣṇava schools have historically defined themselves in contrast to Advaita Vedānta. Then, I will take a closer look at select textual commentaries from within these traditions to highlight on a micro level the varied range of interpretations these schools have and how they differ from conventional Advaita Vedānta views.

7.1.2 Rāmānuja's Biographical Information

The first relevant Vaiṣṇava movement after 1000 begins with Rāmānuja, whose school of Vaiṣṇavism is also known as Śrī Vaiṣṇavism (Bartley 2015, 1). Members of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition believe that Rāmānuja lived from 1017-1137, though other scholars believe that he lived from 1077-1157 (Tapasyananda 2011, 1). While his life dates are uncertain, we can be sure that Rāmānuja did live around the 11th and 12th centuries, making him the first major Vaiṣṇava theologian to emerge after Śaṅkara's time. Rāmānuja was born as the son of the learned Brahmin Āsuri Keśava Dīkṣita and his wife Kānitmatī in a town known as Śrīperumbudur, located in Tamil Nadu, in South India (Tapasyānanda 2011, 1). He is venerated by the members of that tradition as the thinker and scriptural exegete who, following in the footsteps of Nāthamuni (900-950) and Yāmuna (c. 966-1038), provided a solid and comprehensive theological defence and articulation of their beliefs and practices in the system that would come to be known as Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. While this ideology incorporates the language of Advaita, it nevertheless challenged the dominant monistic interpretation of the *Upaniṣads* propounded by the Advaitins. Rāmānuja's success in this respect was such that nothing

could ever be the same again in Vedānta, theistic or otherwise (Bartley 2015, 1). As we will see when examining Vaiṣṇava theologians who succeed Rāmānuja, Vaiṣṇavism began to develop a personal ideology of devotion that contrasted Advaita Vedānta.

A significant event in Rāmānuja's life that illustrates his rejection of Advaita Vedānta is seen in his interaction with his first spiritual teacher, Yādavaprakāśa, who was considered an authority on Advaita Vedānta. Rāmānuja studied under Yādavaprakāśa in the city Kāñcīpuram. Yādavaprakāśa initially loved his disciple Rāmānuja, but because Rāmānuja expressed devotion to a personal God, Yādavaprakāśa eventually began to grow disdainful towards Rāmānuja and hatched a plan to have his other disciples to murder him, though this ultimately failed (Tapasyānanda 2011, 3-5). After this, Rāmānuja took initiation from within the Śrī Vaiṣṇava sect (Tapasyānanda 2011, 6-10).

Rāmānuja is an agent in the Vedānticisation of what was originally a non-Vedic Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* tradition. He sought to harmonize the tenets of the *bhakti* cult with those of the classical Vedāntic tradition whose primary scriptural authorities are the *Upaniṣads*, the summaries of the *Upaniṣads* in the *Brahmasūtras* and the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Amongst the criteria of Hindu Brahminical orthodoxy (*smārta*), the recognition of the authority of the Veda is one of the most important principles. By "Vedānticisation" is meant the articulation of theory and practice of sectarian traditions in terms of a widely recognized notion of ideology and conduct as preserved in the mainstream Vedāntic tradition. By writing commentaries on the *Brahmāsūtras* and the *Gītā*, Rāmānuja was asserting the Vedāntic legitimacy of his *bhakti* religion. As a result of this, it seems likely that Rāmānuja's usage of the language of Advaita Vedānta is motivated more by the need for

him to present his ideology to an audience familiar with Advaita Vedānta rather than the fact that Rāmānuja's ideology is actually a representation of Advaita Vedānta.

Rāmānuja's emphasis on using Vedāntic, brahminical language illustrates the extent to which such views were a major consideration in the promotion of his philosophy. However, while Rāmānuja presents his ideology according to brahminical, Vedāntic terms, his philosophy nevertheless departs in various significant ways from the brahminical orthodoxy. While the *brāhmaṇas* insist on maintaining their superiority within the caste system, Rāmānuja is more liberal in his views towards the other classes. In fact, Rāmānuja is credited with enabling *bhakti* to become accessible not only to the *brāhmaṇas*, but to all other classes, an idea previously established by Rāmānuja's predecessors, the Āḷvārs (Hawley 2015, 104). This illustrates an important tension that arises between *bhakti* and the Vedānta/*brāhmaṇa* Sanskrit tradition. Whereas the Vedāntic, brahminical tradition is concerned with the perpetuation of the power of the *brāhmaṇas*, the *bhakti* tradition is more egalitarian and embracing of the other castes. What this illustrates to us is that historically the tension between the Vedānta tradition and the *bhakti* traditions has been more than just a theological divide – the two groups are also divided in other areas such as social views and valuing of the brahminical hierarchy. Therefore, subsuming *bhakti* under Advaita Vedānta in an attempt to harmonize all Indian religions ignores the fact that these groups had major differences amongst them, theological views being just one component.

Ultimately, Rāmānuja is important because he is the first major Vaiṣṇava saint-philosopher to popularize the *bhakti* movement and give it the credibility it needed to

become accepted as legitimate by the Brahminical orthodoxy. His theistic and dualistic interpretations of the *Upaniṣads* provided a classical basis for popular devotional religion (Bartley 2015, 2). Additionally, his impact has had a powerful effect on India's religious history, which has seen a number of other various *bhakti* movements arise following in his wake. These *bhakti* movements were characterized by their emphasis on devotion to a personal God, a notion antagonistic towards Advaita Vedānta, and this idea is first developed in Rāmānuja's ideology.

7.1.3 The Ideology of the Rāmānuja Sect of Vaiṣṇavism

Rāmānuja's doctrine was Viśiṣṭādvaita, which is non-dualism qualified by difference. Viśiṣṭādvaita was the first of several Vaiṣṇava ideologies to introduce the notion of a personal God. God or *brahman* for Rāmānuja is *saguṇa* (with attributes or qualities). He recognizes that there are three ultimate truths, God, souls, and matter. Souls and matter form the body of God, who is considered their Soul. In contrast with Advaita Vedānta's *nirguṇa* (without qualities) *brahman*, Rāmānuja's conception of *brahman* has innumerable positive qualities. Unlike Śāṅkara, who holds that the world is false, Rāmānuja believes that the world is real. Rāmānuja justifies this view based on the fact that souls and matter are the body of the Lord and are His attributes. Because souls and matter form the body of the Lord, they have an inseparable relationship with God. The soul is a part of *brahman*, yet at the same time it is not identical with the Lord. However, because the soul is a part of the Lord, the soul is nevertheless dependent on the Lord (Doshi 2016, 4-5).

In Rāmānuja’s philosophy, there is a strong emphasis on *bhakti*, and the concept of *prapatti* (self-surrender), is given prime importance. Rāmānuja admits that knowledge is the immediate cause of release, which seemingly echoes the views of Advaita Vedānta. However, Rāmānuja differs from Advaita Vedānta in his beliefs because real knowledge according to him is realized in the highest *bhakti*, which is obtained by *prapatti*.¹ For Rāmānuja, liberation from the world is possible only after the soul gives up its body. Lastly, according to Rāmānuja, the released soul does not become identical with *brahman*, rather, it only becomes somewhat similar to *brahman* (Doshi 2016, 4-5).

To summarize Rāmānuja’s theology, souls and matter are in one sense one with *brahman*, but not in the same way as Advaitins describe. This oneness comes from the fact that souls and matter are each aspects of *brahman* and thus they have an inseparable relationship with *brahman*. However, neither matter nor the soul can become absolutely one with *brahman* in identity, rather there is always a distinction between them though they comprise parts of him.² *Brahman* is also a personal God and not an impersonal spirit, and liberation from the world comes through devotion to God, which culminates in salvific knowledge, an aspect of which is separate individuality from God even at the stage of liberation. Thus, Rāmānuja’s ideology departs from Advaita Vedānta in many significant ways. Though, it should still be noted that unlike other Vaiṣṇava ideologies,

1. This represents a core difference between Advaita’s ideology and that of Rāmānuja (as well as other Vaiṣṇavas). To Advaitins, it is man’s own volition in the quest for knowledge that results in liberation. There is no personal God to submit oneself to for the acquisition of knowledge, and in devotion to a personal God only serves to keep one in ignorance according to Advaita. However, as we see here in Rāmānuja’s theology, the knowledge necessary for liberation comes through devotion, rather than the pursuit of knowledge on its own.

2. This reflects a theological position known as *bhedābheda*, which is the soul’s simultaneous oneness and difference with God. Though Rāmānuja doesn’t refer to his ideology as *bhedābheda*, his ideology is in fact nearly identical to it. This idea of *bhedābheda* will be discussed throughout the rest of this paper as well.

Rāmānuja's ideology seeks to qualify Advaita Vedānta rather than outright oppose it. Nevertheless, the numerous differences between Rāmānuja's ideology and Advaita Vedānta should cause us to reconsider modern claims that Advaita Vedānta represents all varieties of Indian religions.

7.2 The Importance of Madhva

7.2.1 Madhva's Biographical Information

The next major Vaiṣṇava teacher is Madhva, who founded the Madhva school. Madhva lived from 1238-1317, or around a century after Rāmānuja (Tapasyānanda 2011, 107). He was born to a Tulu Brāhmaṇa family in the village of Pājakam eight miles southeast of the town of Uḍupi, Karṇāṭaka in South India. His father Madhyageha Bhaṭṭa (otherwise known as Naddantillaya) was a Paṇḍit specially learned in Itihāsas and Purāṇas. His father and Acyutaprekṣa the spiritual teacher of Madhvācārya, were all probably Ekānta Vaiṣṇavas, devoted to Viṣṇu and the Pañcarātra texts, though they were influenced by Advaita Vedānta as well (Tapasyānanda 2011, 108). Like Rāmānuja, Madhva's life was marked by a resistance to the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta. When he was sixteen, Madhva took initiation from Acyutaprekṣa in Kārey (a village near Uḍupi), who leaned more towards the teachings of Advaita Vedānta. But, despite Acyutaprekṣa's Advaita orientation, Madhva gravitated more towards a devotional understanding of the Vedic scriptures, particularly the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Madhva was able to convince Acyutaprekṣa that the true import of the Vedic scriptures was ultimately not Advaita Vedānta, which changed Acyutaprekṣa's views and made him a student of Madhva (Tapasyānanda 2011, 112-114). Madhva then founded a Kṛṣṇa temple in Uḍupi where he

remained for the remainder of his life. There, he gave discourses on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and also produced a lengthier commentary on the Vedānta Sūtra. Such activities illustrate the extent to which Madhva worked to promote his own ideology of a devotional theism. After Madhva had completed his mission of establishing his new devotional philosophy and religion, he left this world, though the exact circumstances of how exactly he left are unknown (Tapasyānanda 2011, 117-121).

Madhva appeared to be at odds with other popular philosophies during his time. Of course, he was antagonistic toward Advaita Vedānta, which he critiqued heavily throughout his writings and lectures. However, to a lesser extent, Madhva also criticized the doctrine of Rāmānuja as well. He felt that neither school had an adequate belief system. This is one of the reasons Madhva decided to start an entire new school of Vaiṣṇavism all together (Tapasyananda 2011, 113-118).

Madhva is important because he is the next torchbearer of *bhakti* after Rāmānuja, helping bring *bhakti* up further North within India. He continued Rāmānuja's critique of Advaita (Madhva was even more antagonistic towards Advaita Vedānta than Rāmānuja), and while he also had his own disagreements with Rāmānuja, he observed certain parameters in his ideology that conform to Rāmānuja's school. These parameters have also continued to remain important features of Vaiṣṇava theologies since his time (emphasis on devotion to a personal God being the most prominent example).

7.2.2 The Ideology of the Madhva Sect of Vaiṣṇavism

The doctrine of Madhva is Dvaita Vedānta, which is also known as dualism. Madhva's ideology is significant because it is arguably the most antagonistic ideology

towards Advaita Vedānta out of all the Vaiṣṇava ideologies. Like Rāmānuja, Madhva accepts three ultimate truths: God, souls, and matter. The distinction between God, souls, and matter, always remains, and the latter two are dependent on God, who creates, preserves, and destroys the world. This world is not a transformation of God, and the material cause of the world is *prakṛti*, or material energy itself (Doshi 2016, 5-6)

There are innumerable souls, which are eternal and different from God and from matter. Souls are absolutely dependent on God. Madhva states that souls and God can never have the absolute same identity. Madhva believes that souls have similar qualities as God, but this only means that the souls resemble God; it does not mean that the souls are absolutely identical to God. Bondage to this world for Madhva is real, and salvation is ultimately achieved through the grace of Viṣṇu, though knowledge and *bhakti* are important as well. Once the soul is liberated, it remains different from God as well as other souls. Thus, as we can see, Madhva is insistent not on qualifying the Advaita view as thinkers like Rāmānuja and Vallabha did, but instead insistent on maintaining the fundamental distinction between the soul and God. To Madhva, the soul never becomes God nor it does ever have the same identity as God. Madhva also believes that there are gradations in the state of liberation, and he is also the only Vaiṣṇava theologian who believes that certain souls will experience eternal damnation (Doshi 2016, 6).

Madhva's theology can thus be summarized as follows. *Brahman*, or God, is the ultimate reality. There is always a distinct difference between soul, matter, and God. Nevertheless, souls and matter are dependent on God. *Bhakti* is also important for Madhva, and ultimately, release from the world comes through the grace of Viṣṇu. This

is yet another differentiation from Advaita Vedānta philosophy, which holds that salvation come through one's own efforts and knowledge, rather than through the mercy of a deity.

7.3 Other Groups of Interest

Between Madhva and my next Vaiṣṇava school of interest, there were several other Vaiṣṇava sects that emerged. For instance, in Maharashtra, there was a *bhakti* movement that began in the 13th century with the advent of saints like Jñānadeva and Namdev, and in North India around the 14th-15th century there was a prominent *bhakti* saint named Rāmānanda (Schomer 1987, 4 and Burghart 1978). Because none of these commentators I will later discuss hail from these particular schools, I am only providing a brief mention of them.

7.4 The Importance of Vallabha

7.4.1 Vallabha's Biographical Information

The next important Vaiṣṇava teacher is Vallabha (1473-1531), who had a school of Vaiṣṇavism called the Vallabha school develop around him. He was the son of Lakṣmaṇa Bhatta and Yellamma Gāru, who were of Telugu heritage. Vallabha grew up in Benares in the state of Uttar Pradesh. When he was eleven, his father passed away and he spent his next twenty years on pilgrimage in India, ultimately traversing the subcontinent thrice (Tapasyānanda 2011, 201-202). His first pilgrimage was to South India, where he defeated a leader of Śankara's school in a philosophical debate in the city of Vijayanagar, an early indication of his the opposition he would show towards Advaita

Vedānta throughout his life. He stayed in Vijayanagar for about two or three years, where he learned the philosophy of Viṣṇu Svāmī and of Madhva, thus acquainting him with Vaiṣṇavism. There a Madhvite ascetic named Mādhavendra Yati first introduced him to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the most important text Vallabha preached in his mature years, significant for its common interpretation of emphasis on devotion to a personal God (Tapasyānanda 2011, 202-203). Vallabha is also considered the successor of Viṣṇu Svāmī, an earlier forerunner of the Rudra sect of Vaiṣṇavism (unfortunately we have little historical information on Viṣṇu Svāmī, including dates and whereabouts), though his direct lineage to him is unknown (Hawley 2015, 206, 213 and Tapasyānanda 2011, xviii, 206).

Vallabha entered into a number of philosophical debates with teachers of other schools and established his own particular school, which was also a Vaiṣṇava ideology that promoted the idea of devotion to a personal God, unlike Advaita Vedānta. He initiated large numbers of people and preached from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Tapasyānanda 2011, 207). Later in Vallabha's life, he stayed in Benares for some time and defeated many Advaitic scholars in debates, yet another example of the antagonism Vallabha showed towards Advaita Vedānta. During the last year of his life, Vallabha took *sannyāsa* (formal renunciation of the world), and shortly after he departed from this world (Tapasyānanda 2011, 210-213).

7.4.2 The Ideology of the Vallabha Sect of Vaiṣṇavism

Vallabha's doctrine is Śuddhādvaita, which means that *brahman* is pure and non-dual, untouched by *māyā*. His ideology is also known as *puṣṭi-marga*, or the path of grace

(Redington 2013, 78-79). For Vallabha, the highest reality is *brahman* or Kṛṣṇa. The interrelationship between the soul, the world, and God in Vallabha's belief system is that the individual souls and the inanimate world are parts of *brahman*, yet at the same time, they are non-different from *brahman* as well (Doshi 2016, 7-8). This distinction is important because it sets Vallabha's ideology apart from conventional Advaita Vedānta. It is also interesting to note that like Rāmānuja and unlike Madhva, Vallabha's ideology incorporates much of the language of Advaita. It also appears not to vehemently oppose it, but rather qualify Advaita in a way to make it more devotional and centered towards a personal God.

The fundamental concept in Vallabha's system is that the Lord transforms himself into the world without undergoing any changes to his fundamental nature. Therefore the world and the souls are nothing but forms of God, which have manifested due to his will. The manifestation of the soul and the world is therefore real, not an error or illusion as Advaitins posit. For Vallabha, souls are eternal parts of *brahman* and thus non-different from *brahman*. Souls only appear to be different because the bliss aspect of *brahman* is hidden in them, and due to this concealment of bliss the souls consider themselves different from *brahman* (Doshi 2016, 8).

Furthermore, Vallabha accepts the plurality of souls, each of which has God (*antaryāmi*) within them as their innermost being. Liberation for Vallabha is union of the individual soul with Kṛṣṇa, which is obtained through *bhakti*. For Vallabha, the purest form of *bhakti* is to have no other desire other than for Kṛṣṇa (Redington 2013, 80, 87). Though one can follow either the path of *karma*, *jñāna*, or *bhakti* for the attainment of

liberation, Vallabha considers his path of divine grace to be above all of these. Vallabha believes that God-realization is not possible without God's grace, which is bestowed on those who surrender themselves to the Lord. Therefore, Vallabha argues that the soul and God share the same identity, and on the attainment of liberation, the difference between them lapses and the soul realizes its true nature (Doshi 2016, 8-9).

Therefore, the relationship between God and the soul for Vallabha can be summarized as follows: the soul is considered to be one with God. But, this is different than the Advaitic notion of absolute identity because the soul never becomes *brahman* itself and remains distinct from *brahman* as his devotee. However, the soul is nevertheless a part of God, and therefore it can be said to be one with God in this way. The release of the soul from the world entails this realization of oneness with God, and the means of attainment is also through the grace of God, rather than knowledge and one's volition as in conventional Advaita Vedānta.³ Thus, even though Vallabha's ideology uses the language of Advaita Vedānta, it nevertheless remains a very different doctrine.

7.5 The Importance of Caitanya

7.5.1 Caitanya's Biographical Information

The background of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava sect (also known as the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava sect) is as follows. During the sixteenth century, the saint Caitanya (1486-1533) initiated a popular revival of *bhakti* that took place primarily in East India as well as the

3. It is interesting to note here that Vallabha's ideology is essentially also *bhedābheda*, given that the soul is both one and different from God. Though, it appears that Vallabha is disguising his ideology as a variant of Advaita.

Vṛndāvana area in northwest India (Tapasyananda 2011, 239 and Bryant 2017, Kindle Location 349). Caitanya emphasized meditations on Kṛṣṇa's *līlās* (God's divine acts of play), particularly those of his early life as described in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'s tenth book and its derived literature. Such emphasis on meditating on Kṛṣṇa's acts of play illustrates the strong emphasis the Caitanya school places on devotion to a personal God, namely, Kṛṣṇa.

Out of all the schools of Vaiṣṇavism that we have seen so far, Caitanya's claims to have the most insight into the esoteric activities of God. In fact, there are aspects of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition that are not found in any other Vaiṣṇava traditions such as a description of various ecstatic mental states and intimate relationships with Kṛṣṇa one can cultivate and reach through one's devotional practice (Bryant 2017, Kindle Locations 353-379).

7.5.2 The Ideology of the Caitanya Sect of Vaiṣṇavism

Caitanya's ideology is that Kṛṣṇa is the Highest Supreme Reality (*brahman*), who is not a formless impersonal existence but rather a personal God. He is freed from the three qualities of material nature (thus he can be said to be *nirguṇa* or without material qualities), and at the same time, he possesses innumerable auspicious qualities (thus he can be said to be *saguṇa*, or with positive qualities). Kṛṣṇa possesses three primary energies. The first type of energy is a spiritual energy known as the *para* or *cit śakti*, which itself has three components: 1) *sandhinī* (the aspect of existence), 2) *saṁvit* (the aspect of knowledge), and 3) *hlādinī* (the aspect of bliss). The second type of energy is the material energy, or *māyā*, which consists of the three *guṇas* (*sattva* (goodness), *rajas*

(passion), *tamas* (darkness) and serves to conceal the spiritual nature of the soul and keep it attached to material pleasures. The last type of energy is *jīva śakti*, or souls themselves, whose position is in between the *para śakti* and *māyā śakti* (Doshi 2016, 48-50)

The Caitanya school also believes that the God, or Kṛṣṇa is the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the world. Through his *jīva śakti*, Kṛṣṇa manifests himself in the form of innumerable infinitesimal souls, and through his *māyā śakti*, he manifests himself as the material world. Thus, to the Caitanya school the world is not an illusion but a real manifestation of God's power. God is the material cause as well as efficient cause of the world as well. Though Kṛṣṇa creates the world through his *māyā śakti*, he is untouched by *māyā* and therefore unaffected by the world's defects. At the same time, Kṛṣṇa is also both immanent and transcendent. He is in everything, and everything is in him (Doshi 2016, 50-51).

The three *śaktis* or potencies of the Lord are both simultaneously different and non-different than him. The *śaktis* are non-different from Kṛṣṇa because they have no independent existence other than him. Yet, these potencies of Kṛṣṇa are not absolutely identical with him either because they change during the process of creation. Kṛṣṇa's energies are parts and Kṛṣṇa is the whole, and just as parts can never be identical with the whole, the Lord's potencies can never be identical with him. The Caitanya Vaiṣṇava philosophy is thus called *acintyabhedābheda*, or inconceivable oneness and difference (Doshi 2016, 50-51).

In Caitanya's school, the ultimately goal is pure *bhakti* itself, rather than liberation on its own. When one attains pure *bhakti*, one realizes oneself as an eternal

servitor of God and simply endeavors to please him. Nevertheless, in Caitanya's school when the devotee achieves pure *bhakti*, he or she can choose to leave the material realm and live in the transcendental realm of Goloka, where Kṛṣṇa interacts in various activities with his devotees, who serve him. *Bhakti* is divided into various categories, which initially begins at a stage where one disciplines himself or herself devotional principles as if a practice. As the devotee matures in his or her spiritual development, he or she begins to spontaneously worship the Lord out of love rather than out of a sense of duty. This culminates in the stage of pure unalloyed love for God, where the devotee experiences intense bliss and desires only to please Kṛṣṇa (Tapasyananda 2011, 317-341).

A summary of Caitanya's theology is thus. The soul is simultaneously one with and different from God [*bhedābheda*, which was mentioned previously (see footnotes to Rāmānuja's and Vallabha's ideologies)], in the same relationship that a part has to its whole (the oneness of the soul comes from being an aspect of the existence of Kṛṣṇa, and yet the soul is different than God because it has a different capacity). Kṛṣṇa is also a person, whom the individual soul never merges into as in the case in Advaita Vedānta. Rather, there is always a distinction between the soul and God, and the soul always remains a separate individual, even when the soul attains complete perfection, an idea that contrasts the conception of spiritual perfection in Advaita Vedānta. This perfection is a state of unalloyed *bhakti* for Kṛṣṇa, which enables the devotee to leave the material realm to serve Kṛṣṇa in his realm of Goloka.

While knowledge of the correct understanding of oneself as a servitor of Kṛṣṇa is important to have, knowledge is not emphasized in Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism as much as it is

in Advaita Vedānta. In Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, *bhakti* takes the position of prime importance, being both the means to the goal as well as the goal itself. Therefore, like the ideology of the Madhva school, the Caitanya school’s ideology defines itself in sharp contrast to Advaita Vedānta.

7.5.3 A Modern Gauḍīya Example of Antagonism Towards Advaita Vedānta

One modern example that illustrates the antagonism of the Gauḍīya school towards Advaita Vedānta is seen in the writings of A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda, a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava commentator. Prabhupāda was born Abhay Charan De on September 1, 1896 in Calcutta, India to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava parents Gour Mohan De and Rajani (Goswami 2014, vii). He is well-known in recent times for founding the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava institution the “International Society for Krishna Consciousness” (ISKCON), which has centers not only in India but throughout the rest of the world. Prabhupāda is of notable interest to us because his writings of interest were written in the middle 20th century, following the wake of Vivekānanda and other Neo-Vedāntins (Goswami 2014, xxxiii-xxxix).

A clear example that illustrates how Prabhupāda’s conception of Vaiṣṇavism defines itself in contrast to Advaita Vedānta comes in his commentary to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 2.5.24. In his commentary he writes that the Advaitin, or the “impersonalist” is self-centered and has no clear conception of Kṛṣṇa, whom he again describes as the “Personality of Godhead.” According to Prabhupāda, the impersonalist’s conclusion that the Personality of Godhead takes a material shape from His original impersonal spiritual

existence for a particular mission is false and arises from their ignorance. Prabhupāda also writes that this ignorance of Kṛṣṇa’s personal feature is due to the mixture of the different *guṇas* or material qualities (Prabhupāda 1972b, 266).

Prabhupāda also adds that the Lord exercises the right not to expose himself to the impersonalists, who even after a thorough study of texts like the *Bhagavad-gītā* still remains an impersonalist due to obstinacy. This obstinacy is due to the action of one of the Lord’s energies, *yoga-māya*, which impedes the impersonalist’s ability to perceive Kṛṣṇa’s personal feature (Prabhupāda 1972b, 267). Here, Prabhupāda considers the impersonalist the kind of practitioner referred to in the *Gītā* as pursuing the path of knowledge. However, Prabhupāda also describes that such a knowledge-seeking practitioner is also characterized as self-centered by verses 7.24-7.27 in the *Gītā*.

Prabhupāda’s continual criticism of “impersonalists” reveals, is that he reads the *Gītā* as clearly promoting the path of *bhakti* over the other spiritual paths mentioned in the text (action and knowledge, or *karma* and *jñāna*), which itself contrasts Universalist notions that any spiritual path is valid. Nevertheless, there are currents within scholarship that try to categorize the *Gītā* through a Universalist lens and argue that the *Gītā* describes that all the paths of *karma*, *jñāna*, and *bhakti* are the same. For example, Laurie Patton describes in her translation of the *Gītā* that the three paths are “in productive tension with each other” and that the reader can “decide for themselves which path is

best,” thus shying away from giving any one path supremacy over the others (Patton 2008, xiv).⁶

Prabhupāda also describes that the transcendental form of the Lord is unborn and unchangeable, and thus the impersonalist errs in declaring that the Lord takes a form or material shape from His original impersonal feature because this would mean that the Lord is born and changeable (changing from an impersonal state of existence to a personal state of existence), which he is not. Prabhupāda also describes that Kṛṣṇa doesn’t take his birth like an ordinary soul, and he criticizes the impersonalists for considering Kṛṣṇa an ordinary soul like them (Prabhupāda 1972b, 267).

Prabhupāda then begins to describe that the reason impersonalists are ignorant about Kṛṣṇa’s ontological position as a personal Supreme God is because they engage in materialistic activities and artificially increase their material demands. According to Prabhupāda, in order to realize Kṛṣṇa, one has to purify the materialistic senses by *bhakti-yoga* or “devotional service.” Prabhupāda writes that the quality of goodness, (*sattva-guṇa*), or brahminical culture recommended in the Vedic literatures, is beneficial for

6. I had initially hoped to be able to do a thorough investigation into the *Gītā* and illustrate how scholars have read it too often as a Universalist text. A textual reading of the *Gītā*’s valuation of *bhakti* won’t be possible in this paper. But, a look at Prabhupāda’s commentary on the *Gītā* illustrates that certainly not all schools view the *Gītā* as a Universalist, any-approach you-take-reaches-the-same-goal-text. Rather, Prabhupāda clearly interprets the *Gītā* as a text that promotes *bhakti* to a personal God as the highest ideal (his commentary verses 9.11, 9.12, 9.14, 9.15, 9.23, 9.24, 9.25, 10.42, 11.51, 13.8-12, and 13.15, are just some of several verses where Prabhupāda brings this interpretation in). What this should tell us as scholars then, is that the reading of the *Gītā* as a Universalist text is *an interpretation*, and not an accurate account of what the *Gītā* means to its various adherents because it fails to capture the fact that various schools read different meanings out of the *Gītā*. I consider this yet another instance of the Advaita trends within academia in action. Rather than acknowledge that the *Gītā* is a text that is read differently by different schools (and thus exhibits the same type of diversity we see within the different groups under the category of Hinduism), scholars instead try to classify the *Gītā* in the same Advaitic, Universalist way that Hinduism gets categorized as.

realization of Kṛṣṇa. Only when people stop living materialistic lives and instead practice *bhakti-yoga*, can they begin to realize Kṛṣṇa's personal nature (Prabhupāda 1972b, 267).

Thus, as evidenced by this commentary, Prabhupāda is opposed to the ideology of Advaita Vedānta. His statements are highly polemical and advocate for the superiority of *bhakti-yoga* over Advaita Vedānta, which is criticized along with its proponents as being a product of ignorance. The worship of Kṛṣṇa as a person is not a means by which one realizes the impersonal *brahman*. Rather, it is a mistake to consider the impersonal *brahman* the highest manifestation of God. The true understanding of God, according to Prabhupāda, is the realization of Kṛṣṇa as a personal Supreme God, who is unlike ordinary souls bound to this world.

7.6 The Importance of these Vaiṣṇava Ideologies

As the history and ideologies of these Vaiṣṇava schools illustrate, the Indian religious landscape was not dominated by Advaita Vedānta and in fact contained many Vaiṣṇava groups whose theologies were in direct opposition to Advaita Vedānta. From the time of Rāmānuja, the various Vaiṣṇava teachers dedicated much of their energy into qualifying or rejecting Advaita Vedānta, through both their writings and in debates with Advaitins. While these Vaiṣṇava sects each had their own slightly different ideology, one common feature amongst them is their rejection of Advaita Vedānta and their emphasis on devotion towards a personal God, often identified either with Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa.

Unfortunately, this basic knowledge of how Vaiṣṇavism distinguishes itself from Advaita Vedānta seems to be ignored. Thus, contemporary Neo-Advaitins or scholars may try to erroneously subsume these groups under the category of Advaita and consider

their worship and beliefs as the same as any other devotional group, which is a major theological error. Such theological errors represent the universalist or anti-theological bias scholars have, which in turn presents a problem for the field of religious studies because it causes scholars to misclassify religions and fail to properly analyze them due to the imposition of preconceived notions of Hinduism onto them. However, when one comprehends the ways in which Vaiṣṇavism has historically contrasted itself to Advaita Vedānta, a clearer understanding of Vaiṣṇavism arises, which illustrates the problem of looking at Advaita Vedānta as a contemporary lens for Hinduism and Indian religion.

8. An In-Depth Look at Vaiṣṇava Commentaries

8.1 An In-Depth Analysis on *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.8.27 with Multiple Commentators

8.1.1 Background Information on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and Commentators

One of the most important Vaiṣṇava texts is the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which is centered particularly on Kṛṣṇa, one of the main manifestations of Viṣṇu. Traditionally, there have been several commentators who have provided their own interpretation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in the form of commentaries on specific verses. While the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is a text that's open to interpretation, including an Advaita Vedānta interpretation, Vaiṣṇava commentaries put forth many views that are contrary to and irreconcilable with the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta. Thus, I will make the argument that the various Vaiṣṇava interpretations of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* problematize the view that Advaita Vedānta works for all interpretation of Hinduism.

In particular, I will look at the pre-modern commentaries on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* verse 1.8.27¹, spoken by Queen Kuntī, which is as follows: “My salutations to you, you who understand the abandoned and for whom the conditions of the qualities of material nature are invalid. My salutations to you, you are self-satisfied, peaceful, and the

1. My rationale for choosing this verse is as follows. I originally intended on addressing the problem of suffering in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* for my Masters' Thesis. I had chosen to translate all the commentaries for this verse originally with the intention of exploring how Prabhupāda, based his commentary off of previous commentators. I had translated these commentators before changing my Thesis topic, so thus I had it already on hand. As it turned out, the commentaries on this verse were suitable for discussing the theme of how Vaiṣṇavas throughout history have held views contrary to Advaita Vedānta.

However, the fact that this verse was chosen without the original intention of illustrating how it depicts anti-Advaita sentiments and yet still manages to do just that, I believe serves to reinforce my point even more. This is because the anti-Advaitic sentiments are so pronounced in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* commentaries that even a verse selected at random (as opposed to a verse specifically targeted with the intention of bringing out anti-Advaitic sentiments) will contain such anti-Advaitic sentiments, thus revealing how Vaiṣṇavism defined itself in contrast to Advaitic notions.

lord of absolute unity” (My translation). With the exception of Viśvanāntha and Prabhupāda (both had extant commentaries translated into English), I translated all these commentaries from a compendium of commentaries compiled by Kṛṣṇaśaṅkara Śāstrī.²

To contextualize the commentaries, I can provide background information for the various commentators that I will discuss. With the exception of Prabhupāda, all these commentators are the ones whose commentaries are included in Kṛṣṇaśaṅkara Śāstrī’s compendium of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* commentaries on its first book.

- Śrīdhara Svāmī (1327-1378 or 1353-1414) – He likely resided near Orissa³ (Okita 2014, 65). He is one of the first commentators on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and his commentary is the first extant full commentary on the entire *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Sheridan 1994, 48). It is difficult to ascertain what Śrīdhara Svāmī’s theological affiliation was. Śrīdhara Svāmī was apparently a follower of Śaṅkara’s Advaita (Monism) school of Vedānta, though, despite this Advaita affiliation, his commentary is largely devotional in character (Gupta 2016, 5). Upon a close reading of his commentary, it becomes clear that the theological system he follows is not strictly in accordance with that of Advaita Vedānta, as pointed out by Dr. B.N.K Sharma (Sharma 1960, 128-129).⁴

2. I tried to ascertain Kṛṣṇaśaṅkara Śāstrī’s theological affiliation; however, I was unable to do so.

3. The reason he likely lived near Orissa is because he became a direct disciple of a Śaṅkarite monk (Ramakrishnananda Swami) in the monastery of Kapilasha, a famous Saivite shrine in Orissa. Moreover, Śrīdhara is known to have influenced the Caitanya school in Bengal, so this would be a reasonable assumption as to his whereabouts.

4. According to one scholar, Bishnu Dash, viewed from the stand point of philosophy, Śrīdhara was opposed to Sankara's absolute monism and advocated pure monism (Śuddhādvaita) which was preached by Viṣṇu Svāmī, Dash 2010, 88). Another scholar, Kiyokazu Okita, has also analyzed the theology of Śrīdhara Svāmī and situates him somewhere in between the *abheda* philosophy of Śaṅkara (God and the soul are not different from one

- Śukadeva - Little is known about him (including his life dates and location), but it appears that his commentary is based off of Nimbarka's school of Vaiṣṇavism (Mishra 1998, 216).⁵
- Viraraghava - Little is known about him, though he is known to have lived around the fourteenth century (Lorenz 2014, 116). According to one scholar, Vijay Mishra, he is affiliated with Rāmānuja's school of Vaiṣṇavism (Mishra 1998, 218). A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami writes in one of his commentaries to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that Viraraghava belongs to the Śrī Vaiṣṇava school (the school of Rāmānuja), which substantiates this claim (Prabhupāda's commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 4.8.54). However, his location and where he spread Vaiṣṇavism is unclear.
- Vijaydhvaja Tīrtha (1410-1450) – He comes from the Madhva school and lived near Udupi in South India. Like Madhva, Vijaydhvaja Tīrtha powerfully criticizes Advaitic interpretations of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in his *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* commentary called the *Padaratnāvali* (Sharma 1960, 458).

another) and the *bhedābheda* philosophy of Rāmānuja and Jīva Gosvāmi (God and the soul and both one and different from one another) (Okita 2014, 123). Lastly, another scholar, Sambidanana Das, claims that Śrīdhara Svāmī may have been affiliated with Viṣṇu Svāmī's school of Vaiṣṇavism (Das 1991, 146-148).

5. Nimbārka is another Vaiṣṇava who had a school develop around his teachings. Some say he died in 1162, around 25 years after Rāmānuja is supposed to have passed away. While dates surrounding his birth and life are uncertain, it is most likely that he flourished a little later in the 12th century. He was born of Telugu parents, Jagannātha and Sarasvatī. He was born in Nimbapur, which is identified with a place now known as Naidupattana in the modern Bellary District in Karnataka (South India). Nimbarka was a devotee of Kṛṣṇa and he spent most of his life in Mathura, the birthplace of Kṛṣṇa. Unfortunately, nothing else is known about his life (Tapasyananda 2011, 85).

His ideology was Dvaitādvaita, or identity in difference (synonymous with *bhedābheda*) which holds that the soul is both one with God and different from God, just as a part is both one with and different from the whole. It also stressed devotion to a personal God (Kṛṣṇa) as a means of liberation (Doshi 2016, 6-7).

- Vallabha – Described previously
- Jīva Gosvāmī (1509-1595) - He spent much of his life in Vṛndāvana (in North India where Kṛṣṇa lived), though he also oversaw missionary work in Bengal as well (Das 1991, 532-539). He is affiliated with the Gauḍīya school of Vaiṣṇavism, and he was the nephew of the prominent Gauḍīya teachers, Rūpa and Sanātana Gosvāmī. He was a prolific philosopher and authored many theological treatises of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism (Stewart 2010, 371).
- Viśvanātha Cakravarti Thakura (roughly 1638 or 1654 to 1708 or 1710) (Das 1991, 711-712) - He is affiliated with Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, and he acted as a revivalist for the tradition after the death of Jīva Gosvāmī. Like Jīva, he also mainly resided in Vṛndāvana (Das 1991, 711-712). He composed a number of Sanskrit commentaries on important texts within the Gauḍīya tradition, including the *Śārārtha Darśinī*, his commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Stewart 2010, 379).
- Śrī Vaṃśīdhara (1820-1890) - Little is known about him. It's difficult to ascertain his theological affiliation, but given that his commentary is called *Bhavartha-dipika-prakasha*, it seems that he follows Śrīdhara, whose commentary is the *Bhavartha-dipika* (Lorenz 2014, 126).
- Prabhupāda - described previously.

8.1.2 The Theme of Devotion as a Vaiṣṇava Foil to Advaita Vedānta's Emphasis on Knowledge

One theme mentioned by the commentators that runs against conventional Advaita Vedānta notions is devotion to Kṛṣṇa. In their commentaries, Śrīdhara, Vijaydhvaja, Vallabha, Jīva Gosvāmī, and Vaṁśīdhara all describe the importance of developing devotion toward Kṛṣṇa. Included in this theme of devotion is also the idea that devotees of Kṛṣṇa know no one else other than Kṛṣṇa. For instance, referring to Kṛṣṇa's devotees' relationship with him, Vallabha writes “*atas te eva jānanti nānya ityarthah,*” which asserts that the devotees know (*jānanti*) no other (*nānya*) apart from Kṛṣṇa (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 1965, 401-402)

Thus, these commentaries differ from conventional understandings of Advaita Vedānta. The emphasis on devotion is not present in the original doctrine of Advaita Vedānta, which asserts that devotion perpetuates one's bondage to the world due to the fact that it strengthens one's conception of duality (in this case between the worshiper and the object of worship). Rather, Advaita Vedānta places a greater emphasis on knowledge, which is viewed as essential for salvation from the world. Even Neo-Vedānta, which holds a more accepting view towards devotion, still wouldn't regard devotion as superior to other spiritual practices, as these commentators argue. Therefore these commentaries illustrate that it's problematic to assert that all Hindu perspectives can be viewed through the lens of Advaita Vedānta. As we see, the supremacy of devotion as advocated by these Vaiṣṇava commentators doesn't align with the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta.

8.1.3 Vaiṣṇavism’s Method for Liberation

Another key difference between the views espoused by the Vaiṣṇava commentators and that of conventional Advaita Vedānta concerns the methodology for the soul to attain liberation from the world. According to commentators like Śrīdhara, Śukadeva, Viraraghava, Vijaydhvaja, Vallabha, and Viśvanātha, Kṛṣṇa is responsible for one’s liberation, which he gives due to one’s devotion for him. For example, Vallabha states “*kiñca yairapekṣyate tairmokṣārthamapekṣyate, niyataphalatvāt tasya,*” which means that for those who hope for liberation, such liberation results as a fruit of attachment for Kṛṣṇa (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 1965, 401-402). This contrasts the viewpoint held in conventional Advaita Vedānta, which asserts that liberation is caused by proper knowledge, which one acquires through one’s own endeavor. Thus, subsuming Vaiṣṇavism under Advaita Vedānta is problematic because the two ideologies have fundamentally different means of attainment for attaining liberation from the world.

8.1.4 Vaiṣṇavism’s Emphasis on Reciprocity

The Vaiṣṇava commentators, in particular Vijaydhvaja, Viśvanātha, and Prabhupāda, also place an emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between God and the soul. The essence of this reciprocal relationship is that God and his devotees both experience a great love for one another and each one of them considers themselves the property of the other. As Prabhupāda also adds, this also enables the devotees of Kṛṣṇa to overcome or transcend the *guṇas* or qualities of material nature, illustrated in his statement: “because the Lord is the property of the devotees, and the devotees are the property of the Lord reciprocally, the devotees are certainly transcendental to the modes

of material nature” (Prabhupāda 1972a, 381). This type of loving, reciprocal relationship is incompatible with Advaita Vedānta due to its ideology that God and the soul are one and thus incapable of having a relationship with one another. As a final point, it’s notable that in particular, it is the Gauḍīya and Madhva commentators that emphasize this the most, which likely results due to their stronger emphasis on the distinction between the soul and God.

8.1.5 Kṛṣṇa is the Highest Goal

Vijaydhvaja in particular comments that the devotee of God, or Kṛṣṇa believes that there is nothing more excellent than Kṛṣṇa (*śri kṛṣṇādanyat kimcanopādeyam na vidyate yeṣām te akimcana*) (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 1965, 401). While one could try to interpret this through an Advaitic lens and argue that Vijaydhvaja intends to say that there is nothing higher than *brahman*, this seems unlikely due to Vijaydhvaja’s affiliation with the Madhva school, which is the Vaiṣṇava school most antagonistic towards Advaita Vedānta and its aim of attaining monistic liberation. Such acceptance of Kṛṣṇa, rather than liberation, as the highest goal, is yet another sharp distinction between Vaiṣṇavism and Advaita Vedānta.

8.1.6 Kṛṣṇa as the Highest God

Jīva Gosvāmī also puts forth a similar idea to Kṛṣṇa being the highest goal. He argues that Kṛṣṇa is the Highest God (*paramamahadeva*) (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 1965, 401). While one could interpret this statement through the lens of Advaita Vedānta to mean that Kṛṣṇa is synonymous with *brahman*, this doesn’t seem likely given Jīva’s Gauḍīya

affiliation. Rather, it's more likely that Jīva intends to state that the personality of Kṛṣṇa is the supreme God over all other lesser deities, which is in accordance with the Gauḍīya ideology. This runs counter to Advaita Vedānta, which doesn't regard a personal God as the ultimately reality, but rather *brahman*, which isn't viewed as a person but rather a spiritual force that one attempts to realize and merge into. Jīva's sectarian claim of the supremacy of Kṛṣṇa also contrasts Universalist notions, which would assert that there are not supreme gods, but rather, any form of worship leads to the same final goal.

8.1.7 The Personal Nature of Kṛṣṇa's Existence

Several commentators, namely, Viśvanātha, Vamśīdhara, and Prabhupāda, also describe Kṛṣṇa either as a personal God, or in ways indicative of Kṛṣṇa's personal nature. Viśvanātha for example describes that Kṛṣṇa possesses the characteristics of being detached from those who are not his devotees as well as the capacity to show mercy (Cakravarti 2008, 309). Vamśīdhara also describes that Kṛṣṇa experiences attachment to his devotees (*akimcaneṣu āsaktopyanyatrodāsīna eva*) and doesn't exhibit anger at the offenses of devotees (*bhaktānam aparādhe satyapi na tvam kupyasi*) (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 1965, 400). All these various qualities mentioned (ability to experience attachment, ability to forgive and show mercy, etc.) are those one would expect from a person rather than an impersonal force.

Nevertheless, even if there were somehow an Advaitin rationale for how such qualities could be within an impersonal *brahman*, then Prabhupāda's commentary leaves no doubt that his Vaiṣṇavism at least emphasizes the personal nature of God's existence. Prabhupāda explicitly refers to Kṛṣṇa as the "Supreme Personality of Godhead"

(Prabhupāda 1972a, 381). This term appears to originate from Prabhupāda’s own guru, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasavati Thakura, who coined the term in order to distinguish the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava view of Kṛṣṇa as a personal God from other common Hindu theological views of an impersonal God (Vikāsa 2009, 328). Both Prabhupāda and his teacher’s usage of such a term is yet another further illustration of how Vaiṣṇavism often defines in contrast to the ideology of Advaita Vedānta by emphasizing a personal God instead of the impersonal *brahman*.

8.1.8 The Different Destinations of the Monist and the Devotee

Prabhupāda in particular also describes that there are different destinations for the monist and the devotee when they perfect themselves in their respective discipline. He writes that the monist “merges within the personal effulgence of the Lord called the *brahmajyoti*, whereas the devotee enters into the transcendental pastimes of the Lord, which are never understood as material” (Prabhupāda 1972a, 381). These different ends for the monist and the devotee contradict the idea that Vaiṣṇavism can be subsumed within Advaita Vedānta, for its goal as described here is markedly different than the goal of Advaita Vedānta. The idea that there are different destinations for different spiritual practitioners is also antagonistic towards a Universalist reading, which would assert that all spiritual disciplines ultimately reach the same goal.

8.2 Jīva Gosvāmī’s Commentary to 1.8.25

Jīva Gosvāmī’s commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* verse 1.8.25 also illuminates various Vaiṣṇava notions that run counter to Advaita Vedānta. Like verse 1.8.27, Queen Kunti also speaks this to Kṛṣṇa, I translate the verse as follows: “O teacher

of the universe, may there continually be calamities for us everywhere. By this we will have sight of you, by which it may be that we never have to see the coming into existence again” (My translation). Jīva commentary mentions that by looking at the sweetness of Kṛṣṇa (*īdṛśamādhuryayabhāvāt*), one doesn’t have to see birth again (*punar na jātam darśanam*) and at the same time goes towards that which one hasn’t gone to before (*samyak pratītyasya tat apūrvam*) (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 1965, 401).

Thus, Jīva’s commentary has a more devotional element to it. His comment about how one attains freedom from this world by looking the beauty of Kṛṣṇa departs from conventional Advaita ideology. In conventional Advaita ideology, devotion is seen as a practice that enslaves one in ignorance. Even in Neo-Vedānta where devotion (among several other practices) finds acceptance, the deity is ultimately only useful insofar as it provides the practitioner with a spiritual practice that itself culminates in realizing oneself to be *brahman*. Jīva’s depiction of Kṛṣṇa however, depicts him as an object of love and someone who possesses sweetness, attraction to which liberates from the cycle of birth and death. Thus, according to Jīva, salvation does not come from knowledge of oneself as *brahman* as Advaita philosophy would hold, but rather, salvation comes from attraction to Kṛṣṇa. Whereas an Advaitin would look at the beauty of the deity as illusory and unreal, to Jīva, appreciating the beauty of the deity does not further bind one to material existence, and instead, it actually carries one beyond this world to the spiritual realm.

This idea is not unique to Jīva and is shared by other Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas as well as by the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* itself. For instance, in the *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* of Rūpa Gosvāmī, Jīva Gosvāmī’s uncle, the idea of the devotee becoming attracted to Kṛṣṇa’s

beauty is also described through the citation of various verses in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Rūpā Gosvāmī first cites the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* verse 3.25.36, which states that “*bhakti* steals away the mind and senses of the persons who do not desire liberation, by the prema arising from realizing the attractive limbs, pastimes, charming words, glances and playful smiles of the generous Lord” (Gosvāmī 2006, Kindle locations 1797-1805). Such devotees, who experience love or *prema* for Kṛṣṇa by having been attracted by his various features, have no difficulty achieving any of the four aims of life, namely, religiosity, economic development, sensual pleasure, or liberation (Gosvāmī 2006, Kindle locations 1820-1826). Indeed, such devotees may be offered one of five different types of liberation from the world (Gosvāmī 2006, Kindle locations 1847).

In a similar light, another important point of difference between Advaita Vedānta and Jīva’s Vaiṣṇavism, as illustrated in this verse, is the role that the deity itself plays in salvation. In Advaita philosophy, salvation comes through man’s own spiritual practice and attempt to realize the oneness of one’s soul with brahman, and in Neo-Advaita the deity is only useful because it enables one to attain this monistic realization. For Jīva however, the deity is not an assistant to one’s salvation, the deity is also necessary for one’s salvation and transference to the spiritual realm. Thus, while emphasis on liberation from the world might be a common emphasis in Advaita philosophy and Jīva’s Vaiṣṇavism, Jīva clearly departs from other Advaita ideals in his treatment of the deity.

8.3 Importance of These Vaiṣṇava Commentaries in Relationship to Advaita Vedānta and In Relationship to Defining “Hinduism”

While Advaita Vedānta may have had a prominent role throughout history, to the point where other sects incorporate its language into its own religious framework, this does not mean that all religious groups in India accepted the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta wholesale. As these commentaries show, although Vaiṣṇavism may use the language of Advaita in explaining its ideology, Vaiṣṇavism nevertheless variously defines itself sometimes in stark opposition to Advaita Vedānta and Universalistic notions of Hinduism. Therefore, I argue that it is an error to classify all Indian religions as if they were one religious entity, Hinduism, and then represent Hinduism as if it were Advaita Vedānta.

Due to the varied nature of Indian religion, I think there should be a shift in how we categorize Hinduism. Rather than view Hinduism as a single religion, I believe it would be more helpful to look at Hinduism as an umbrella term for the varieties of religious expression found within India. The various religious groups subsumed under Hinduism should be acknowledged as distinct religious groups whose views can differ dramatically from one another rather than groups that are all united in their ideology.

Unfortunately, due to the popularity of Advaita Vedānta, scholars insist on viewing Hinduism through an Advaitic lens even in situations where other ideologies are more appropriate. As we have just seen, the major Vaiṣṇava schools contrast the notions of Advaita Vedānta. This is especially the case with the commentaries of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, where most Vaiṣṇava interpretations are explicitly against the principles of

Advaita Vedānta. Nevertheless, perhaps due to the prevalence of Advaitic and Universalist trends within the academic study of Hinduism, scholars insist on describing the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as a text that promotes Advaitic theism.

Daniel Sheridan's *The Advaitic Theism of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is one such example. In my conclusion, I will analyze his book and point out the inconsistencies and errors in his argument to illustrate how the prevalence of Advaitic thought in Hindu scholarship influences scholars to make erroneous claims that are rooted in poor theological understanding (which itself points to a larger problem within Hindu scholarship of allowing our preconceived notions to influence our perception of religion and improperly describe the religions we study).

9. Conclusion

This research illustrates the problem of describing Hinduism as a Universalist religion as well as the use of Advaita Vedānta to make that argument. In the academic study of religion, Advaita Vedānta has become a lens for understanding Indian religious views. Now, whether the ultimate reality is actually that which is described by Advaita Vedānta or not is a metaphysical matter beyond the purview of secular, academic scholarship to determine.

As we have seen, Vaiṣṇavism in particular has had a history of defining itself in contrast to Advaita Vedānta. All of the major Vaiṣṇava schools that have been analyzed in this thesis hold views that either qualify Advaita Vedānta to bring it more in line with a devotional ideology (Rāmānuja and Vallabha's schools), or contest it outright (Madhva and Caitanya school). As scholars, we need to be careful to ensure that we are properly representing the traditions that we study rather than project our preconceived notions onto them. As my analysis of the Vaiṣṇava commentaries has shown, there are many distinct features in Vaiṣṇavism that cause it to be incompatible with the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta. While Advaita Vedānta may be a suitable lens of interpretation for certain texts, we should at least be aware of the other viewpoints held by other Indian religious sects and be mindful that an Advaitin reading misrepresents such sects.

An apt illustration of the dangers of projecting Advaita views onto on research is illustrated in Daniel Sheridan's *The Advaitic Theism of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. I happened to stumble upon this text while searching for books in the Duke University

Divinity School Library. After going through it, I was surprised to find that such a book could be found in university library given its various issues.

In his book, Sheridan argues that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* promotes a type of “Advaitic Theism.” While he is not arguing that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* promotes Advaita Vedānta per se, I still find the usage of the language of Advaita to describe the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* problematic for a number of reasons. First of all, as we’ve discussed a number of times already, Advaita Vedānta rejects the conception of a personal God in lieu of an impersonal God, *brahman*. However, by Sheridan’s own admission, the absolute reality according to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is ultimately personal (Sheridan 1986, 24). Moreover, Advaita Vedānta stresses the importance of knowledge over other spiritual processes. However, as Sheridan himself states, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* emphasizes the importance of devotion over knowledge (Sheridan 1986, 91). Furthermore, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (3.29.14), a verse that Sheridan states, describes that devotees of the Lord will reject liberation in favor of serving the Lord (Sheridan 1986, 93). This is also in stark opposition to Advaita Vedānta, which holds the attainment of liberation as its highest goal.

Thus, to use the language of Advaita to describe the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which has the ideology of a personal God, is inappropriate given the incompatibility with the ideology of Advaita Vedānta with the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*’s theology. Instead, what the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* advocates for, as Sheridan himself describes, is a theological position called *bhedābheda*, which Sheridan describes as difference in identity (Sheridan 1986, 139). We have also seen the idea of *bhedābheda* explicitly in the Caitanya school (though

as mentioned it also describes the ideology of Rāmānuja and Vallabha as well), which argued that the soul is both simultaneously one with and different from God. Sheridan includes Vaiṣṇava theologians such as Jīva Gosvāmī, Rāmānuja, Vallabha, and Bhāskara under the category of *bhedābheda*. However, Sheridan also places the *bhedābheda* position under a broader category of Advaita, though also in a separate category from the Advaita Vedānta of Śāṅkara (and likely other major Advaita proponents) (Sheridan 1986, 139).¹

The fact that Sheridan lumps the category of *bhedābheda* under Advaita is itself a problem. While certain Vaiṣṇava theologians like Rāmānuja and Vallabha use the term “Advaita” in their theologies (Rāmānuja’s ideology is Viśiṣṭādvaita and Vallabha’s ideology is Śuddhādvaita), their positions are nevertheless much different than conventional Advaita Vedānta. When one looks at all the Vaiṣṇava theologies together, one finds that they are much more in line with each other than they are with Advaita Vedānta (for instance the emphasis on the importance of devotion to a personal God is one shared trait among them not found in Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta). In fact, given that Madhva’s Dvaita philosophy also emphasizes the importance of devotion to a personal God, I would argue that the *bhedābheda* Vaiṣṇava theologies are closer to Madhva’s Dvaita Vedānta than they are to Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta.

Nevertheless, because Sheridan defines the position of *bhedābheda* as an Advaitic position, he believes he can make the claim that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which he

1. The broad categories Sheridan uses are Advaita and Dvaita. Within the category of Advaita, there is *abheda*, or absolute oneness, and *bhedābheda* (oneness and difference, or as he describes, difference in identity). Within the category of Dvaita, there is *bheda*, or an absolute difference.

believes promotes a *bhedābheda* position, is a text that holds an Advaitic Theistic perspective. However, previously explained, there is a problem of using the language of Advaita to define the theological position of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. However, I think an even bigger problem is the problem that Sheridan's classification of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as an Advaitic text represents an example of the ways the importance of Advaita Vedānta has been magnified within academia to an extent greater than it warrants. One implication of this is that scholars become motivated to define things in terms of Advaita, either in terms of language, or by projecting an Advaitic reading onto a particular text. This is a dangerous bias for the field of religious studies, because it can obscure our objectivity and cause us to misrepresent religious expression by projecting our own views, biases, predilections, etc. on the religions that we study. Sheridan's assertion that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* promotes Advaitic Theism may have some credibility; however, this credibility is only gained by defining a particular theological stance (*bhedābheda*) under the broader category of Advaita. However, given the marked difference of the *bhedābheda* category from Advaita Vedānta, one wonders why it the *bhedābheda* position has to be subsumed within Advaita and can't be an entire category of its own. It seems one of the driving motivators for such a decision is the importance we as scholars place on Advaita and the subsequent need that results from this to define everything in terms of Advaita, even though the reality is that there are a number of differing viewpoints that should be looked at on their own merit instead of on their relationship to Advaita. If Advaita wasn't overly emphasized by scholars, Sheridan's scholarship may

have defined itself much differently, which should cause us as scholars to seriously consider the impact an overemphasis on Advaita Vedānta has for our research.

The same considerations can be applied to viewing Hinduism through a Universalist lens. Applying a Universalistic lens to Indian religions becomes problematic when these religions themselves don't consider themselves Universalistic religions. As the commentaries mentioned previously have shown, there are various aspects of Vaiṣṇavism that are inconsistent with Universalism, such as the idea that *bhakti* is not merely a valid path, but rather the highest path. Additionally, we also find within these commentaries claims like Kṛṣṇa is the highest God and the existence of different destinations for the monist as well as devotee.

Nevertheless, despite the issues present in categorizing Hinduism as Advaita Vedānta or Universalist, Hinduism will likely remain relevant as a meaningful term to identify Indian religion. Thus it is worth considering how to use the term in scholarship going forward. People in India will continue to use and to contest the use of the term as a self-identifier, and yet it has to be possible to find a way to use the term that reflects critical scholarship. There are other ways that scholars could describe Hinduism other than as a unified, Universalistic religion. For example, one classification of Hinduism according to Julius Lipner is as a “family of religious traditions whose kinship is based on the distinctive characteristic of ‘Hinduness’” (Lipner 2005, 33). Of course, scholars would then have to determine what exactly is meant by “Hinduness” too then.

Certainly, the various religions categorized under the banner of Hinduism share common *features*, but this does not mean that they are all the exact same religion or share

a single worldview. As the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all share common features, but are not labeled as one religion, Hinduism too could be broken down into its various sects without making the claim that such sects can all be viewed through the same perspective. A desideratum would be a definition of Hinduism that describes how Hinduism is not a singular religion per say, but an umbrella term for the varieties of religious expression within India, which share common features but remain individual distinct religions nonetheless.

I have debated my thoughts on breaking down the banner of Hinduism as it is currently constructed all together and allowing its units (Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism, Advaita Vedānta, Śaktism, etc.) to stand on their own merit rather than as part of a collective Hindu identity, or allowing the concept of Hinduism to stand albeit with a more accurate definition of what it really is. With respect to the latter idea, scholars would be need to be sensitive to the differences between developing a critical, descriptive language and making room for the ongoing use of the term by believers to whatever end. I suspect that the former idea may be difficult given that certain individuals may have amalgamated various Hindu religions together to create their own distinct unique practice and beliefs that don't neatly fall into one of the smaller categories of Hindu sects. It may also prove troublesome to the academic study of religion in America, which still retains its Judeo-Christian parochialism preferences and therefore would prefer the convenience of labeling everything Hindu as one religion rather than break down Hinduism into its various distinct religions. I think I'm inclined towards the latter as long as Hinduism is given proper treatment and not classified as a single religion through an Universalist,

Advaita Vedānta lens and various groups are studied without the imposition of an artificial Advaita Vedānta reading onto them.

Going forward, it will also be helpful to also be aware when political ideas influence our understanding of religion. As we have seen with the rise of Neo-Vedānta, political ideas of national freedom heavily influenced the proponents of Neo-Vedānta to shape the ideology of Neo-Vedānta in a particular way. While the scholars of religion should be aware of the various factors that influence religion and acknowledge that religion responds to the needs of people at the time, we should nevertheless be able to keep a clear account of history and know when certain currents of thought have acquired greater influence in order to prevent ourselves from reading that influence back in time.

In conclusion, the ways in which we view Hinduism need to be seriously questioned and challenged. Because the notion of Hinduism itself is a recent construct, I believe we as scholars should work towards acquiring a more mature view of Hinduism and Indian religions. It's important to deconstruct Hinduism and understand the historical factors that led to its formation, and it's also important to take a holistic view at India's various religions in order to begin to more accurately describe it. While further research may be required in order to provide a more complete understanding of Hinduism as well as Indian religion, I believe eliminating the unhelpful and erroneous biases we've acquired will enable us to move forward as scholars.

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