

Divine Exposures: Religion and Imposture in Colonial India

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Department of  
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2009

ABSTRACT

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## ABSTRACT

My dissertation asks how narratives of religious fraud have been used to rethink Hinduism. It begins in a theoretical register by arguing that the unmasking of charlatans serves as a metonym for the secularizing procedures of modernity more broadly. Tales of charlatans' exposure by secularist skeptics promise a disenchanted world freed from the ill-gotten influence of sham divines; such tales evacuate the immanent frame of charismatic god-men, thereby allowing the extension and consolidation of secular power. I trace the trope of charlatanic exposure, beginning with Enlightenment anxieties about "priestcraft," continuing on to nineteenth century criticisms of religion, and then making a lateral move to colonial India. I suggest that by the 1830s it had become difficult for many English critics to extricate the problem of priestly imposture from the broader problematic of empire and, more specifically, from the specter of the "crafty brahmin." I track the cultural crosscurrents that conjoined English and Indian anticlericalisms, not only to insist on the centrality of colonial thinkers to the constitution of modernity, but also to reconsider modernity's putative secularity. The "anticlerical modernity" that I identify brings religious and secular skeptics together in a shared war on sacerdotal charisma, best observed at the interstices of empire.

The dissertation disperses the intellectual lineage of the "imposture theory of religion" by rerouting it through colonial India. The imposture theory, or the notion that religion is but a ruse concocted by crafty priests to dupe gullible masses, was central to the emergence of secular modernity and its mistrust of religion. Closely associated with the English and French Enlightenments, it was also pervasive in British polemics against Indian

religions. My dissertation demonstrates how in its colonial redeployment the imposture theory came to abut Indic imaginaries of religious illusion, ranging from folkloric spoofs of gurus' authority to philosophical debates about the ontological status of "maya." Starting from the religious controversies of the colonial era, my interrogation of Indic illusion extends from the ninth century philosopher Shankaracharya to the sixteenth century saint Vallabhacharya to the twentieth century guru Osho. Its focus, however, is on three nineteenth century religious reformers: Karsandas Mulji, Dayanand Saraswati, and H.P Blavatsky. Through archival research, textual analysis (in Hindi, Gujarati, and English), and theoretical inquiry, I insinuate these three colonial thinkers into the history of the imposture theory of religion. In doing so, my aim is to contribute to scholarship on the genealogy of religion, particularly in colonial contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION: THEORIZING IMPOSTURE

The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of men is a demand for their *real* happiness. The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a *call to abandon a condition which requires illusions*.

Karl Marx, 1843 <sup>1</sup>

The divine “pretender” stood exposed, and he knew it. His head and hands ceased their ecstatic gyrations, and he confessed to the crowd that the Goddess had left him. The Rev. William Bowley was pleased. A man on a mission, he had rushed to the banyan tree earlier that 1820 morning, upon learning of the blacksmith who claimed to speak with a voice divine. Bowley came to the banyan with a message: “I told them that several of them seemed to have combined together; and to have contrived this scheme to deceive the people in order to extort money from them.” Hearing his words, the crowd began to laugh. As Bowley later wrote in his journal, “they acknowledged that it was no more than I had said.”<sup>2</sup>

Bowley’s tale, though presented as fact, is necessarily part fable. There below the banyan, the British missionary enacted a simple morality play that has proved one of modernity’s most potent mythologies. Three stock characters take the stage: the imposter, the skeptic, and the duped. In this tale, the first and the second characters vie for control of the third. Despite their enmity, these two non-duped figures are more like each other than either is like the crowd; sunk in credulity, its too-easy belief sets it

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1972), 12.

<sup>2</sup> “Hindoo Delusions,” *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1820), 121.

at an irreducible remove from those who see through illusion. Indeed, the entire tale is predicated on the stark separation of belief from doubt. This definitive rupture distinguishes the players, and it secures the tale's purportedly happy ending. In the fable of divine exposure, nary a trace of faith can haunt a crowd once delivered to the certitudes of disbelief.

In India, British colonialism used the imposture narrative to provide a moral justification for empire. British skeptics would liberate Indians, and especially Hindus, from the despotic enchantments of their fake divines—from what one observer called “the tyrannical swami-ism of modern India.”<sup>3</sup> Imperial ideologues adapted a long history of English anticlericalism to a colonial context where screeds against sacerdotal authority served a distinctive function. As Indian culture became firmly identified with religion, allegations of religious fraud were able to breach this last domain of native sovereignty. Precisely because it was overdetermined by imperial discourse, however, “belief” emerged in colonial India as a highly resonant mode of cultural and political praxis. In doubt's empire, acts of belief were often the only acts that could challenge secular authority.

This dissertation interrogates the discourse of religious fraud in the nineteenth century. It begins by arguing that the unmasking of charlatans serves as a metonym for the secularizing procedures of colonial modernity. Tales of charlatans' exposure by secularist skeptics promise a disenchanting world freed from the ill-gotten influence of sham divines; they evacuate the immanent frame of charismatic god-men and thereby allow the extension and consolidation of secular power. I trace the trope of charlatanic

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<sup>3</sup> “Karsandas Mulji's Travels,” *Bombay Saturday Review*, August 4, 1866

exposure, beginning with Enlightenment anxieties about “priestcraft,” continuing on to nineteenth century criticisms of religion, and then making a lateral move to colonial India. I suggest that by the 1830s it had become difficult for many British critics to extricate the problem of priestly imposture from the broader problematic of empire and, more specifically, from the specter of the “crafty brahmin.”<sup>4</sup> I track the cultural crosscurrents that conjoined British and Indian anticlericalisms, not only to insist on the centrality of colonial thinkers to the constitution of modernity, but also to reconsider modernity’s putative secularity. The “anticlerical modernity” that I identify brings religious and secular skeptics together in a shared war on sacerdotal charisma, best observed at the interstices of empire.

The dissertation thus takes up the “imposture theory of religion”—the idea that religion per se is a fraud perpetrated on humanity, a nefarious ruse concocted by clever priests to dupe and control the gullible masses—and reroutes it through colonial India. Because of its polemic mobility, “priestcraft” could be appropriated by the colonized and refitted to cultural contexts well beyond the fold of Western Christendom. I show how in its colonial redeployment the imposture theory came to abut Indic imaginaries of religious illusion, ranging from folkloric spoofs of gurus’ authority to philosophical debates about the ontological status of “māyā.” I use colonial-era controversies to a sketch history of illusion that extends from the ninth-century philosopher Śaṅkarācārya to the sixteenth-century saint Vallabhacārya to the twentieth-century guru Osho. My focus, however, is on three nineteenth-century religious reformers:

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<sup>4</sup> A note about orthography: throughout the dissertation, I use the archaic spelling “brahmin” to signal period rhetoric about Indian religions, both inside and outside marked quotations. When referring to the *varṇa* in a more neutral sense, I use the preferred spelling, “brahman.” Capitalization should occur only within quotations. Apologies for any confusion caused by this necessary inconsistency.

Karsandās Muljī, Dayānand Saraswatī, and H.P Blavatsky. Through archival research, textual analysis (in Hindi, Gujarati, and English), and theoretical inquiry, I insinuate these three colonial thinkers into the history of the imposture theory of religion.

In a sense, the dissertation revisits and rewrites William Howitt's *The Popular History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations* (1833), a text discussed at length in Chapter 1. Riding the newly globalized concept "religion," Howitt mounted an ostensibly universal critique of priestcraft, sweeping up Greeks and Incas, Druids and Hindus into a one grand anticlerical narrative. By contrast, I will call attention to the history of which Howitt himself was a part: how the discursive object "priestcraft" was recalibrated and remobilized during the era of empire. Where Howitt wrote a vertical history of priestly imposture from its postdiluvian origins, I emphasize the horizontal trajectories of "priestcraft" as it crept rhizomatically across the discursive networks of empire. "Priestcraft" brought India's gurus, swamis, and pandits, its mullahs and pirs, into intimate congress with the clerics of the Christian West, its priests, popes, and bishops, its vicars and pastors.

Several closely interrelated questions steer my inquiry: In colonial India, what idioms were available for lambasting religious authority, and what were the cultural valences of those idioms? When did Indians adapt British rhetorical strategies for delegitimizing religious authority, and in doing so how did they signal their critical distance from the ideologies of empire? Finally, what were the effects of the colonial-era assault on sacerdotal authority? What forms of subjectivity and sociality did it open, and what forms did it foreclose?

This introduction lays the theoretical groundwork for the inquiry, while subsequent chapters pursue it by way of specific historical conjunctures. A summary of those chapters can be found below. As for the introduction, it delineates several interlocking vectors of analysis. First, it locates my genealogy of “priestcraft” within the scholarly literature on genealogy of religion and the powers of the secular modern; I argue for the importance of “contrapuntal” or “interactional” analysis in studying the intersections of religion, secularism, and colonialism. Next, I consider how “priestcraft” functions as an idiom of interreligious polemic. I describe the culture of religious controversy that prevailed in colonial India; and, drawing on critical work by Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Gauri Viswanathan, I use religious polemic to rethink the problems of the religious “outside” and the secular public.

The dissertation suggests that it is more helpful to think of modernity as constitutively “anticlerical” than as constitutively “secular” or anti-religious. To support this suggestion, the latter part of the introduction begins to develop the concept “anticlerical modernity.” It first pauses to consider how the appellation “Luther of India,” often bequeathed on subcontinental skeptics by Anglophone writers, organizes anticlerical modernity under the sovereign sign of Europe. Following Dipesh Chakrabarty, I set out not to ignore the hegemony of European models, but to use colonial margins to rethink those models’ normative claims. Next, I turn to the genealogy of “priestcraft” in Britain, offering a thumbnail sketch of a history treated in greater detail in Chapter 1. Here, drawing on work by Mark Goldie, Justin Champion, and others, I simply want to suggest that secular modernity’s “war on religion” might better be understood as a “war on priestcraft” and sacerdotalism. Finally, I return to

the question of doubt and belief. I distinguish between “propositional belief” and “relational belief,” elaborating the latter concept mostly by way of Jacques Derrida’s meditations on the “fiduciary.” As Derrida explains, the web of human relations that constitutes humans as subjects also immerses them in an irreducible field of inter-subjective trust—in short, and contra the young Marx, Derrida implies that the human condition will always require, if not illusion, then at least a faith that exceeds empirical knowledge.

### Genealogies of the Secular Modern

In *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), Talal Asad excavates the “conceptual geology” of religion in the West and considers the implications of this geology for the rest of the world.<sup>5</sup> According to Asad, “religion” is a culturally provincial term with a distinct

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<sup>5</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1. For other genealogies of religion, see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Peter Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Tomoko Masuzawa, *In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origin of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); S. N. Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in his Blindness...: Asia, the West, and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the ‘Mystic East’* (London: Routledge, 1999); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Hans Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Alongside this substantial body of research unsettling the concept “religion,” other scholars have recently sought to redefine the term. For compelling recent efforts, see Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006) and Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

history. It assumed its present shape in the North Atlantic world during the early modern period and was then forcibly exported to other locales as part of the imperial expansion of Europe. Asad and other genealogists of religion, operating within a broadly Foucaultian paradigm, have sought to unsettle the concept “religion” by uncovering its secreted histories.<sup>6</sup> As Tomoko Masuzawa explains, such a project looks to deny the concept “the kind of overwhelming sense of objective reality, concrete facticity, and utter self-evidence that now holds us in its sway.”<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, it resists the structural “separation of religion from power.”<sup>8</sup> Genealogists like Asad and Masuzawa reveal just how political “religion” has always been— and never more so than when presented as worldly power’s opposite or antidote.

My dissertation joins the general effort to think “beyond” the concept religion.<sup>9</sup> Like much of the existing scholarship, I draw particular attention to the intersections of religion and colonialism.<sup>10</sup> Imperial ideology made regular use of religion to bolster its rhetoric of civilizational difference. The word “religion” articulates its sanctity in opposition to a shifting series of profane antonyms (superstition, heathenism, paganism, demonism, the secular). Like so many binaries (male/female, adult/child), these oppositional pairs came to code the ideological divide separating colonizer from

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<sup>6</sup> See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139-164. According to Foucault, genealogy “disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (147).

<sup>7</sup> Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Hent de Vries, ed., *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> See Asad, Masuzawa, Styers, Chidester, King, and Balagangadhara.

colonized.<sup>11</sup> In the case of religion, however, this binary code proved unstable because of “religion’s” own denotative volatility. Although the British often contrasted their true “religion” with Indian “superstition,” they also frequently relegated religion to India while claiming secularism for themselves. In other words, because imperial Britain had not decided what *it* wanted to be (Anglican or Dissenting, religious or secular), it could not effectively police the line differentiating itself from India. “Religion,” precisely because it was a confused cultural domain, thus emerged as a particularly generative site for re-imagining colonial borderlines.

It now seems fair to say that the concept “religion” as we know it has always already implied “the secular” as its most definitive antonym. As Masuzawa puts it, when “religion came to be identified as such,” it was already “in the process of disappearing,” or least of “becoming circumscribed in such a way that it was finally discernible as a distinct, and limited, phenomenon.”<sup>12</sup> As I will demonstrate, notions of religious imposture have been central to this modern circumscription of the sacred—and, as a consequence, to the constitution of cultural modernity as such. For, as Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini have recently argued, the mutual determination of the religious and the secular has taken place not only “in modernity,” but, “indeed, as modernity.”<sup>13</sup> Taking this insight to heart, I will for the sake of brevity generally use the phrase “secular modernity” to indicate the complex mutual determinations of religion

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<sup>11</sup> See Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, 19

<sup>13</sup> Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, “Introduction: Times Like These,” in *Secularisms*, ed. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Social Text Books* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

and secularism. The overarching logic of the secular has, after all, typically defined and subsumed the much more tightly delimited category “religion.”

A monumental scholarship now attests to the failure of the secularization thesis to account for the empirical and theoretical complexities of religious modernity and of secularism itself. If the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was the bellwether of public religion’s resurgence, the increased prominence of “political religion” since the 1980s has cemented the sociological consensus that public religion is here to stay.<sup>14</sup> The empirical persistence of religion has been one of several factors prompting scholars to rethink the conceptual bases of secularism. Philosophers working in the Western tradition have, like Charles Taylor and Marcel Gauchet, come to emphasize how Christian and Jewish contestations over the place of the transcendent prepared the way for secularism and its “immanent frame.”<sup>15</sup> Postcolonial critics like Talal Asad have likewise insisted that despite its ostensible neutrality, secularism continues to bear the stain of the sacred, a fact that partly explains why a Western secularism born of Christianity has fumbled in its dealings with Islam.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The revisionist literature on secularism is far larger than can be covered here. For a representatively interdisciplinary sampling see the following: José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and its Critics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); William E. Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (London: Ashgate, 2005); and Vincent Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007); Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

The complex legacy of Western secularism has been debated with particular acuity in the Indian context. In the 1980s, intellectuals like Ashis Nandy and T.N. Madan disavowed secularism because, as they argued, it had been imposed on India by Britain. In the postcolonial period, the imperial ideology had continued to exacerbate class divisions, to centralize state power, and to suppress indigenous modes of “folk tolerance.”<sup>17</sup> Calls for a reappraisal of secularism became more intense after the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the 1992 destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, and, more recently, the 2002 pogroms in Gujarat.<sup>18</sup> Although later commentators have been much less inclined to renounce secularism entirely, they remain committed to critically and creatively refiguring its core concepts and its cultural allegiances.

One of the most persistent problems posed by the interdisciplinary reappraisal of secularism is the problem of cultural origin. If secularism is understood as fundamentally Christian or Western, postcolonial critics concerned with the legacies of imperialism will only be able to adopt it with great ambivalence. Accordingly, two major techniques have been developed for claiming secularism away from the post-Christian West. First, some scholars have sought to reterritorialize secularism by insisting that its core values (democratic argumentation, skepticism, empiricism) have

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<sup>17</sup> Ashis Nandy, “An anti-secularist manifesto,” *Seminar* 314 (1985): 14-24; T. N. Madan, “Secularism in Its Place,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46.4 (1987): 748-49. One might compare the subaltern studies collective’s frequent association of secularism with the urban elite and religion with the peasantry. See Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 81; Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Death of History?: Historical Consciousness and the Culture of Late Capitalism,” *Public Culture* 4.2 (1992): 52-53.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, the essays in Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, eds., *The Crisis of Secularism in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). For an important earlier study of Indian state secularism, see Donald Eugene Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

been just as pervasive in India as in Europe. Amartya Sen's essays on the "argumentative Indian" for instance showcase pre-modern events that, he avers, prove India an epigone of proto-secularist debate.<sup>19</sup> A second group of scholars has sought, more radically, to deprive secularism of any national territory by locating its origins in the contact zones of colonial encounter. Because it is historically and epistemologically prior to both "India" and "the West," the scene of colonial encounter undermines both these integral cultural entities.

Many of the critics who look to colonialism to unmoor secularism from national geography take their theoretical model from Edward Said. His "contrapuntal analysis" resisted insularity and provincialism by indicating the degree to which empire foisted global connections on even the most "local" modes of knowledge.<sup>20</sup> This certainly holds true for the major discursive nodes of secular modernity. As Peter van der Veer has argued, in order to track the emergence of concepts like "secularity, liberty, and equality," scholars must engage in an "interactional history" that places colony and metropole in a single frame of reference.<sup>21</sup> Gauri Viswanathan's influential study of British literary education in India exemplifies this type of analysis. As she demonstrates, the British hit upon literary education as a means of improving the "moral character" of colonial subjects for whom Christian pedagogy (still the preferred method for educating the British working classes) was thought inappropriate. The

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<sup>19</sup> Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture, and Identity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 42, 318.

<sup>21</sup> Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 7-8.

English literary canon thus hails from India, its secularity a response to the constraints of colonial governance.<sup>22</sup> Contrapuntal analysis also suggests that the legal status of religious minorities in Victorian Britain was redefined, not due to domestic pressures alone, but as part of a colonial conversation about the nature of citizenship.<sup>23</sup> Although contrapuntalism has mostly been used to draw out the cultural contingencies of British and French colonialisms, one could also in principle adapt the method to analyze other contact zones.<sup>24</sup>

Colonial fault-lines thus splinter the study of secularism. But this is not all. As Talal Asad has suggested, “because the secular is so much a part of our modern life, it is not easy to grasp it directly”; instead, it must be studied by “its shadows, as it were.”<sup>25</sup> The critical reappraisal of secularism should proceed, not by hunting the entity “secularism,” but by enumerating and interrogating that entity’s component parts (tolerance, progress, liberty, democracy, public sphere, reason, etc).<sup>26</sup> In my estimation,

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<sup>22</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Aamir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> For example, Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued that the rudiments of the concept “religion” emerged much earlier than is often supposed and in a much more diffuse geographical zone. In Smith’s view, Islam not only anticipated the reification of belief that would define modern Western cultures; these two developments should be understood as part of the same historical process. Islam thus does far more than provide a “special case,” as Smith puts it, for those who would challenge the concept religion’s universal applicability. It redefines the entire field of research. In order to track the full genealogy of “religion,” one would need to develop a contrapuntal method that follows it across such cultural divides. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*. See also Talal Asad. “Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith’s *The Meaning and End of Religion*,” *History of Religions* 40.3 (2001): 205-22.

<sup>25</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> This list is borrowed from Van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*, 14. The critical interrogation of “tolerance” has proved particularly productive. See, for instance, Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion*:

the trope of priestly imposture should be included on this list.<sup>27</sup> In order to appreciate the trope's resonance, however, we first need to understand the polemic field in which it was honed and deployed.

### Arguing Religion in Colonial India

Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued that the modern concept "religion" emerged through a dialectic process of "polemics and apologetics." Smith charts a general movement away from "religion" as piety toward "religions" as reified systems of belief and practice. Where the former mode of religiosity emphasized disciplined work upon the self, the latter fixated on doctrinal and communal boundaries, apprehending religion primarily as an object of knowledge rather than as the habitation of the knowing subject.

According to Smith, polemic encounters triggered this historic shift. "One's own 'religion' may be piety and faith, obedience, worship, and a vision of God." But one inevitably apprehends an "alien religion" from the outside, rendering it as "an abstract and impersonal pattern of observables." During a debate, the critic presents his opponent's religion "schematically" in the terms of this abstract pattern. In order to

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*Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anijdar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 356-420.

<sup>27</sup> For histories of the imposture theory, see Frank Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959); Peter Harrison, *"Religion" and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Justin Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Justin Champion, "'Religion's Safe, with Priestcraft is the War: Augustan Anticlericalism and the Legacy of the English Revolution, 1660-1720,'" *The European Legacy* 5.4 (2000): 547-561; and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

respond, the religious insider comes to inhabit his opponent's argument. He is forced, in a sense, to step outside of his religion in order to defend it; and, in the process, he alters his relation to pious praxis. What had functioned as the unconscious substrate to subjectivity becomes newly available as an objectified entity that stands over and against the self. Although the insider might return to the fold at debate's end, once he has inhabited his opponent's position, he inevitably carries the outside with him into the interior of belief. There it begins to transform religion from the inside out.<sup>28</sup>

Religion as we know is the product of this process. It is always apprehended externally as a reified object of knowledge that stands apart from the knowing subject. As Smith suggests, this is true for both "insiders" and "outsiders": theologians and anthropologists are not, after all, so very different from one another in their efforts to fix and define idealized religious systems. Of course, even in modern English the older sense of religion as ethical praxis persists, as in the statement "Wilfred is more religious than he used to be." Religious interiorities continue to function; it is just that they cannot be disentangled from religious exteriorities. In fact, as Smith summarizes, four distinct senses of "religion" with four distinct histories continue to cohabit within the word, splitting it from the inside.<sup>29</sup>

The upshot of Smith's dialectic model of religious consciousness is this: modern religion implicates human subjects in a convoluted infolding of the irreligious outside.

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<sup>28</sup> Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 43. Smith's account of the emergence of religion is in some ways remarkably resonant with Foucault, who insisted in his essay on the genealogical method that new discursive entities emerge from the interstitial spaces of struggle, such that neither competing party can claim authorship. See "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 150.

<sup>29</sup> These are (a) religion as piety, (b) discrete religions (e.g. "Christianity") as the ideal object of theology, (c) discrete religions as the ideal object of the human sciences, and (d) religion as a generalized essence (which Smith dates to Friedrich Schleiermacher's 1799 *Über die Religion*). See *Meaning and End of Religion*.

If we take Smith's argument seriously, it becomes impossible to sustain a naïve notion of the "insider's perspective" in matters of religion. As soon as anyone steps forward to offer her perspective as an insider, she has already assumed the schematic imperatives of the externalist position. Brian Massumi's thoughts on subjectivation are apposite here. He maintains that there is no such thing as interiority "in the sense of a closed, self-reflective system." Rather, "[t]here is only a multileveled infolding of an aleatory outside, with which the infolding remains in contact." Despite the occasional coalescence of more rigid boundaries between self and other, "the cordoning off is never complete."<sup>30</sup> Smith's rereading of religion through the scene of polemic encounter suggests something very similar in its refusal of uncontaminated interiority. Although Smith does wax nostalgic for the authentic pieties of an earlier age, his theoretical model exceeds his quest for religious origins. Above all else, Smith's historicist account of religion's dialectical emergence signals the productivity of polemical misrecognition. He locates religion not in the pious interiority of belief, but in the slippery inter-subjective space in which belief can be communicated—and, in its communication, isolated, identified, and catalogued precisely as belief.

Smith's focus on polemical, oppositional religion echoes Gauri Viswanathan's recent call for scholars to rethink secularism "through the framework of heterodoxy." Viswanathan suggests that to overemphasize the contest between religion and secular reason (as modern meta-narratives are wont to do) is to homogenize religion by effacing the violent forms of dissent that have littered its history. One might, she

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<sup>30</sup> Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 80.

implies, fracture the grand conflict between religion and reason by granting more attention to religion as an “oppositional knowledge system”; such an approach, she hopes, may provide for “a more expansive idea of secularism.”<sup>31</sup> While Viswanathan uses the frame of heterodoxy to rethink the “prehistory” of secularism, her method lends itself just as well to remapping the critical spaces of secular modernity. Where secularism posits a single space categorically outside of religion, heterodoxy provides for convoluted inter-foldings of the religious with the irreligious. A public sphere structured by oppositional heterodoxies operates kaleidoscopically, its shifting critical spaces positioned inside some religious formations and outside of others. It denies secular criticism its ostensible transcendence of belief, maintaining instead that all critical positions inhabit a single immanent plane. Critical insight is gained not through transcendence of religion, but through a lateral shift in oppositional location.

This theoretical model helps to clarify the scene of religious controversy in colonial India. The colonial state typically asserted its superiority to Indian civil society by claiming that, as a secular agent, it stood above the oppositional heterodoxies of Indian religions (see Chapter 3). In the colonial context, then, to deny secularism its critical transcendence of religious belief is to resist the British state’s claim to stand above its Indian subjects. Revaluing heterodoxy also allows us to revisit practices of interreligious polemic in colonial India. As a rich and growing historical scholarship has demonstrated, religious controversy was of central importance to colonial public culture. For heuristic purposes, one might follow Kenneth Jones in classifying these controversies as either “internal” or “external” in scope and audience. The former,

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<sup>31</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, “Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy,” *PMLA* 123.2 (2008): 469, 476.

helmed by reformers intent on revising received orthodoxies, took place within a single tradition; the latter, often initiated by missionaries or aggressive new religious movements, took place between different religions. As Jones suggests, in the twentieth century these two types of disputation were joined by “purely secular ideologies” once again altered the field of religious debate.<sup>32</sup>

These categorical divisions, although useful, do of course oversimplify the shifting scene of religious controversy in colonial India. During the nineteenth century, new religious movements proliferated at a dizzying pace, and the devotional positions that they championed confounded older rubrics for configuring community.<sup>33</sup> Although these religious did articulate the identity politics of religious “communalism,” they also did much more. Indeed, to focus too insistently on the communalist *telos* of nineteenth century religious movements is to ignore the confusions of identity that prevailed at the time.

Religious debate and competition took many forms, including formal addresses, organized debates, and street preaching; the publication of journals, pamphlets, books, tracts, and translated scriptures in English and the vernaculars; religious processions and performances; the production of visual artifacts (especially in new “hybrid” forms like the chromolithograph and Kalighat painting); street theatre; rumor and gossip;

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<sup>32</sup> Kenneth W. Jones, “Preface,” in *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, ed. Kenneth W. Jones (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), ix.

<sup>33</sup> For general overviews of religious reform movements in colonial India, see John Nichol Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1977 [1914]); Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Antony Copley, ed., *Gurus and their Followers: New Religious Reform Movements in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); Gwilym Beckerlegge, ed., *Colonialism, Modernity, and Religious Identities: Religious Reform Movements in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

voluntary associations; new and old educational institutions; and, last but not least, the theatrical venues provided by the colonial state itself (e.g. the courts). Some of these practices and structures drew on classical precedent, whether Islamicate or Sanskritic (e.g. the debating protocols of *munazara* and *shāstrārth*).<sup>34</sup> Others were new to the nineteenth century. In any case, it was the interconnection of these divergent objects, practices, and performance venues that constituted the colonial public, whether construed (following Jürgen Habermas) as a “public sphere” or (following Sandria Freitag) as a “public arena.”<sup>35</sup>

Print was arguably the most important of these overlapping public venues. While the printing press had been introduced to India in the sixteenth century, it did not take off until the nineteenth, when it became central to public contestations over religion.<sup>36</sup> The growing pervasiveness of print during this period had several effects. First, it facilitated the rise of the regional vernaculars, which asserted their independence from Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, and English by developing new literary

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<sup>34</sup> For the *munazara*, see Avril Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1993); for the *shāstrārth*, see Catherine Adcock, “Religious Freedom and Political Culture: The Arya Samaj in Colonial North India” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); Sandria Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas in the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); and Sandria Freitag, ed., “Aspects of the Public in Colonial South Asia,” spec. issue of *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 14.1 (1991). For other major inquiries into formations of the South Asian public sphere, see C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989); Douglas Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India: The Shaping of a Public Culture in Surat City, 1852-1928* (Berkeley: University of California, 1991); Raminder Kaur, *Performative Politics and the Cultures of Hinduism: Public Uses of Religion in Western India* (London: Anthem Press, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley, eds., *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 21.

forms (especially prose essays and novels) and by developing procedures for systematizing their grammars and regulating their vocabularies. This would have a substantial effect on the formation of religious communities, as demonstrated most dramatically by the political bifurcation of Hindustani into Hindi and Urdu. Second, “print capitalism” cut across the regional vernaculars to facilitate the formation of global identities, whether communalistic, nationalistic, or cosmopolitan.<sup>37</sup>

Third, print media encouraged lateral solidarities that undermined the traditional hierarchical structures of religious authority. Although I will reconsider this claim in Chapter 2, (situating it within what Michael Warner has called the Whig-McLuhanite model of print media effects), the basic argument bears stating here: as sacred texts that were once the preserve of trained elites were disseminated via print, charisma was channeled out of the person and onto the printed page.<sup>38</sup> A new breed of “lay” leader came to predominate in the new milieu. As Barbara Metcalf has suggested, these lay leaders turned from an “esoteric” style of pedagogy based on the personal relationship between teacher and student to a “public and impersonal” pedagogy rooted in schools, journalism, street preaching, and (perhaps mostly importantly) the printed book. Like the print artifacts they plied, these men were supremely mobile, both in their peripatetic lifestyles and in their double access to traditional and colonial forms of knowledge. They were most at home in urban settings, where other unmoored

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<sup>37</sup> For “print capitalism,” see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991). For an argument about how religious movements like the Brahma Samaj, Theosophical Society, and the Ramakrishna Mission proffered “cosmopolitan syncretisms,” see Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Francis Robinson, “Technology and the Impact of Print,” *Modern Asian Studies* 27 (1993): 229-251.

subjects welcomed the new identities and new social networks proffered by voluntary religious associations.<sup>39</sup>

Fourth, and finally: as the above discussion suggests, print culture redrew the line between “public” and “private” in colonial South Asia, often interlacing the two quite vertiginously.<sup>40</sup> Print artifacts founded their public on readerly solitude, although this solitude was often complicated by the common practice of reading newspapers aloud in places like teashops. They circulated anonymously and, in principle, infinitely to convene an eerily immaterial public, the only concrete manifestations of which were the metonymic pages of print artifacts themselves.<sup>41</sup> Print media were, moreover, of central importance to the closeted political project that, according to Partha Chatterjee, gave rise to anti-colonial nationalism.<sup>42</sup> The domain of “spiritual” sovereignty demarcated and defended by elites in Bengal relied heavily on the literary

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<sup>39</sup> Barbara Daly Metcalf, “Imagining Community: Polemical Debates in Colonial India,” in *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, ed. Kenneth W. Jones (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 232-233.

<sup>40</sup> This has been true for other historical contexts as well. For the argument that modes of political subjectivity fostered in private by eighteenth century literature were crucial to the revolutionary politics of 1789 and afterward, see Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, and Sarah Maza *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For a reconsideration of how the private is implicated by the public, with primary reference to the United States, see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> See Michael Warner, *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). This is discussed at greater length in Chapter Two.

<sup>42</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). British imperial ideologies also affected the shape of Indian “cultural” publics. Nicholas Dirks, for instance, has argued that “caste” served as the organizing concept for the imperial effort to invalidate colonial civil society as inherently, even atavistically, apolitical. See *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

genres of the print vernacular; importantly, these included women's journals designed to render domestic space a suitable site for inventing the nation.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, the scholarship on religious controversy in colonial India echoes an increasingly common sentiment: far from inculcating blind belief or meditative passivity, religion in South Asia has long provided for the pleasures of argument.<sup>44</sup> These pleasures are aptly illustrated by anecdote recorded by the Rev. Bowley, some six years after his intervention at the banyan tree. A prince of Benares who was "fond of discussions" once invited a dozen men to his palace to debate religion. His guests included not only Bowley, but also several maulvis and even "a professed atheist" armed with a Bible. As Bowley tells it, most of the participants thoroughly enjoyed their urbane disputation. Graciously accommodating others' beliefs, the atheist even joined in prayers later on in the evening. Bowley, however, was disgruntled. The maulvis were "rude and unbecoming" when told that Christians do not pretend to comprehend the mysterious doctrine of the Trinity; still worse, they insisted on discussing Jesus' circumcision. Although the prince continued to hold his debates, the Reverend declined future invitations.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Stree Bodh*, the Gujarati periodical edited by Karsandas Mulji, is exemplary of this trend. Compare Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Asraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar: A Partial Translation with Commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>44</sup> The most influential text in this regard is surely Amartya Sen, *Argumentative Indian*. In a very different vein, see the focused inquires into ethical argument in Leela Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and Paula Richman, ed., *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>45</sup> "Captious and Sceptical Spirit of some of the Natives," *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1826), 431-432.

## The Luther of India

The pleasures and forms of religious argument in colonial India were, assuredly, many. People debated religion in different media and different languages and for different reasons. It is notable, then, that Anglophone commentators on the culture of religious controversy consistently sought to fit anticlerical polemic to a single historic pattern. At one point or another, almost every reformer of note was hailed as “the Luther of India.” This moniker was foisted on ancient and modern religious critics, from the Buddha to Kabir to Ram Mohan Roy. In the chapters to follow, we will see journalist Karsandas Mulji, much to the chagrin of the prosecuting attorneys for the Maharaj Libel Case, “represented as a Reformer, a Martin Luther of the Banian caste (Chapter 3).<sup>46</sup> We will also encounter Swāmī Dayānand Saraswatī, who for many remains the quintessential Indian Luther (Chapter 4).

Dayānand earned this appellation early on. For instance, in his 1879 address to the Meerut chapter of the Ārya Samāj, Henry Steel Olcott proclaimed the Swami the “Luther of Modern India.” In India, as Olcott explains, the “mighty mass of people” persists in an enchanted state, “blindly follow[ing] the lead of a debauched, ignorant, selfish priesthood.” Dayanand, not only a Luther, but also a “new Gautama,” has begun “to regenerate and redeem them.” His “enlightened” followers in the Arya Samaj should take it as their first duty to assist him.<sup>47</sup> In his speech, Olcott assembles a series

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<sup>46</sup> *Report of the Maharaj Libel Case and of the Bhattia Conspiracy Case, Connected With It. Jadunathjee Birzrattanjee Maharaj, vs. Karsandass Mooljee Editor and Proprietor, and Nanabhai Rastamji Ranina, Printer, “Satya Prakash”* (Bombay: Bombay Gazette Press, 1862), 170.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Steel Olcott, “An Address by Col. Henry S. Olcott, President of the Theosophical Society, to the Arya Samaj of Meerut, Delivered May 5<sup>th</sup> 1879, on the Occasion of a Public Welcome to a Committee of the Theosophical Society, by the Revered Swamee Daya Nand Saraswati, and the Meerut Samaj” (Roorkee, India: Thomason Civil Engineering College Press, 1879), 2-4.

of religious critics (Dayanand, Gautama, Zarathustra, Pythagoras) and collates them under the sign of “Luther,” totem of Protestant modernity. Here, as elsewhere, Luther is made the inescapable referent of all anticlerical protest.

This phenomenon fits a familiar pattern. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has influentially argued, “‘Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan,’ and so on.”<sup>48</sup> Because European modernity is paradigmatic for social theory, it remains the “silent referent” of non-Western histories that become “historical” precisely through the application of Western thought; non-Western history thus re-inscribes the colonial relationship in the very categories of its analysis. In Chakrabarty’s estimation, however, the solution to this problem does not lie in “rejecting or discarding European thought.” His prescription is far more ambivalent: “European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought—which is now everybody’s heritage and which affects us all—may be renewed from and for the margins.”<sup>49</sup>

The impasses of Europe’s theoretical sovereignty have shaped debates about postcolonial secularism. Although Western secularism has been nothing if not uneven and heterogeneous (e.g. the Church of England vs. French *laïcité*), it has tended to present a unified front to the postcolonial world. Postcolonial Indian secularism

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<sup>48</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27-28.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

inevitably departs from the idealized Western model, and can thus seem “derivative” or tragically inadequate.<sup>50</sup> Some intellectuals, like Ashis Nandy, responded to this impasse by rejecting secularism. Others, like Amartya Sen, have sought to deny secularism its Western-ness by identifying “proto-secularist” moments in pre-modern India. Sen champions Akbar as a pre-modern paragon of secularist values. Akbar predates not only the British Empire, but all of European modernity; as Sen points out, when Akbar was preaching tolerance in Agra, the West was still embroiled in the Inquisition. Sen, to be sure, has a point. In the terms of his argument, however, Akbar can be “secular” only insofar as he meets norms set by Western social theory, here represented by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. In Sen’s essays, “argumentative reason” always refers, and not all that silently, to the modern West.<sup>51</sup>

Rather than universalizing and de-historicizing the values of secular modernity, one might instead return them to their colonial contexts in order, as Chakrabarty prescribes, to revise them from the margins. Such an approach would foreground what Sumathi Ramaswamy has called the “off-modern”—or what, to suit the present context, I would term the “off-secular” (see Conclusion).<sup>52</sup> I think that “anticlerical modernity” is just such an off-secular concept. It addresses canonical texts in the making of secular modernity, but refuses to divorce these texts from their religious forbearers and contemporaries (Chapter 1). The dissertation aims to track how anticlerical modernity,

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

<sup>51</sup> Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*.

<sup>52</sup> Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 16.

as fashioned in Europe, came to be rethought from the colonial margins—margins that are read more readily as modern, I would add, if we allow the anticlerical to displace the secular.

Thus, in the case of India's proliferating "Luthers," the trick is to recognize that anticlerical connection (e.g. Luther-Dayanand) as both indispensable and inadequate. It is indispensable because European modernity, anticlerical or otherwise, remains hegemonic, and so in order for India to be read as modern it must be read in relation to Europe. It is inadequate not only because the sign "Luther" fails as a rubric for coding the richly diverse skeptical attitudes of colonial India, but also because its explanatory power, even in Europe, has often been overstated. The challenge is thus to read colonial pairings like Luther-Dayanand contrapuntally, using each term to refigure the other—Luther shapes our perception of Dayanand, and Dayanand our perception of Luther. The task, in other words, is to use the colonial margins to rethink the stakes of our shared modernity.

### **Priestcraft and the Politics of Delusion**

In *Hind Swaraj* (1908), M. K. Gandhi exploited the trope of priestly imposture for rhetorical effect. His fictive interlocutor accuses the charismatic Gandhi of "encouraging religious charlatanism. Many a cheat has by talking in a similar strain led the people astray." Gandhi responds by confirming that all religions may have some "humbug" about them, but he is "prepared to maintain that humbugs in worldly matters are far worse than the humbugs in religion." The real humbug, as Gandhi aims to prove, is the "humbug of civilization," and in order to expose this humbug, India

must “appreciat[e] and conserv[e]” its religions—for only religion can ground opposition to colonial capitalism and technocratic reason.<sup>53</sup> Here Gandhi inverts the trope of imposture. Where imperial ideology had denounced the humbug of Hinduism, Gandhi denounces the humbug of empire—revealing it to be precisely *ideological*, a political illusion, insofar as it assumes the role of the religious charlatan. In the following brief genealogy of “priestcraft,” I will suggest that Gandhi’s inversion of imposture replicates in miniature the history of anticlerical invective, from Luther to Marx. The sedimented stages of this history continued to animate the imposture theory in 1908, and, as Gandhi demonstrates, their critical contiguity could be exploited to good effect.

The modern West’s obsession with priestly imposture may have begun with Protestants’ suspicions about the ill deeds of the Catholic clerisy. But the polemic force of the imposture narrative quickly outstripped its original purpose. If the rhetoric of “priestcraft” had been devised to *reform* Christianity by cleansing it of its clerical excesses, the same rhetoric would ultimately provide Enlightenment critics with a surefire strategy for dismissing Christianity entirely. Starting in the 1680s, a flurry of English and French treatises broadened the scope of the imposture theory to suggest that *all* religion might be understood as a fraud perpetrated on the world by the

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<sup>53</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel, Cambridge Texts in Modern Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 43-44. This rhetorical strategy occurs elsewhere in the text. For instance: like the “selfish and false religious teachers,” who divide Hindu from Muslim, the English “pretend to study the manners and customs of all peoples. God has given us a limited mental capacity, but they usurp the function of the Godhead and indulge in novel experiments. They write about their own researches in laudatory terms and hypnotize us into believing them. We, in our ignorance, then fall at their feet” (56). In other words, when the English take on the universal perspective of social science, they pretend to be gods, and in this are no different than the many pretended godmen of India.

priestly class. Most of these critics wanted to do away with priestly religion so as to restore whatever philosophical creed they thought had preceded it (Deism, Spinozism). But full-fledged atheism was soon to follow. Indeed, several scholars have suggested that the priestcraft narrative provided Karl Marx with the conceptual apparatus for his theory of ideology. Religion, as Marx well knew, was ideology's prototype: only by exposing both secular and sacred frauds can humanity at last discover the hard facts of the material world. To trace the history of the discursive object "priestcraft" is thus to trace how secular modernity's most potent epistemological procedures emerged from the Christian cultures that preceded and produced them.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "priestcraft" in its earliest uses (c. 1483) simply referred to "the knowledge, training, or work of a priest; the exercise of priestly functions." This original sense became obsolete, however, as "priestcraft" (from about 1680) began to denote something much more nefarious: the "maintenance or extension of priestly power and influence; the practices and policy supporting this; priestly scheming, guile, or deceit." The new sense of "priestcraft" maintained the emphasis on outward performance, but transfigured that performance's inner motivation. Piety became hypocrisy, and the inscrutable inner life of the skilled priest prodded fantasies of diabolical deceit. Eventually this would result in a paranoid polemics obsessed with the execrable deeds of conniving clerics.

According to Mark Goldie, Protestants' anticlerical and anti-Catholic jibes swelled to produce the radical anticlericalism of the Enlightenment. As Goldie puts it, as "a habit of mind" anticlerical suspicion "became omnivorous and devoured its own

children.”<sup>54</sup> An infamous early pioneer of this expanded anticlericalism was the anonymous *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (c.1719), which scandalously imputed imposture to Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad, renouncing all revealed religion in favor of Spinozist pantheism. In its frontispiece, the treatise depicted all three prophets in partial exposure, masks dangling in their hands.<sup>55</sup> Translations from Greek and Latin provided crucial fodder for Enlightenment disquisitions on priestly fraud hungry to expand their narrative repertoire. Particularly important was Lucian’s *The Religious Imposter, or, the Life of Alexander, a Sham Prophet, Doctor, and Fortune Teller*. Equipped with a baby snake, a purple cape, and a prosthetic head, Alexander used his theatrical wiles to convince the credulous residents of a little town that he was an emissary of the god Aesculapius. Enlightenment writers took Alexander’s exploits as paradigmatic. As the text’s English translator quipped, such “has been the artifice of corrupt Priesthood in all Ages and Countries.”<sup>56</sup> All-out atheism was soon to follow.

As Goldie has it, Karl Marx took up the anticlerical modernity articulated by Enlightenment critics of religion, borrowing the “conceptual apparatus” of priestcraft to formulate his theory of ideology. Marx himself, after all, said more or less the same thing: the criticism of religion, as he so famously announced, is the premise of all

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<sup>54</sup> Mark Goldie, “Ideology,” in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, eds. Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 279; cf. Richard Ashcraft, “Anticlericalism and authority in Lockean political thought,” in *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750*, ed. Roger D. Lund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), 73-96.

<sup>55</sup> *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (Amsterdam?: s.n., 1775?).

<sup>56</sup> Lucian, *The Religious Imposter, or, The Life of Alexander, a Sham Prophet, Doctor, and Fortune Teller*, trans. Sebastian Smith (Amsterdam?: c1700), 11.

criticism.<sup>57</sup> Goldie helpfully summarizes the core elements of all the narratives of priestly imposture enumerated above. “Ignorance and falsehood are the instruments of men of power”; these men “rule by fabricating illusions”; and these illusions “clothe naked power with their icons and idols.” To liberate the duped masses, the skeptical few must unmask this cadre of dastardly deceivers. One of the foremost mythologies of enlightened modernity, the imposture theory demonstrates that “Enlightenment, for all its own claims, was not radically disjunctive from the Protestant critique of popery.”<sup>58</sup> Justin Champion goes still farther in questioning modernity’s secularist teleology. He insists that early modern anticlericalism not be interpreted as “proleptic of Enlightenment irreligion.” Resisting such anachronism through insistent returns to the topsy-turvy heterodoxies of the seventeenth-century, Champion is able to reframe the core conflict around religion in modernity. Secular modernity emerged not in

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<sup>57</sup> Goldie’s suggestion that “priestcraft” and “ideology” are genealogically intertwined poses serious methodological problems for scholars involved in the ideological critique of religion. Put bluntly, to say that religion is ideological is to frame a tautology. “Religion” is the prototype for “ideology,” not an instance of it. It is well beyond the scope of this dissertation to think through the implications of this claim, but its pertinence to contemporary debates in religious studies bears noting. In general, I would suggest that we replace the question “Is religion ideological?” with the question “How do the contiguous concepts ‘religion’ and ‘ideology’ constrain how we imagine belief?” A thorough answer to this question would also take into account Simon During’s recent research into “secular magic.” During documents the rise of magic as an entertainment industry in parodic relation to “authentic” hierophants; he goes on to demonstrate how, around the turn of the twentieth century, professional magicians like George Méliès migrated into the cinema and other emergent culture industries. If twentieth century contests between media magicians and ideological critics seemed to replicate the primal drama of priestly exposure, this is, one might surmise, no coincidence: by During’s account, “magic” mediates between “religion” and “culture.” Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); see also Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). For an account of how notions of ideology are used in recent work in religious studies, see Tylor Roberts, “Rhetorics of Ideology and Criticism in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of Religion* 85.3 (2005): 367-389; Gary Lease, “Ideology,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 441. For fuller histories of “ideology,” see Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991) and Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1994).

<sup>58</sup> Goldie, “Ideology,” 270

opposition to religion, but rather in opposition to the notion of *sacerdos*.<sup>59</sup> Or, as John Toland put it: “religion’s safe, with priestcraft is the war.”

My dissertation tries to carry this critical insight into the nineteenth century, highlighting critics of religion generally sidelined by the history of secularism (e.g. William Howitt’s *Popular History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations* (1833)). My aim is not to displace secularism entirely, but to insist that it be read alongside anticlericalism: Howitt *and* Marx.

### **Faith, Trust, and the Charlatan**

Before bringing this introduction to a close, I would like to call attention to one final feature of anticlerical modernity: it is more invested in “relational belief” than in “propositional belief.” As Donald Lopez has noted, modern scholars of religion have often taken “belief” as their primary field of study, reducing religion to abstract theological propositions of the sort one might find in a catechism.<sup>60</sup> This doctrinal fixation, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith observed, tends to reify religion by abstracting it from its social networks and its embodied practices. Such abstraction has served many functions, including the production of bureaucratic religions readily arrogated to the managerial apparatus of colonial states (see Chapter 3). In general, however, it tends to distract from relational belief, or trust in persons. In comparison, anticlerical polemic has paid very little attention to propositional particularities. Its chief concern, however

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<sup>59</sup> Champion, “Religion’s Safe,” 554.

<sup>60</sup> Donald S. Lopez, “Belief,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1998) 21-35.

scandalous, is with personalities— its gleefully ad hominem attacks on clerics having attracted rather more gossips and politicians than philologists or theologians. Anticlerical modernity is, in short, a rift in the fabric of “relational belief,” a standing challenge to the loving trust that binds the disciple to priest or guru.

Jacques Derrida has described this as the “fiduciary” order of modernity. As he explains, the Enlightenment, even at its most critical and rational, must always “suppose trustworthiness.” The social body is founded on an “irreducible faith” that unfolds from the testimonial nature of all speech acts, including and perhaps especially speech acts that vouch for scientific truth (“I promise to tell you the truth beyond all proof and all theoretical demonstration, believe me, etc.”). Techno-scientific rationality, like all other forms of utterance, relies on this fundamental communicative trust. In Derrida’s words, it always “brings into play and confirms the fiduciary credit of an elementary faith which is, at least in its essence or calling, religious.” By this account, the religious is the supplementary outside that is the founding condition for the secular. Secular rationality can intervene in the fiduciary structure of the social body, restructuring the religious, but it can never eliminate faith entirely.<sup>61</sup>

Were all traces of faith to be abolished, society would collapse. In the words of one early nineteenth century writer, a “certain extent of credulity, or, more properly, belief, may, indeed, be considered as absolutely necessary to the well-being of social communities; for universal skepticism would be universal distrust.”<sup>62</sup> If our collective

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<sup>61</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” trans. Sam Weber, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anijdar, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 80-82.

<sup>62</sup> Richard A. Davenport, *Sketches of Imposture, Deception, and Credulity* (London: Thomas Tegg and Sons, 1837), 1.

credulity involves us in collective illusion, so be it. Indeed to exit entirely from collective illusion would be to court psychosis. This, as Žižek has explained, is why the non-duped errs: “the only way *not* to be deceived is to maintain a distance toward the symbolic order, i.e. to assume a psychotic position—a psychotic is precisely a subject who is *not duped by the symbolic order.*” But the psychotic, in his pervasive paranoia, falls into the classic error of ideological thought, fabricating a vision of an undeceived subject who “holds and manipulates the threads of the deception proper to the symbolic order.” The non-duped subject thus errs because he is, however ironically, “too easy of belief.”<sup>63</sup> As Žižek and others have argued, there is no pure outside to delusion: the claim to exodus from ideology is ideology par excellence.<sup>64</sup>

Here the priestly specter returns as an uncanny apparition, which haunts the suspicious science of ideological critique and marks its limit. In the 1930s, Karl Mannheim tried to differentiate the “scientific” criticism of ideology from mere “distrust and suspicion.” Where the naïf holds “individuals personally responsible for the deceptions that we detect in their utterances,” the scientific critic locates deception in social structures.<sup>65</sup> Žižek suggests that the spectral Big Other remains lodged in the phantasmatic heart of modernity, the irrational animus of its hermeneutics of suspicion. (The tension between structural and personal deception will be played out in a very different idiom in Chapter 4, where Swami Dayananda Saraswati rereads

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<sup>63</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “How the Non-Duped Err,” *Qui Parle* 4.1 (1990): 9.

<sup>64</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “The Spectre of Ideology,” in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1994): 1-33.

<sup>65</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company 1936), 54.

Śaṅkarācārya's metaphysics of māyā through an anticlerical lens). For anticlerical modernity, in particular, this figure proves inescapable. How, then, are we to understand the persistence of the charlatan?

One might take up the Derridean notion of the “perperformative,” as developed by Hent de Vries. As de Vries writes, any “religious utterance, act, or gesture, stands in the shadow—more or less, but never totally avoidable— of perversion, parody or kitsch, of blasphemy and idolatry.”<sup>66</sup> The notion of the “performative” is of course J. L. Austin's. It indicates, as he so famously put it, the sort of utterance that can “do things” (like “I do” effects a marriage). As Austin notes, such speech acts will misfire if conditions are “infelicitous” (“I do” does nothing if the bride is absent, or the groom is a bigamist, or the priest is not properly licensed).<sup>67</sup> For Austin such misfires remain incidental to the phenomenon of performativity per se, but for Derrida they are central. Every successful performative is predicated on and shadowed by the possibility of its own failure; as a consequence, the risk of misfire becomes the “internal and positive condition and possibility” of success, the “very force and law of its emergence.” Because of this structuring condition, a “successful performative is necessarily an ‘impure’ performative” in that it carries within it the trace of its own failure.<sup>68</sup> The neologism “perperformative” signals this invagination graphemically: perversion splits the performative from the inside.

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<sup>66</sup> Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>67</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>68</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 325-326

The etymology of “priestcraft” offers one paradigmatic instance of the slide of religion into perverse parody. Fairly quickly, a word denoting the expert performance of ritual duties came to denote something very different: the iterability of priests’ professional performance inscribes the potential for fakery into the sacred rite itself. Trust in the professional competency of the priest is always predicated on the possibility of betrayal and the possibility that the sincere professional is a fraudulent charlatan. Suspicion lurks within trust, just as faith is always already inhabited by an intimation of doubt. One might suggest that the appeal of some charismatic figures derives from their ability to mobilize trust and suspicion at the same time, thereby more fully inhabiting the inherent structure of belief.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, as Simon During has pointed out, the ambiguity of the magician as object of belief places him within the same cultural sphere as some forms of imaginative literature. Imaginative exercises like Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “suspension of disbelief” model a mixture of faith and doubt, central to the powers of the charlatan.<sup>70</sup>

As I will suggest in Chapter 5, the Theosophical Society experimented with just such an adumbrated belief. Its occultism took priestcraft as its starting point, but sought to rethink the imposture theory of religion. For instance, one 1884 article avers that all “the different religious systems of the world” have suffered from priestly corruption. Only in the modern period has the West awakened from its nightmare “to find out that it has been led by the nose by the priests.” A problem, however, remains

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<sup>69</sup> Compare David Chidester’s suggestion that even “religious fakes still do authentic religious work”; in *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), vii.

<sup>70</sup> During, *Modern Enchantments*, 44-45.

for the Theosophical writer. Why did so much of humanity fall for the lie? “[I]f all these theological fables are nothing else but stupid tales, at the absurdity of which a child would laugh, how could they dominate for so many centuries the minds of the people?” Because, as the Theosophists have it, every religious lie conceals a secret doctrine that the masses “intuitively perceived.”<sup>71</sup> Theosophical wisdom suggests the inverse of Derrida’s performativity: secreted within ersatz religion abides a kernel of irreducible truth.

### Chapter Overview

In what follows, I will consider how religious fraud was theorized under conditions of empire. Chapters 1 and 2, relatively broad in scope, chart the genealogy of priestcraft from the English Enlightenment to British India; despite considerable temporal latitude, their primary mooring is in the period from 1813-1840. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 consider how the discourse of priestly imposture articulated during this earlier period was revived during a later moment of religious reform (1858-1885). Each chapter analyzes a specific discursive conjuncture: two offer micro-historical accounts of religious scandals; one interprets a modern religious text. My conclusion returns to the general problematic of secularism, criticism, and the fiduciary.

Chapter 1, “The History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations,” takes its title from the text that is its principle topic: Quaker litterateur William Howitt’s *Popular History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations* (1833). In the chapter, I suggest that Howitt

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<sup>71</sup> “Practical Instructions for Students of Occultism: Forbidden Fruit,” *The Theosophist*, September 1884, 291-292. This was published in the same month that the *Madras Christian College Magazine* published its notorious exposé of Madame H. P. Blavatsky (see Chapter 5).

situates his text within two English anticlerical lineages. First, under the sign of George Fox, he raises the ghost of seventeenth-century Christian heterodoxy. Second, under the sign of Charles Blount, he revives critical deism and, albeit in attenuated form, the radical Enlightenment. In Howitt's text, these two lineages enter into just the sort of tactical alliance that I have suggested characterizes anticlerical modernity. In addition to parsing Howitt's invocation of the English past, I also return his text to the early 1830s. Starting in 1828, a series of legal reforms had begun to redefine the status of religious minorities in Britain. Howitt, I suggest, wanted to use the ensuing confusion in minority status to return the Quakers to their anticlerical origins; but he found that to tell the story of English priestcraft in 1833, he had first to traverse the world. Due in large part to the stridently anticlerical rhetoric of British Evangelicals since the Charter renewal debates of 1813, the problem of "priestcraft" had become inextricably intertwined with the problem of empire. It is no coincidence, then, that after completing his *History of Priestcraft*, Howitt went on to protest the ethical abuses of British colonialism.

Chapter 2, "Priestly Despots," expands on this contrapuntal connection by analyzing the conceptual grammar of the imposture theory as redeployed in India. It makes two related arguments. First, as Nicholas Dirks has suggested, in the early part of the nineteenth century British colonialism's mode of governance shifted decisively. The rhetoric of "reform" remade colonial governmentality by rendering it more diffuse and prodding it to intervene in Indian "culture." I suggest that the figure of the despotic priest played an important role in efforts to theorize this new style of colonialism, which, following Michel Foucault, I describe as "pastoral power." Once

imperial ideologues had identified “priestcraft” as the eternal substrate of Indian politics, colonial power devised ways to undermine the priests and redeem the souls of the colonized. Second, I argue that print media were central to the colonial effort to institute a new species of pastoral power that would re-form colonial subjects. Print artifacts were situated within a powerful cultural narrative that Michael Warner has described as the “Whig-McLuhanite” model of print media effects. I locate the lineaments of this model in documents from the period; Anglo-Indian print theorists hoped that “rational” reading publics would displace “fanatic” congregational multitudes.

Chapter 3, “Guru is God,” considers how this cluster of discourses was “applied” in a scandalous trial of 1862. Intrepid journalist Karsandas Mulji published an article alleging that Jadunāthjī Brizratanjī, a “Maharaj” or guru of the Puṣṭimārgī sect of Vaiṣṇavas, had foisted himself sexually on his devotees; the Maharaj sued him for libel. After months of shocking revelations about the guru’s erotic escapades, the trial ended with a ruling in favor of the defendant: the Maharaj was, as alleged, a libidinous imposter. In my discussion of the scandal, I draw on the trial transcript, as well as selections from the English and Gujarati press. I use these documents to contrast the political and devotional order instituted by the court ruling with the utopian ethics implied by the Maharaj’s devotional writings. In brief, I argue that colonial power tended to bifurcate Hinduism into a liberal religion, aimed at the governance of the individual soul, and a bureaucratic religion, aimed at the governance of the population. By contrast, the bhakti displaced by the trial enjoined an ethics of self-unmaking, of radical relationality, lateral solidarity, and self-surrender (ātma-nivedan).

Chapter 4, “Purāṇic Popery,” turns to a text very much influenced by the Maharaj Libel Case: Swāmī Dayānand Saraswatī’s *Satyārth Prakāś* (1875). Karsandas Mulji had begun the translation of “priestcraft” into the North Indian vernaculars; Dayanand finished the job with his Hindi-language monument to Vedic revival. In this text, Dayanand translates “priestcraft” as “pope-līlā.” My chapter analyzes, at length, the hybrid logic of this bilingual compound. First, I argue that the term is central to his double program of Vedic reform and national rejuvenation. By labeling his opponents as “popes,” Dayanand forces them into semantic exile, refracting heterodoxy through the linguistic codes of the nation. The popes entered India with the fall into debased modernity (that is, the Kali Yug), and the dialectic contest between popish lies and resurgent Vedic truth has propelled history ever since. Second, I use the compound “pope-lila” to open the theory of priestly imposture to a different body of thought. Dayanand is intent on reclaiming the ninth century philosopher Śaṅkarācārya (Shankara) for his reform program; but in order to do so, he must divorce Shankara from his non-dualist metaphysics. This proves no easy feat. I argue that the specter of māyā haunts Dayanand’s book. He constructs the compound “pope-lila” tendentiously in order to delimit divine illusion by attributing human error to human fraud. The ultimate effect of his effort, however, is to underscore Shankara’s cosmic suspicion: illusion is the horizon of the real.

Chapter 5, “A Skeptic’s Medium,” turns from Dayanand to one of his least favorite friends: Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. The chapter analyzes the scandalous Coulomb Affair of 1884-85. I use a range of primary documents to sketch the general contours of the colonial public before which the scandal unfolded. I then

consider how Theosophy intervened within the epistemology of exposure that undergirds the trope of priestly imposture. I draw particular attention to how the stereotype of the “credulous native” constrained the public actions available to Indian Theosophists like Mohini Chatterjee and to how Blavatsky experimented with an epistemology of the veil that simultaneously promised public openness and occult closure. My discussion concludes by defining “miracle” as an event that refuses to present itself fully in public.

My conclusion synthesizes this genealogy of priestcraft and religious imposture in colonial India. It briefly gestures to the rhetoric of charlatanism after 1885, with particular reference to Gandhi and (in a perverse pairing) Osho. It then returns to some of the general topics broached in this introduction by considering the mutual determinations of secularism, criticism, and belief. I consider the recent effort to recuperate Edward Said’s notion of “secular criticism” for the post-secular age, and I propose an “off-secular” criticism that uses belief to resist the “religious effects” of secularist doubt.

## 1: THE HISTORY OF PRIESTCRAFT IN ALL AGES AND NATIONS

Q: What is that men call Religion?

A: A politick cheat put upon the world.

Q: Who were the first contrivers of this cheat?

A: Some cunning men that designed to keep the world in subjection and awe.

-- Charles Wolsey (1669)<sup>1</sup>

*A Popular History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations* (1833) catalogues “the basest frauds” and “the most shameless delusions” ever perpetuated under the name of religion. Penned by William Howitt (1792-1879), the book aims “to shew that priestcraft in all ages and all nations has been the same; that its nature is one, and that nature essentially evil.”<sup>2</sup> To showcase this universal evil, the book ferries its reader from Indian temples to Druid circles, from snowy Siberia to tropical Africa, stopping off along the way in Assyria, Egypt, Scandinavia, Persia, America, and Greece. In the end, however, the book returns home to England to vituperate against that particular nation’s established church: in Howitt’s hands, universal priestcraft is a tool with an immediate (and much more local) use, designed to be wielded against the ecclesiastical state.

William Howitt had been reared by provincial Quakers who were not pleased with his decision to enter the world of literature. Their opprobrium, however, did not slow his ambitions. After his 1821 marriage to Mary Botham, the two became prolific writers, authoring between them over 180 titles on diverse topics including poetry, natural history, slavery, colonialism, and German and Scandinavian literature. To

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wolsey, *The unreasonableness of atheism made manifest*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Nathaniel Ponder, 1675), 198.

<sup>2</sup> William Howitt, *The Popular History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations* (London and New York: Effingham Wilson, 1833), 14. Henceforth cited in text as *PHP*.

borrow a phrase from one of their biographers, the Howitts were incomparable “Victorian samplers,” dabbling in seemingly all major trends of the period; their early poetic Romanticism gave way to strident reformism in the 1830s and, by the 1860s and 1870s, to experimentation with spiritualism and even Catholicism.<sup>3</sup> With their dual commitment to religion and the literary imagination, the Howitts’ vast oeuvre might prove a promising site for an interrogation of Simon During’s claim that, in the nineteenth century, literature came to mediate between “religion” and “belief.”<sup>4</sup> That, however, will not be my project here; instead, I will leave the Howitts’ eclectic sampling behind to analyze William’s diatribe against priestcraft.

This chapter aims to thicken the genealogical claims made in the introduction, enumerating the major treatises on religious imposture in order to amplify my inquiry into anticlerical modernity. The chapters to follow will join this history of imposture, diffusing and dispersing it to rethink its ostensible secularity from the colonial margins. As I suggested in the introduction, Howitt’s *History of Priestcraft* gestures to the horizontal scope of the imposture theory of religion. My project seeks, in a sense, to revisit Howitt’s book. Where Howitt looked for a universal, static phenomenon, I track a mobile discursive object (“priestcraft”) as it circulated globally under the aegis of empire. Where Howitt rushed to racial origins, mapping global cultures through their arboreal lines of descent, I emphasize the synchronic conjunctures and rhizomatic

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<sup>3</sup> Carl Ray Woodring, *Victorian Samplers: William and Mary Howitt* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1952). The other major biography of the Howitts is Amice Lee, *Laurels and Rosemary: The Life of William and Mary Howitt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955).

<sup>4</sup> Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

crossings of colonialism. My project's scope is much more tightly delimited than Howitt's; however, in principle, it gestures beyond cultural "areas" toward global cultural flows.

This chapter uses Howitt's *History of Priestcraft* to sketch the itineraries of that term since the late seventeenth century. Howitt was a Quaker, and he wanted to return the Society of Friends to its origins in the strict disestablishmentarianism of George Fox (1624-1691). Fox's fiery denunciations of the official church pepper the pages of the *History of Priestcraft*; but as I will suggest, their influence is rivaled by unmarked allusions to Charles Blount (1654-1693), a less devout religious critic of the same period. Fox and Blount represent two poles of England's anticlerical tradition, which (and despite the contemporaneity of the two men) might be figured as "Reformation" and "Enlightenment." Howitt makes easy use of both modalities: doctrinal difference recedes behind polemical commonality. As I suggest, the dual availability of Blount and Fox for Howitt would seem to support an argument framed by historians like Justin Champion and Mark Goldie. The Enlightenment was not radically disjunctive from the Reformation; especially in England, the two declared a mutual war on priestcraft, together articulating anticlerical modernity.

The chapter goes on to make a further argument: by the 1830s it had become difficult to extricate English anticlericalism from the wider cultural frame of empire. Despite his attempt to reclaim the spirit of the national past, "Little England" eludes Howitt: he can only come back home after having traversed the world. The referential slide of religious comparison had intensified since the seventeenth century's efforts to identify "heathen conformities" (discussed below). To trace the history of global

priestcraft in 1832 was to come up against two different discursive fields, each of which involved the religious critic in the ideologies of empire. First, the grand comparative disciplines, with their effort to order the world through a decidedly racial logic, provided Howitt with the scholarly skeleton of his global history. Second, Evangelical cries for the moral uplift of the colonies had latched onto “priestcraft” as the major organizing concept for the denunciation of “native” culture, particularly “Hindoo” culture. Accordingly, the central chapter in Howitt’s *History* is the chapter on India, the land where priestcraft was “at once in full flower and full fruit; in that state at which it has always aimed, but never, not even in the bloody reign of the Papal church, attained elsewhere” (*PHP*, 74-75). The imbrications of anticlericalism with imperialism led Howitt, after completing the *Popular History of Priestcraft*, to turn to anti-colonial agitation, a passion that culminated in his book *Colonization and Christianity* (1838).

The following discussion, then, consists of three sections. The first (“The Quaker Establishment”) interrogates Howitt’s legal status as a religious minority. It briefly outlines the lifting of disabilities on minorities that took place after 1828, suggesting that the volatility of minority status during this period led Howitt to reconsider the Quaker’s relationship to George Fox and the formative seventeenth century. Howitt tried to recoup the oppositional ethos of Quaker origins, but he also undermined English national history by casting for transnational solidarities: Dissent, in the *History of Priestcraft*, emerges as a cosmopolitan category.

The next section (“Great is Diana of the Ephesians”) traces the second scion of English anticlericalism invoked by Howitt. This is the longest section in the chapter; it uses Charles Blount to reconstruct the history of the imposture theory of religion since

the Enlightenment. The final section of the chapter (“Heathen Conformities”) tracks how early modern claims about interchangeability of different “religions” became reframed by the comparative disciplines so important to Howitt’s project. Howitt had no immediate access to the intellectual world of Fox and Blount. Rather, his foray into comparative anticlericalism propelled him into the academic and political problematics of the British Empire.

### The Quaker Establishment

In 1833, when Quaker leaders gathered in London for the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, they reviewed a prospectus of Howitt’s *History of Priestcraft* and decided to denounce as a “libelous work” that Friends would be “cautioned” not to read. To the mind of Mary Howitt, William’s wife, this was just as well. Their disapproval “would in reality do the book good, the very caution inflaming curiosity and attracting attention to it.”<sup>5</sup> Mary thought that George Fox and William Penn would have liked her husband’s book very much. If modern Quakers did not, the fault did not lie with William. “Friends,” she wrote in a letter of June 1833, “have adopted a more timid policy in these days, and are more inclined to concede to the powers that be than stand boldly opposed to them.”<sup>6</sup>

In this matter, the two Howitts were of a single mind. Like Mary, William thought that the Society of Friends had deteriorated since its inception, and he made his opinion known in an 1833 article on “George Fox and his Contemporaries.” In

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret Howitt, ed., *Mary Howitt: An Autobiography*, vol. 1 (London: W. Isbister, 1889), 233-34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 233

Howitt's estimation, when the 1689 Act of Toleration (1689) stopped the persecution of Quakers, it also triggered the Society's long decline by causing the "effervescence" of the early movement to settle into a dull literalism. Wealth and rank overtook the Friends, and their radical roots withered. Howitt hoped that his contemporaries would recoup the original spirit of the movement by instituting key reforms, including the abandonment of Quaker "peculiarities" of speech and dress (stubborn insistence on the informal "thou" had come to serve a very different function after the pronoun was dropped from everyday English). Although his article was not well received among Society elders, younger members did appreciate his sentiments. This reflected support among English Quakers for American Elias Hicks' (1748-1830) rejection of Quaker orthodoxy, which had resulted in the great schism of American Friends in 1828.<sup>7</sup>

Above all, then, Howitt was concerned with managing the minority status of Quakers. This is not surprising, given the legal reforms of the late 1820s. In 1828, the Test and Corporation Acts, which had placed legal disabilities on religious minorities since the 1660s and 70s, were repealed. This was followed in 1829 by the "emancipation" of Catholics. As Gauri Viswanathan has suggested, the shift signaled by these reforms was more complicated than a simple extension of the legal structures of tolerance or the removal of disabilities. Closely related to simultaneously developments in India, the new legislation was meant to incorporate minorities into the national body by assimilating them to the dominant values of a national culture newly remobilized expressly for this purpose. As Viswanathan points out, "Tory support of the bill was

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<sup>7</sup> Woodring, *Victorian Samplers*, 42-43. Howitt's article was later reprinted as *George Fox and his First Disciples; or, the Society of Friends as It Was, and as It Is* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1834).

motivated in part by the conviction that aiming for a nation of good Englishmen was a more realistic goal than achieving a nation of good Anglicans.” For the new minorities, their difference from the national norm was both effaced and retained: they were remade as non-Jewish Jews, non-Catholic Catholics, non-dissenting Dissenters, non-nonconforming Nonconformists, and so forth.<sup>8</sup> English liberalism thus rose to prominence by producing new contradictions within the concept of the citizen.

As “non-dissenting Dissenters” the Quakers would indeed have ceded their some portion of their minority power status, as well as the critical purchase on state power that minority status often entails. With *The Popular History of Priestcraft*, Howitt tried to render this destabilizing conjuncture a moment of maneuver for his religious minority. Howitt wanted to recoup Quakers’ minority status, which in his view had been compromised since 1689. He proposed two means for doing so. First, he would reinstate the oppositional ethos of Quaker origins. Second, he would look beyond England to court transnational solidarities, by lumping Quakers together with other anticlerical agitators in “all ages and nations.” Thus positioned at the margins of the English nation, Quakers could proudly identify as members of a fully global minority: the fearless critics of sacerdotal religion.

Newly revived, the Quakers could then further expand the moment of maneuver produced by post-1828 volatility in their minority status. It would seem that, in the late seventeenth century, when the problem of religious dissent was

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<sup>8</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 4-5. Meanwhile, in India, Maucaulay’s educational program, designed to produce people who were “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,” sought in effect to produce non-Muslim Muslims and non-Hindu Hindus.

provisionally resolved with creation of the protected category of the religious minority, the content of dissent was neutralized as protected minority belief. With the legal structure of religious minority-dom up for question, Howitt seemed to think that the time was ripe once again to advocate seriously for the full disestablishment of the Church of England. The *History of Priestcraft* is, above all else, a screed against the state's official support of Anglicanism. Howitt quotes George Fox to bolster his claim that if a government patronizes one religion, it punishes all others, whether the Catholic majority in Ireland or the Quaker, Dissenting, and Catholic minorities in England. The established church, he goes on to claim, is even bad for the Anglicans. It strangles Oxford and Cambridge with sinecures. It burdens parishes with privately appointed pastors, often the sluggard nephews of the rich.

When the *History of Priestcraft* was published, it catapulted Howitt to new prominence as one of Nottingham's most celebrated Radicals. His new connections allow him to take his complains to the government. In January 1834, he and a few other delegates were sent to Prime Minister Earl Grey (r. 1830-1834) to petition for the full disestablishment of the Church of England. The Earl, however, did not take their request seriously. As Mary Howitt wrote that month:

His Lordship, after reading the petition, told the deputation that he was sorry to find the expression of such sweeping measures, which would embarrass the Ministers, alarm both Houses of Parliament, and startle the country. He wished they had confined themselves to the removal of those disabilities connected with marriage, burial, registration, and such matters, for on these heads there existed, both in himself and his colleagues, every disposition to relieve them.... Did they want entirely to do away with all establishment of religion?

William Howitt replied in no uncertain terms that that “was precisely what they desired.” The Earl, displeased with this response, vowed to oppose Howitt’s efforts.<sup>9</sup> Disestablishment was not to be.

The *History of Priestcraft* may not have the impact on national politics that its author had hoped for. But, as I suggested above, the nation was not its ultimate horizon. Howitt’s *History* reread English religion through a global frame of reference, making its case for disestablishment by harnessing a world history of religious imposture. A single “moral lesson,” Howitt writes, “is stamped on the destinies of every nation.” In order to “enjoy happiness, mutual love, and general prosperity,” the people must “snatch from the hands of their spiritual teachers all political power, and confine them solely to their legitimate task of Christian instruction” (*PHP*, 247). The true Dissenting spirit will not rest until all humanity has been delivered from sacerdotal authority. “From age to age, the great spirits of the world have raised their voices and cried ‘Liberty!’” (250). Howitt clearly counts himself among these great spirits, asserting his solidarity with a global Non-conformism that protests the near-universal power of crafty priests. This transnational solidarity serves to reinforce Quaker minority status within the English nation, cementing—and fracturing—Howitt’s attempted return to the stridently anticlerical spirit of George Fox.

If George Fox had provided Howitt with the conceptual apparatus that he used to impugn the justice of a state-sponsored church, he did not offer adequate conceptual resources for writing a global history of clerical oppression. For this, Howitt had to turn to a different intellectual lineage, to a set of thinkers that allowed him to postulate

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Howitt, letter of January 1834; in Margaret Howitt, ed., *Autobiography*, 237-39.

“heathen conformities,” or the comparability and substitutability of religions. It is to that other set of thinkers that I now turn.

### “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!”

In one particularly enigmatic passage in the *Popular History of Priestcraft*, Howitt describes a cadre of Aztec priests who, arrayed before the credulous mass, call out to their deity in order to distract the multitude from their own dubious claim to divine authority. “They cry out, if not exactly ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians,’ great is Mexitli of the Azticas” (*PHP*, 48).<sup>10</sup> Thus does Charles Blount’s *Great is Diana of the Ephesians* (1680) enter into Howitt’s *Popular History*.

Charles Blount, gentleman and man of letters, may not number among the most celebrated freethinkers of the English Enlightenment. Nevertheless, he remains notable for his popular adaptation of work by other, more influential authors like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), and Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648). By citing Blount, however obliquely, William Howitt invoked the history of what historian Frank Manuel has termed the “imposture theory” of religion: the notion that religion per se amounts to nothing but fraud.<sup>11</sup> As this dissertation is centrally concerned with the imposture theory and its multiple genealogies, I will take this opportunity to track the history to which Howitt alludes (the standard history of

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<sup>10</sup> Other references to Diana of the Ephesians occur on pages 124 and 196.

<sup>11</sup> See Frank Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959); Peter Harrison, *“Religion” and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Justin Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Justin Champion, “‘Religion’s Safe, with Priestcraft is the War: Augustan Anticlericalism and the Legacy of the English Revolution, 1660-1720,” *The European Legacy* 5.4 (2000): 547-561; and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

Enlightenment theories of priestly fraud). As historians like Frank Manuel, Peter Harrison, and Justin Champion have suggested, the closing decades of the seventeenth century were a pivotal moment for the consolidation of the imposture theory, and it is thus notable that this is the moment Howitt turns to in writing his *History of Priestcraft*.

Charles Blount stepped into prominence in 1678, the year that he joined the Green Ribbon Club (a prominent organ of Whig dismay over Charles II and his alleged papist proclivities) and published his *Anima Mundi, or, an historical narration of the opinions of the ancients concerning man's soul after this life* (which subtitle notwithstanding had very modern implications, arousing the ire of a bishop and even inspiring book burnings). The next year, Blount published *An Appeal from the Country to the City* (1679), which spun conspiratorial tales of the Popish Plot to take over London. *Great is Diana of the Ephesians* (1680), his most thorough exposition of the imposture theory of religion, quickly followed. Before his lovelorn suicide in 1693, Blount published two other major denunciations of religious supernaturalism (*Miracles, No Violations of the Laws of Nature* [1683], *Oracles of Reason* [1693]).<sup>12</sup>

Blount's irreverent skepticism places him squarely within the world of the "radical Enlightenment."<sup>13</sup> In many ways, his work anticipated the far more scandalous allegations of imposture made by the anonymous *Traité des trois imposteurs* (c.1719),

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<sup>12</sup> See Karl Josef Walber, *Charles Blount (1654-1693), Frühaufklärer: Leben und Werk* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Laing, 1988); Mark Goldie, "Charles Blount's intention in writing King William and Queen Mary conquerors (1693)," *N&Q* 223 (1978): 527-32; J. A. Redwood, "Charles Blount (1654-93), Deism, and English free thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35 (1974): 490-98.

<sup>13</sup> This term has been used to denote the period's most ardently materialistic and atheistic thinkers, whose clandestine conversations about scandalous topics like Spinoza forged cosmopolitan connections across Europe. See Margaret C Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981); and Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

perhaps the quintessential text of the eighteenth century's clandestine radical scene.<sup>14</sup> The *Traité* held to a hard materialism, dismissing all supernatural claims as “but human fictions and pure illusions given birth... by the politics of Princes and of Priests.”<sup>15</sup> Blount, however, stopped short of radical materialism, instead using the imposture narrative to bolster belief in a rationalist religion. Like Herbert of Cherbury, of whom he was the “only self-acknowledged disciple,” Blount was a Deist, and he claimed that understanding imposture was the key to reviving natural religion.<sup>16</sup>

Blount demonstrates his commitment to Deist monotheism in his major histories of religious fraud. In *Anima Mundi*, Blount posited an “Original” of superstition, a first fraud, that “did certainly proceed from some crafty discerning person” out to “procure an esteem and credit in the World.”<sup>17</sup> Later, in *Great is Diana*, he elaborated this tale of primal deceit, explaining that in the beginning humanity held to a natural monotheism presided over by virtuous philosophers. The Edenic state came to an end, however, when the people “were seduced by their crafty and covetous Sacerdotal Order; who instead of the said Virtue and Piety, introduced Fable and Fictions of their own coining.” These charlatans convinced the multitude that, henceforth, God would only communicate via priests. They devised a vast catalogue of

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<sup>14</sup> The text was first published in French in 1719, under the title *L'Esprit de M. Spinoza* and subsequently entered multiple editions. For discussion of the authorship of the *Traité*, see Jacob, 55, as well as the essays collected in Sylvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert, and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> *The treatise of the three impostors and the problem of Enlightenment: a new translation of the Traité des trois imposteurs (1777 edition)*, trans. Abraham Anderson (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), II.xi.28.

<sup>16</sup> Harrison, ‘Religion’ and the Religions, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Blount, *Anima Mundi, or, An historical narration of the opinions of the ancients concerning man's soul after this life* (London: Will Cademan, 1679), 2-5.

crimes in order to further the trade in divine forgiveness; proliferated divinities to produce a lucrative polytheism; faked theatrical miracles; and introduced the custom of sacrifice, “the greatest and most mysterious fourbs that ever were invented,” to confirm their rule by fear.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, they marginalized the philosophers to prevent them from detecting and decrying their impostures.

Blount borrowed the basic form of this narrative from Herbert of Cherbury. Herbert had, in his *De Veritate* (1624), sought to uncover through a *a priori* reflection a set “Common Notions” underlying all religions.<sup>19</sup> But, after deciding on them, Herbert hit upon a snag: the growing literature on “pagan” religion, classical and contemporary, proved his Notions to be anything but common. So he added an addendum to his theory: the common religion, with its Common Notions, had long ago been corrupted by a “Sacerdotal Order” that pioneered the “great Defection from the Pure Worship of the *Supreme God*.”<sup>20</sup> The reasoning Deist might restore the natural order by recovering the pure monotheism lost to the priests.

For Herbert, the primal fraud was a footnote to eternal monotheism; but for Blount, monotheism becomes but a minor episode in the epic tale of fraud’s unfolding.

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Blount, *Great is Diana of the Ephesians, or the Original of Idolatry* ( 3-15).

<sup>19</sup> Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *De veritate, prout distinguitur a revelatione, a verisimili, a possibili, et a falso*, trans. Meyrick H. Carré (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1937). Herbert settled on five Common Notions: (1) that there is a supreme God, (2) that God is to be worshipped, (3) that virtue and piety are at the heart of religion, (4) that we must repent our wickedness, and (5) that after this life we await reward and punishment. Herbert is often hailed as a precursor of the comparative study of religion that emerged in the nineteenth century. See Morris Jastrow, *The Study of Religion* (London: Charles Scribner, 1901), 133-136; Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986 [1975]), 16; and J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 23-39; and Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *The antient religion of the gentiles, and causes of their errors consider'd* (London: William Taylor, 1711), 3, 41.

Taken tendentiously, Blount's *Diana* writes the Notions out of Herbert's *De Veritate*. The common cause of religion, at least as we know it, is fraud, pure and simple. Blount's program, to be sure, remains Deist in orientation. As he clarified in a 1693 essay, it is their faith in "external things or bare opinions of the mind" that puts the followers of the "Particular" religions at risk for the "cheat" of the religious imposture. Deism peers behind externals to find its deity; because it worships God "negatively," it remains immune to human lies.<sup>21</sup> But Blount introduced an instability into this paradigm. When Herbert had peered behind religious particulars, he found find the serene effulgence of divine reason; when Blount peered behind the curtain of religious particulars, he kept sticking on huckster priests. The stagecraft of conniving charlatans might conceal yet a deeper recess, the true temple of the divine, but this final step could just as easily be dispensed with. Radical materialism is only a step away.

But, as Peter Harrison has noted, Blount and other proponents of "critical deism," alongside their clear affinities with radical thought, also shared in an "anti-clerical sentiment" that was widespread in early modern England.<sup>22</sup> During the late seventeenth century, a richly varied body of satirical writing lambasted the clergy for a variety of ends. John Eachard's *The Grounds and Occasions of the Contempt of the Clergy and Religion* (1670), for instance, diagnosed the poor policies that had rendered English clerics pompous, bumbling, and generally laughable, bringing disesteem not only on

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Blount, "A Summary Account of the Deists' Religion," in *Oracles of Reason* (London: 1693), 88-96.

<sup>22</sup> Harrison, 'Religion' and the Religions, 73.

themselves, but also on God.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, clerics were also satirized on stage such that, in the words of one outraged observer, “glorious Religion” was made “the Diversion of the Town, and the Scorn of Buffoons.”<sup>24</sup> While Blount’s anticlerical writings share a strong affinity with radical texts from the Continent, like the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, they also need to be understood as part of this wider English anticlerical culture.

Indeed, as Justin Champion has argued, it is precisely the historiographical tendency to entangle the English and French Enlightenments that has rendered English anticlericalism invisible to theorists of modernity. Champion follows J. G. A. Pocock’s claim that English anticlericalism remained more “muted” than its French counterpart (i.e. Voltaire’s “écrasez l’infâme”) because in England there was “simply no *infâme* to be crushed.”<sup>25</sup> Consequently, some of the most trenchant critics of the period were, like Jonathan Swift, also card-carrying clerics. As Champion aptly summarizes the situation, “the English Enlightenment was inscribed from within the prophetic.”<sup>26</sup> Secular and sacred criticisms were not clearly demarcated and, for this reason, it makes more sense to conceive of the two together as composing an “anticlerical modernity” (I discuss this

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<sup>23</sup> John Eachard, *Grounds and Occasions of the Contempt of the Clergy and Religion Enquired Into* (London: W. Godbid, 1670). Not surprisingly, Eachard associates outright fraud with the Catholic Continent: it is there that “Cheats, contriv’d Tales, and feigned Miracles” are used by priests to accrue “Money in abundance” (98).

<sup>24</sup> Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Kable, Sare, and Hindmarsh, 1698), 81. For discussion of Collier, see Justin Champion, “Religion’s Safe,” 552-553; and Rose Anthony, *The Jeremy Collier Stage Controversy, 1698-1726* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1937).

<sup>25</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, “Post-Puritan England and the Problem of the Enlightenment,” in *Culture and Politics from Puritanism to the Enlightenment*, ed. Perez Zagorin (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 106.

<sup>26</sup> Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft*, 14.

proposal at greater length in the Introduction). The intertwined history of these two anticlericalisms is clearly evident in Howitt's *Popular History of Priestcraft*, with its double invocation of Blount and Fox.

A parallel argument might be made with regard to the French Enlightenment, which, to paraphrase Champion, seems to have been inscribed from within the demonic—or, at least, the demonological. Take, for instance, the *Histoire des oracles* (1686) by Bernard le Boivier de Fontenelle (1657-1757).<sup>27</sup> This treatise on the trickery of ancient oracles adapted Antonius Van Dale's ponderous Latin treatise *De Oraculis* (1683) for popular audiences; not long after its publication, it was translated into English by Blount's friend Aphra Behn (1640-1689) (she is best known today for authoring the Oriental tale *Oroonoko* [1688]). The text remained a touchstone for eighteenth century debates about pagan religion and religious imposture.<sup>28</sup> The *Histoire* refuted the accepted dogma that the coming of Christ had silenced pagan oracles because they were inspired by demons. Fontenelle revised sacred history by placing priests at the helm of fake religion. The oracles were silenced, not because perfidious devils were hushed by Christ, but because shifting political structures upended all-too-human theatrics. Fontenelle played an important role in disenchanting the ancient Mediterranean world for modern audiences, replacing real (that is, supernatural) magic with its secular (that is, theatrical) double.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bernard le Boivier de Fontenelle, *Histoire des oracles*, ed. Louis Maigron (Paris: E. Cornély, 1908); Bernard le Boivier Fontenelle, *The History Oracles, and the Cheats of Pagan Priests*, trans. Aphra Behn (London: 1688).

<sup>28</sup> Manuel, *Eighteenth Century*, 49

<sup>29</sup> I borrow this distinction from Simon During, *Modern Enchantments*

Although the disjuncture between these two narratives, between demons and charlatans, is unmistakably important, the continuity between them should not be ignored. If Fontenelle was able to displace the demons, he retained the structure of suspicion that belief in demons had promulgated: demonic deceit prepared the way for priestly deceit. A version of this argument has been made by Michel de Certeau in his study of the mass demonic possession of Ursuline nuns at the convent of Loudun in the 1630s and 1640s. By analyzing the shifting discursive formations that constellated around the possessed women, Certeau demonstrates how exorcism, as a “struggling against the lie” of the demon, became an important site for the articulation of new regimes of truth, new modes of state power and public spectacle, and new medicalizations of the body.<sup>30</sup> The demonic specter thus comes to haunt even the most paradigmatic of modern epistemologies, including the radical skepticism of René Descartes (1596-1650), who was dogged by a doubter’s devil with alleged links to Loudun.<sup>31</sup> Disappearing demons also influenced events beyond France. They possessed colonized subjects in Spain’s new world empire.<sup>32</sup> They also influenced English Deist

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<sup>30</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 144. For other discussions of how anxiety about religious “enthusiasm,” demonic possession, and magic contributed to the emergence of modern medical institutions, see Michael Heyd, “Be Sober and Reasonable”: *The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); and Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Richard Popkin has suggested that Loudun’s perfidious demons inspired Descartes’s demon hypothesis, the evil genius that threatened to topple his meditations with a pervasive and insurmountable delusion. See *The History of Skepticism from Savanarola to Bayle*, rev. ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 149-150.

<sup>32</sup> For a highly suggestive discussion of demonic possession in seventeenth-century Peru, see Kenneth Mills, *Idolatry and its Enemies: Colonial Andean Religion and Extirpation, 1640-1750* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); see also Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

accounts of the fall from primal monotheism. Previously, Satan had been the paradigmatic “Artificer of fraud” and Eve “our credulous mother” the prototypical dupe; the secularized Enlightenment iteration of this narrative replaced the Devil with the perfidious priest and Eve with the credulous mass.<sup>33</sup> The basic plotline, however, remained the same.

While treatises like Fontenelle’s and Blount’s were important to the development of the imposture theory, they were always situated with networks of popular practice centered on spectacular entertainments and material culture. As scholars like Leigh Eric Schmidt and Simon During have so deftly demonstrated, the imposture theory emerged through “intersections of philosophy and entertainment, scientific experiment and magical display, print and performance.”<sup>34</sup> Philosopher-ventriloquists, mock oracles, and talking pigs were pioneers in the field of “enlightened entertainment”; they rendered the magician “one of the alluring celebrities of the Enlightenment, a wizard arrayed against wizardry, an exposé of ‘supernatural humbugs.’”<sup>35</sup> Such entertainments used illusion to train their audiences in skepticism, redisciplining the senses with new technologies like the acoustic tube.<sup>36</sup> Writers like Fontenelle and Blount indulged in this theatrical sensibility, delving into the acoustic

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<sup>33</sup> Quotations from John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Scott Elledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), IV.121-122 and IX.644.

<sup>34</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, “From Demon Possession to Magic Show: Ventriloquism, Religion, and the Enlightenment,” *Church History* 67.2 (1998): 226.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 225

<sup>36</sup> In *Hearing Things*, Schmidt offers an especially rich account of how the period’s entertainers and philosophers trained the ear to hear reasonably and remain immune to the lure of divine (and demonic) voices. He refigures imposture as a diffuse discipline, a discourse complicit with new regimes of capillary control over crowds and bodies, but a discipline also vulnerable to the enthusiastic eruptions of spirit that modern acoustics could never quite muffle.

effects of mountains and caverns, detailing priests' "fantastical Vestments" and "stately Representations," and reinforcing the truth claims of print with metaphors of ocular clarity. As Blount put it, priests' perfidious craft was a "was a kind of Acting their Religion, as it were, upon a Stage."<sup>37</sup> I would note that Blount's claim here echoes the theory of the religious "performativity" laid out in the introduction. Priestcraft haunts true religion because it recalls the perpetual possibility that the sacred might misfire, performing not religion but instead the perversely irreligious parodies of the stage.

If enlightened entertainments sometimes seemed to reinforce the class-based division between the rational few and the credulous many, further subordinating the mass to their instructors, this was no mistake. The imposture theory implied a distinctly antagonistic class politics, particularly when in the form of the "twofold philosophy."<sup>38</sup> Critical Deists and others, adapting a popular classical tradition, posited a sharp divide between the philosopher and the mass (a divide important, for instance, to Blount's origin narrative). As John Toland once wrote: "We shall be in Safety if we separate ourselves from the Multitude; for the Multitude is a proof of what is worst."<sup>39</sup> The "intellectual elite" resolved to keep their pearls of wisdom from the swine of the "credulous, superstitious mob"<sup>40</sup>; they thus transformed the "truths of natural religion" into a "mystery" that was "veiled from the people" and hinted at only in hieroglyphic

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<sup>37</sup> Quotations from Blount, 42-43. Compare Fontenelle: ). "*et pourquoy ils ne s'avisoyent jamais d'aller anime une Statüe qui fust dans un Carrefour, exposé de toutes parts aux yeux de tout le monde*" (*Histoire*, 115-116).

<sup>38</sup> Manuel, *Eighteenth Century*, 65-69

<sup>39</sup> John Toland, *Pantheisticon, Or the Form of Celebrating the Socratic Society* (London: Sam Paterson, 1751), iii.

<sup>40</sup> Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 85.

code.<sup>41</sup> Intellectual radicalism, though it may have inspired a benevolent elitism, did not do much to undermine prevailing social hierarchies—a feature that would make the imposture theory especially appealing to imperial ideologues in India.

The theory would not have made it to India, however, had it not been for one final feature. Deists like Blount gathered together the various intellectual lineaments outlined above, and their anticlerical spirit fully of a piece with its period. But they transformed this common anticlericalism into something novel, into what Peter Harrison deems a “full-blown theory of religion.” Deists criticized the English clergy by presenting them as “contemporary manifestations of a universal religious type—the priestly imposter.”<sup>42</sup> This universal imposter followed on the heels of Herbert’s *Common Notions*, extrapolating his universality from the presumed universality of minimum religion, which was Herbert’s fundamental innovation. Universal fraud became the foil to universal faith, and the tension between the two furthered the fashioning of a new discursive entity, a “religion” greater than the sum of its parts.

The mythos of priestly deceit had a clear effect on the major naturalist theories of religion that emerged during the eighteenth century. David Hume’s *Natural History of Religion* (1757), for instance, faults fraudulent priests for the loss of the rational monotheism that prevailed in the first ages of the world. What I hope to have called attention to in the above discussion, however, is the critical contiguity of naturalism and supernaturalism, of Christianity and its critics. I have used the revisionist position

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<sup>41</sup> Manuel, *Eighteenth Century*, 65. This mythology of intellectuals’ noble dissemblance in the face of ignorant authority may have proved especially appealing to early modern radical thinkers constrained by state censorship. See Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> Harrison, ‘*Religion*’ and the Religions, 73, 78.

elaborated by Justin Champion, Mark Goldie, and others to insist on the importance of Christian anticlericalism in the making of secular modernity. Christian anticlericalism did not give way with the rise of its materialist cousin; it thrived. And as it continued to mutate, the two anticlericalisms came to inform each other. The “religious” and the “secular” thus come to share a single critical position, their differences in belief receding behind their common skeptical apparatus.

William Howitt’s ability to arrogate the more “radical” breed of anticlericalism to the Quaker reformism of the 1830s (close kin to Evangelical movements of the same period) further reinforces the revisionist claim. A slogan like “Great is Diana of the Ephesians” is just as useful to the Protestant polemicist as to the atheist, and it retained its potency well beyond the 1680s. Indeed, Howitt’s *History of Priestcraft* further textures Mark Goldie’s suggestion that the conceptual apparatus of priestly imposture began to take on new forms around 1844, with the publication of Karl Marx’s “Contribution on the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*” (see Introduction). A decade earlier, in 1833, another effort to rethink religious deceit had been undertaken. Howitt’s history of universal priestcraft may not have proved as influential as Marx’s incipient theory of ideology, but both texts sought to resuscitate and revise related narrative tropes of divine hokum and exposure. As Howitt’s *History* demonstrates, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the twin legacies of Charles Blount and George Fox had taken on a renewed salience.

## Heathen Conformities

For all the ways that the *History of Priestcraft* is a critical and skeptical text, intent on tearing down institutional establishments in the name of Christian protest, it is also heavily invested in what was in the 1830s an increasingly institutionalized array of disciplinary procedures. Howitt was a critic set on establishing what I will call (borrowing a phrase from Frank Manuel) “heathen conformities.” This phrase has an insidiously authoritarian ring to it for a reason. The imperial West articulated its difference from the rest of the world through knowledge regimes that generated stereotypes about the colonized and then, through a range of coercive mechanisms, induced the colonized to conform to those stereotypes; in the process, and even while proliferating massively documented differences, these knowledge regimes also established the fundamental equivalence or interchangeability of colonial subjects. The heathens, in their infinite variety, are by definition not to be confused with Christians, but rather with each other.

Howitt was working in this general mode when he set out “to shew that priestcraft in all ages and all nations has been the same; that its nature is one, and that nature essentially evil.” That is, he gathered together a very wide array of cultural data from around the world and forced all the collocated customs, practices, and anecdotes to conform to a single pattern, a hypothesis proven before it was even tested. All the world’s “heathens” conform to the pattern of priestcraft. In fact, their subservience to priests is what, at bottom, defines them as heathens and separates them from true Christians (Howitt was not particularly shy about classing Catholics and Anglicans with the superstitious mobs of the colonized world).

In his search for heathen conformities, Howitt engaged in a task prevalent since at least the time of Blount and his contemporaries. In the early modern period, the learned devoured new information about two types of “pagans”: one featured in translations from classical Greek and Latin, the other in travelers’ accounts of the non-Western world. This public, in its effort to make sense of its newly widened reality, eagerly drew parallels between these two disparate domains. According to Frank Manuel, by the early eighteenth century the repeated juxtaposition of the two paganisms, classical and contemporary, had fundamentally transformed perceptions of both. By 1724, when Jesuit missionary Joseph François Lafitau published his *Moeurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps*, the two had, he suggests, “been completely assimilated with each other.”<sup>43</sup> Or, as S.N. Balagangadhara has put it, paganism was a “hybrid beast” that “lived among the peoples and cultures of Asia” but “came to the witness stand clothed in the sacerdotal robes of the Ancients.”<sup>44</sup>

The mutual assimilation of ancient and modern “paganisms” proved a boon to the emergent human sciences in their effort to impose systematic order on a new world of things. But it also raised new satirical possibilities for the religious critic. Could the cry of Diana be placed on the lips of a Catholic or even an Anglican priest? For many, the answer was an emphatic yes. Chains of priestly equivalence structured many, if not most, Enlightenment treatises on religious imposture, and it was often only because of the clever substitution of clerics that criticisms of Christianity could be published without seriously endangering their authors. Some, however, thought that to grant the

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<sup>43</sup> Manuel, *Eighteenth Century*, 15-19

<sup>44</sup> S.N. Balagangadhara *The Heathen in His Blindness: Asia, the West, and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 100

comparability of Christianity and “heathenism” was to concede far too much. As Anthony Collier wrote in his 1698 denunciation of theatrical satire: “Can we argue from Heathenism to Christianity? How can the practise be the same, where the Rule is so very different? ...Is there no Distinction between Truth and Fiction, between Majesty and a Pageant? Must God be treated like an Idol?”<sup>45</sup> The more that the object “Christianity” entered into referential relation with equivalent objects under the banner of the newly reconstituted signifier “religion,” the less it could presume to the status of religion’s ultimate referent and ground. Consequently, the new ordering of religions posed real a danger to the claims of orthodoxy.

In many ways, Howitt’s nineteenth century entry into this field of knowledge is strikingly continuous with its late seventeenth century predecessors. It is the presumption of heathen conformity that permits his glib substitution of the slogan “Great is Mexitli of the Aziticas [*sic*]” for “Great is Diana of the Ephesians.” He seems, moreover, to have strategically displaced his harshest critiques of Anglican clerics onto their heathen analogues. As his wife Mary wrote, “while he shows the tyrannical spirit of priestcraft in all ages and nations, he will treat moderately, comparatively speaking, the subject of priesthood in the present day; that is, he will war with the principle, and not with the men.”<sup>46</sup> Howitt’s critics also seemed to replay a much older set of debates. For instance, the introduction to the American edition of the *History of Priestcraft* reframes Collier’s complaint. Written by “a clergyman of New York,” the introduction faults Howitt for unwarranted “apposition” and insufficient “discrimination” between

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<sup>45</sup> Collier, *Short View of the Immorality*, 95

<sup>46</sup> Mary Howitt, letter of December 19, 1832; in Margaret Howitt, ed., *Autobiography*, 231.

divine decree and human corruption. Howitt erred in classifying the true religion (i.e. Protestant Christianity) with “the inventions of the dragon.” While Howitt’s Quakerism might account for his indiscriminately anti-clerical proclivities, it does not entirely excuse it. One should never confuse, as Howitt apparently did, John the Apostle with “Demetrius the shrine-maker of Diana” (*PHP*, viii-x).

Despite these apparent continuities, however, Howitt’s *History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations* is different in kind from similar ventures of the 1680s and 90s. In the intervening century, an array of new disciplinary formations had emerged that refashioned the conceptual tools available for comparative anticlericalism. The nascent human sciences had intensified, systematized, and institutionalized the search for heathen conformities in an era when the West’s political interest in those same “heathens” was very much on the rise. The grand apparatus of Orientalism, although not to receive its full elaboration until later, had begun to emerge by 1830, and Howitt’s *History of Priestcraft* is disciplined by its novel array of classificatory technologies.

Briefly, Howitt structured his *History* around a narrative of common human descent from the sons of the biblical patriarch Noah. This diffusionist narrative was a common one in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century efforts to map world history. It combined modified Christian dogma with an early form of “scientific” race theory, reinforcing the claims of both with copious philological detail. William Jones (1746-1794) was perhaps the most important advocate of the diffusionist paradigm, as in his influential essay “On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India” (1784); and Howitt includes Jones in his appreciative list of “acute and industrious antiquarians” whose research enabled his own study of how “every pagan worship in the world has the same

origin” (*PHP*, 17, 21). Howitt’s *History* was not a neutral presentation of this body of research, however; it clearly took sides in a scholarly debate that had been raging for decades. According to Nigel Leask, eighteenth-century mythography was split over the question of Christian belief. Two camps had laid claim to the discipline: radical mythographers intent on reducing all myth, Christian included, to natural allegory; and conservative mythographers who tried to trace all world mythologies back to the Biblical Flood.<sup>47</sup> Howitt recycles material from both sides of this debate, but his preference is clearly for the authors in the latter camp. He cites Jacob Bryant (1715-1804), who argued that all “heathen” mythologies were corruptions of an antediluvian monotheism. Bryant paid particular attention to how Noah’s son Ham and his progeny the Cushites spread this corruption.<sup>48</sup> Howitt also cited Thomas Maurice (1754-1824) and his follower G.S. Faber (1773-1854). Both were Anglican clergymen who updated Bryant’s theories in light of William Jones’ pioneering research. Maurice’s major obsession was the Trinity; he sought to catalogue divine threesomes around the world so as to argue for the phylogenetic priority of Christian Trinitarianism.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Nigel Leask, “Mythology,” in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*, ed. Iain McCalman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 338-345. My account here draws heavily on Leask. See also Manuel, *Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*; P. J. Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880* (New York, 1984); and David A. Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>48</sup> See Jacob Bryant, *A New System; or, Analysis of Antient Mythology: wherein an attempt is made to divest tradition of fable, and to reduce the truth to its original purity*, 6 vols. (London: J. Walker, 1807 [1774-76]).

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Maurice, *Indian Antiquities: or dissertations relative to the ancient geographical divisions, the pure system of primeval theology, the grand code of civil laws, the original form of government, and the various and profound literature of Hindostan*, 7 vols. (London: W. Richardson, 1793-1806). Also of interest is Maurice’s *Brahminical Fraud Detected; or the Attempts of the Sacerdotal Tribe of India to Invest their Fabulous Deities and Heroes with the Honours and Attributes of the Christian Messiah, Examined, Exposed, and Defeated* (London: W.

Howitt, ever eclectic in his intellectual sensibility, incorporated material from these and others texts. His laundry list of heathen conformities includes trinities, solar worship, human sacrifice, phallic rites, auguries, metempsychosis, self-immolation, arks, and mysterious caves. But the most prominent and defining principle of global paganism is, of course, the despotic rule of priests. Priestcraft, the ultimate heathen conformity, implies a “system of domination in the few, and slavery in the multitude” (*PHP*, 42). It began in an “early age of the world,” after the Flood and before Babel, when “the whole human family was together in one place.” Pure “patriarchal worship” was corrupted by priestly deceit, and from this lie arose “every system of heathen mythology.” The pollution worked its way across the globe with Noah’s sons: Japhet populated Europe, Siberia, and the Americas; Shem populated Asia; and Ham populated Africa (16-18). By the onset of modernity, priestcraft prevailed worldwide: “From the temple of Buddh and Jaggernath in India, to the stony circles of Druidism in Europe; from the snowy wastes of Siberia and Scandinavia to the north, to the most southern lands of Africa and America, the fires of these bloody deities rejoiced the demoniac priests and consumed the people” (24).

India, however, looms largest, and for an important reason. Since at least the 1790s, extremely vocal Evangelical and Reformist elements in England had advocated for the civilizing mission of empire. The moral debacle of British economic expansion into India, showcased in the trial of Warren Hastings (1788-1795), had prompted a sustained outcry from those who thought that Christianity could right the moral wrongs of empire. Evangelical leaders like William Wilberforce (1759-1833) mounted a

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Bulmer, 1812); the text claims that the wily Brahmins and the French atheists have formed an unholy alliance in order to subordinate Christ to Krishna.

campaign to use the 1813 renewal of the East India Company's charter to throw the subcontinent open to missionaries. In the process, these reformists developed a rhetoric about the moral turpitude of "Hindoo" India, blaming the sorry state of subcontinental ethics on the greed of crafty brahmin "priests." This polemical discourse was predicated on the long-standing assumption of the comparability of "heathenisms," as is evinced by the centrality of priestcraft to both traditions. Reformist rhetors and polemicists knew considerably less about the religious particulars of India than they did about the universal type of the conniving charlatan priest.

Howitt's *History of Priestcraft*, published twenty years after the Charter Act of 1813, devotes an entire chapter to this tired trope. Aside from England, India is the only nation in this global narrative to warrant a full chapter, and this is because of the unique place that India holds in the history of priestcraft. As Howitt explains: of all the "semi-barbarous" nations beset by priests, India is the worst. The brahmans have established their unparalleled priestly despotism by fabricating and sanctifying an unusually complete system of social division. Their "soul-quelling" caste system leaves "millions on millions bound, from the earliest ages to the present hour" in "chains." The people are rendered "slavish... in the servility of a religious creed" that is so "subtilly framed" that the "moral regeneration of the swarming myriads of these vast regions" seems almost entirely "hopeless" (*PHP*, 74-75). In the dreamtime of religious origins, we find not the primal *purūṣa* but the primal deceit: an outrageous fabrication of *varṇas* inserted into the mouth of Manu. The clever brahmans "firmly seized and secured the whole political power." Restricting access to knowledge and manipulating

the masses with “promises of future happiness,” they lulled India into a millennium-long stupor. “From such a labyrinth of priestly art, nothing short of a miracle seems capable of rescuing them” (87).

Once turned toward this den priestly iniquity, Howitt seems to have been drawn ineluctably deeper into the problem of colonialism. Swept up into national and international radical politics, William and Mary began to protest slavery and other excesses of imperialism—without, however, calling for the outright abolition of empire. Instances of their activities during this period include a series of events from 1840: in an *Eclectic Review* article on “The Present Condition of British India,” William advocated securing cotton revenues for Indians; William was elected to the general committee of the British India Society; and Mary attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London (where she and the other female delegates, including Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were infamously relegated to the balcony).

William Howitt’s sentiments about the British Empire are laid forth in his 1838 opus his *Colonization and Christianity*. The book aimed to “lay open to the public the most extensive and extraordinary system of crime which the world ever witnessed. It is a system which has been in full operation for more than three hundred years and continues yet in unabating activity of evil.”<sup>50</sup> (In this, colonialism surely bears comparison to priestcraft). As in the earlier book, India (the “Ireland of the East”) occupies pride of place, taking up seven out of twenty-eight chapters. Although Howitt is very critical of British imperial policies, he does not advocate for the relinquishment

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<sup>50</sup> William Howitt, *Colonization and Christianity: A Popular History of the Treatment of the Natives by the Europeans in All their Colonies* (London: Longman, 1838), i.

of the empire. Rather, he wants for Christianity to serve as the British Empire's moral compass. "There is no power but the spirit of Christianity living in the heart of the British public, which can secure justice to the millions that are crying for it from every region of the earth. It is that which must stand as the perpetual watch and guardian of humanity; and never yet has it failed."<sup>51</sup> This passage clarifies how Howitt's concern with colonialism followed from his concern with priestcraft: it was precisely because of India's clerical excesses that it had to be colonized. This was to be an ethical empire with a civilizing mission of cultural reform. Howitt's Quaker passion for social justice propelled him, however ironically, to support the colonial domination of India. In an 1842 essay, William suggested that the British India Society's humanitarian intervention might save for Britain "the finest possessions which ever were put under the control of another nation."<sup>52</sup> After the early 1840s, the Howitts drifted from their Reformist zeal. As Sven Lindqvist has pointed out, in their later translations of Scandinavian literature, the Howitts attributed Britain's imperial successes to its Viking heritage—a conquering blood of which they were proud.<sup>53</sup>

What I want to emphasize, however, is how anticlerical raillery of the 1830s took the Empire, and India in particular, as its inevitable horizon. Howitt had crafted his anticlericalism from the double lineage of George Fox and Charles Blount, hoping to challenge the Quaker establishment, the Church of England, and the new liberal mode of citizenship emerging in the newly tolerant British state. If ideas are bricks to be

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 507

<sup>52</sup> Woodring, *Victorian Samplers*, 52-53.

<sup>53</sup> Sven Lindqvist, *The Skull Measurer's Mistake: And Other Portraits of Men and Women who Spoke Out against Racism*, trans. Joan Tate (New York: New Press, 1997), 51-52.

thrown through the windows of power, the idea of religious imposture found itself in the early nineteenth century suspended between the gravitational pull of two political edifices, one ecclesiastical and the other imperial. This chapter has focused on the first of those poles; the next will focus on the second.

## 2: PRIESTLY DESPOTS

The Brahmin stood in the place of the Deity to the infatuated sons of Indian superstition; the will of heaven was thought to issue from his lips; and his decision was revered as the fiat of destiny... the name of God, by this perversion, was made use of to sanction and support the most dreadful species of despotism; a despotism, which, not content with subjugating the body, tyrannized over the prostrate faculties of the enslaved mind.

Thomas Maurice (1801)<sup>1</sup>

Baptist missionary William Ward (1769-1823) once proclaimed the “Hindoo” religion “the greatest piece of priestcraft and the most formidable system of idolatry that has ever existed in the world.” Under its auspices, “a sixth part of the Human Race are mocked and deluded, for the benefit of crafty men.”<sup>2</sup> With anticlerical flair, Ward uses the imposture theory of religion to establish Hindu belief as an object of study, fitting Hinduism into a ready-made narrative of religious delusion so as to cement his own Protestant claim to religious preeminence. And, as this chapter will demonstrate, he was not alone in doing so.

Throughout the colonial period, deceit, credulity, and illusion remained the conceptual linchpins for representations of Hinduism and of Indian religions more broadly. Many commentators would surely have agreed with the comments published by one Mr. Farrar in December 1832 (the very month that William Howitt was completing his *History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations*): “Brahmins have seized on every thing that is agreeable or wonderful, and made it subservient to their priestcraft.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Maurice, *Indian Antiquities*, vol. 7 (London: John White, 1800), 801.

<sup>2</sup> William Ward, *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the Hindoos*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Serampore: Mission Press 1818). The first quotation is taken from Geoffrey Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant missionary constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 165; the second quotation from *Missionary Register* (London: L. B. Seeley, 1822), 175.

The rivers, the springs, the mountains, the plains, the trees, the stones, all that is animate, and all that is inanimate, are fashioned and moulded into their system, and made to uphold their hydra-headed superstition.”<sup>3</sup> Mr. Farrar was by no means the only British writer to claim that hydra-headed Brahmanism dominated the Indian subcontinent. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Hinduism was equated with priestcraft at least as often as India was equated with Hinduism. Even Orientalists smitten with Sanskrit literature were drawn to the concept: William Jones, for instance, “abhor[ed] the sordid priestcraft of Durga’s ministers,” while insisting that their “fraud no more affects the sound religion of the Hindus, than the lady of Loretto and the Romish impositions affect our own rational faith.”<sup>4</sup> Indian Muslims, although, “tyrannized” by their “Moulaahs, Imans, and Moonshees,” were usually thought not “quite so much tyrannized” as the Hindus.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter will interrogate the “dominant paradigm” of missionary discourse that, according to historian Geoffrey Oddie, emerged between 1792 and 1840. Its major proponents were Charles Grant (1746-1823), William Carey (1761-1834), William Ward (1769-1823), Claudius Buchanan (1766-1815), Bishop Reginald Heber (1783-1826), and, a little later, Alexander Duff (1806-1878). These missionary writers were extremely important to the colonial reconsolidation of “Hinduism.” They helped naturalize the idea that India’s overlapping devotional cultures formed a single, subcontinental

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<sup>3</sup> “Notices of Hindoo Superstition and Cupidity,” *Missionary Register* (L. B. Seeley, 1832), 525.

<sup>4</sup> William Jones, *Letters of William Jones*, ed. Garland Cannon, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 754; cited in Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism*, 106.

<sup>5</sup> John Statham, *Indian Recollections* (London: Samuel Bagster, 1832), 101.

system devised and managed by a priestly elite. This “brahmanical pan-Indian model” of Hinduism relied on several assumptions, mostly notably the presumed preeminence of Sanskrit texts and their brahman interpreters. In addition to cuing Orientalism’s keen nostalgia for the classical past, this assumption also enabled the idea that brahmans had engineered the entire Hindu system for their material benefit.<sup>6</sup> It was this Hinduism that would come to seem comparable to Christianity. Founded on fraud, it was easy to dismiss this polemic reduction as Christianity’s “counterfeit.”<sup>7</sup> To be sure, missionaries’ agendas differed from those of the Company-state both before and after 1813; but, as I will argue below, their activities were central to the broader field of imperial power in the early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism*, 95.

<sup>7</sup> Duff presents Hinduism as a “stupendous” example of the “systems of false religion” that have been “fabricated by the perverse ingenuity of fallen man.” It is Christianity’s “counterfeit” because it corrupted the “primitive patriarchal Christianity” of which Duff, presumably, is the heir. Duff’s reliance on the narratives of religious origin developed during the English Enlightenment should be obvious (see Chapter 1). Alexander Duff, *India and India Missions: Including Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism, Both in Theory and Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1840), 204.

<sup>8</sup> Several scholars have responded to what Jeffrey Cox has termed “the Saidian presumption of imperial complicity.” See *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 12. Robert Frykenberg is surely the leading scholar of Indian Christianity, and he quite rightly points out that, even during the nineteenth century Thomist Christians, Portuguese Catholics, and others continued to played significant roles, particularly in regions like Tamil Nadu and Goa. See especially his monumental *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also the essays in Robert Frykenberg and Alaine Low, eds., *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500, with special reference to caste, conversion, and colonialism* (Grand Rapids, MI. : W.B. Eerdmans, 2003); Geoffrey Oddie, “Orientalism and British Protestant Missionary Constructions of India in the Nineteenth Century,” *South Asia* 17.2 (1994): 27-42; and Andrew Porter, *Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004). Much of this research has emphasized the complex effects of Indians’ conversions to British Protestantism. In this regard, see also Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). Additional accounts of missionary activity in the subcontinent include the following: George Smith, *The Life of Alexander Duff* (New York: American Tract Society, 1879); Henry Morris, *The Life of Charles Grant* (London: J. Murray, 1904); Ainslee Embree, *Charles Grant and the British Rule in India* (London: G. Allen, 1962); Antony Copley, *Religions in conflict: ideology, cultural contact, and conversion in late-colonial India* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

I approach what Duff called the “spiritual invasion” of India by way of the crafty priest.<sup>9</sup> While the previous chapter attempted a history of the imposture theory of religion, here I attend more to its conceptual grammar, as it was articulated in the mission field of India. The chapter calls attention to three primary dimensions of the discourse of “priestcraft” in colonial India. First, I consider how it intersected with the discourse of Oriental despotism. Drawing on the work of Nicholas Dirks, I suggest that in the early part of the nineteenth the Company-state shifted its mode of governmentality. It sought to harness the diffuse circuitry of power that suffused Indian society so as to engineer a newly penetrative “ethnographic state.” I elaborate Dirks’ theory by tracking how imperial ideologues conceived the relation between Oriental despots and Hindoo priests. I argue that the British used both despot and priest as foils for its emergent “pastoral” style of rule (a term I borrow from Michael Foucault). Missionaries and others in this diffuse field of power sought to reform the souls of the colonized, remaking them as self-governing liberal subjects.

Second, I argue that print media were central to this project. Drawing on Michael Warner’s interrogation of what he calls the “Whig-McLuhanite” paradigm of print media effects, I track the peculiar belief that print artifacts possessed an unstoppable power to undermine traditional religious hierarchies. Missionary writers thought that the printing press would trigger a Protestant Reformation in India, upending “Catholic” Hinduism just as the Luther-Gutenberg nexus had upended the German clerisy. I suggest that missionaries like Alexander Duff and William Ward used print media to re-discipline the unruly multitudes convened by Hindu devotional

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<sup>9</sup> Duff, *India and India Missions*, 63

practices, reconstituting them as critical publics—silent, reflective, and (most importantly) immaterial. Finally, I point to the means by which the narrative of print media’s transformative abilities unraveled. These include the raucous arena of print distribution: in its networks of physical exchange, print artifacts did sometimes convene unpredictable embodied publics. They also include the stylistic rifts produced by the literary-textual position that I will term the “subaltern skeptic.”

Finally, I parse the dimension of the Whig-McLuhanite paradigm most important to the imposture theory of religion and the polemics of priestcraft: the epistemology of exposure. If priestly multitudes were to be remade as self-governing readerly publics, it would be through the public display of Hinduism. Alexander Duff suggested that any public exhibition of Hinduism would “expose” its falsities and therefore unravel the entire “system.” In my discussion, I attempt to unpack some of what is encoded in Duff’s use of the word “exposure.” I argue that he invests the printed word with a quasi-magical ability to produce change in the world. In part, he is correct to do so: as J. L. Austin has so artfully demonstrated, words can directly produce changes in the field of social relations; indeed, colonial treatises on Hinduism might serve as a case in point, insofar as they produced fundamental shifts in how Indian religions were conceptualized. However, Duff was wrong to consider his exhibition of Hinduism an “exposure.” Conditions for exposure were not, in Austin’s terms, felicitous. Rather, the term “exposure” relays the theatrical sensibility of the performative practice of imposture, skepticism, and belief (what Simon During has termed the “magical assemblage”) into a medium (print) in which it produces a set of

effects considerably more unpredictable than the prescriptive plotline of charlatanic exposure can account for.

### **A Singular Species of Despotism**

During the early nineteenth century, the East India Company's mode of governmentality shifted decisively. As Nicholas Dirks has argued, at the turn of the century the Company-state still concerned itself primarily with Indian princes, a focus reflected by History's preeminence as the most august of disciplines. In the following decades, however, Anthropology emerged as the "principal colonial modality of knowledge and rule." The shift in discipline corresponded to a shift in the field of power; the Company-state had begun to redevelop itself as a biopolitical entity, concerned with classifying and managing the colonized population with new technologies of rule. This process culminated with the full emergence of the "ethnographic state" after 1857.<sup>10</sup>

The turn to colonial ethnology may have been animated, in part, by a concern with the ethics of empire. As Dirks suggests, the Warren Hastings trial (1788-1795) scandalized the British public with sordid details of unbridled mercantilist greed. For a moment, it seemed as if the public's moral outrage might bring an end to British imperial expansion in India. However, the sense of scandal was quickly displaced. "Where once scandal referred to the exploits of the colonizers, scandal now began to

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<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

refer to the lives of the colonized.”<sup>11</sup> Vocal reformists out to cure Britain of its social ills began to take note of analogous ills in the colonies. India, they proclaimed, had to be reformed. Otherwise, it would continue to groan under the weight of irrational tradition. And so, the ethical problem presented by Empire found a temporary resolution. Imperial power would change its shape. Henceforth, in addition to transforming states and economies, it must also transform the souls of the colonized. A glowing example of how the intensified concern with Indians’ moral constitution took up many of the themes of the Hastings trial is the increasingly pervasive worry over the greed and mendacity of the Hindoos; when British writers tried to pin merchants’ deceptiveness on the “Shasters” and “Debtas,” they might have done better to look to the economic conditions set by colonial capitalism itself.<sup>12</sup>

As I will argue, the new mode of colonial governmentality established conceptual and rhetorical connections among Oriental despots, despotic Hindoo priests, and benign British pastors. Political philosophers had long used the Oriental despot as the foil for the bourgeois social order emerging in early modern Europe. Adapted from Aristotle, the theory of Oriental despotism was revived by thinkers like the Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755), Adam Smith (1723-1790), and Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), and would later frame Karl Marx’s exposition of the “Asiatic Mode of Production.”<sup>13</sup> In this body of writing, Oriental despots were generally associated with

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<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 297.

<sup>12</sup> *Missionary Register* (London: L. B. Seeley, 1830), 456-57.

<sup>13</sup> Montesquieu and Adam Smith authored the main modern articulations of the notion of Oriental despotism, and their work was further developed by Hegel, Marx, and others. For an account of the

agrarianism, tyrannical deputies, and slave labor. They were thought to hoard economic resources in order to construct lavish monuments that signified their authority. In other words, they represented the feudal order that Europe had so proudly left behind. The free market was celebrated as the antidote to despotism: trade would reform the enslaved multitude to render it a democratic public.<sup>14</sup>

The theory of Oriental despotism was quickly imported by British writers interested in the history of India. Robert Orme (1728-1801), for instance, used it to analyze the late Mughal Empire; the emperor's despotic deputies, he wrote, had multiplied "the miseries of the people of Indostan."<sup>15</sup> The theory's validity, however, did not go unchallenged. William Jones, for one, firmly denied its accuracy as a description of Indian statecraft, actual or ideal.<sup>16</sup> But despite its critics, the theory of Oriental despotism remained extremely influential in Western writing about Indian politics.

The theory acquired some distinctive features when applied to India, most notably an increased emphasis on the power of priests. Indian kings were generally thought to hold less power than their ecclesiastical counterparts. The most influential articulation of this revised theory of Oriental despotism is to be found in James Mill's

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theory's lineage, with a focus on Marx's "Asiatic Mode of Production," see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: NLB, 1974), 462-549.

<sup>14</sup> See Mia Carter and Barbara Harlow, "Oriental Despotisms and Political Economies," *Archives of Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 89-90.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Orme, *Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire* (London: F. Windgrave, 1805 [1782]). Quoted in Carter and Harlow, eds, *Archives of Empire*, 108-109.

<sup>16</sup> For William Jones' views on Oriental despotism, see Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's History of British India and Orientalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 29-30; and S. N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones: A Study in Eighteenth-Century British Attitudes to India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 40.

(1773-1836) *History of British India* (1817). Mill affirms the general theory of Oriental despotism by describing how the “Asiatic model” permits rule only by “the will of a single person” with “unlimited authority.” He modifies the paradigm, however, to make sense of the Indian case: the state’s tyranny, although otherwise “absolute,” never extended to “religion and its ministers.”<sup>17</sup> True power, Mill claims, was vested in the brahmins, who retained actual and symbolic authority over the king. Indeed, they had cleverly delegated the tedious business of rule to their royal subordinates in order to save themselves from needless work and needless danger.<sup>18</sup> The two evils (church and state) had combined to produce a uniquely noxious condition for the people of India. As Mill summarizes his position: “despotism and priestcraft taken together, the Hindus, in mind and body, were the most enslaved portion of the human race.”<sup>19</sup> Mill’s displacement of despotism, his transfer of absolute authority from princes to priests, illustrates the period’s pervasive shift in interests, as analyzed by Dirks. Where once the contest for India had centered on statecraft, increasingly it would center on priestcraft: the British would have to unseat the priests, India’s ultimate and enduring despots, if they wanted to claim unchallenged sovereignty over Indian bodies and souls.

The object of the new imperialism was thus to produce autonomous subjects, liberated from Hindu priests and prone to favor British rule. As Eric Stokes has argued, both Evangelicalism and the Utilitarianism, the two primary frames for early

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<sup>17</sup> James Mill, *The History of British India*, 6 vols., 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Horace Hayman Wilson (London: James Madden and Company, 1840), 202-203.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 218-220

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 187

nineteenth century imperialism, were “movements of individualism.” They sought “to liberate the individual from the slavery of custom and from the tyranny of the noble and the priest. Their end was to make the individual in every society a free, autonomous agent, leading a life of conscious deliberation and choice.”<sup>20</sup> The great theorist of liberal subjectivity was, of course, James Mill’s son, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). The younger Mill elaborated his father’s account of religious slavery and its effects on the human mind. The savage becomes a slave when he learns obedience, “the first lesson of political society.” The slave becomes a civilized man when he learns to internalize the “direct command” so that he can exercise “self-government” without the immediate application of fear by an outside party. This new breed of self-policing subject, neither savage nor slave, is the basis of modern democratic states.<sup>21</sup>

The confluence of discourses (liberal democratic theory, the notion of all-pervasive brahminical Hinduism) had clear effects for how imperial ideologues conceived India’s political future. As Alexander Duff wrote in 1840, political reform would prove futile unless the “potent antecedent cause” of “false religion” were addressed first. Religion was the “all in all” of India’s “condition,” and so to install “representative government” or “free institutions at the very outset” is “to *begin at the wrong end.*” To “regenerate” a people “steeped in the very slough of bondage,” the colonizing power must first act upon the mind.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Eric Stokes, *English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 54.

<sup>21</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1861), 39.

<sup>22</sup> Duff, *India and India Missions*, 61-64.

With the dawn of the reform era, the Company-state thus assumed a “pastoral power” over its subjects, and Mill’s self-governing individual was a vector for this novel mode of power. As Michel Foucault has argued, “around the eighteenth century,” a new configuration of power began to emerge in which states would come to intervene simultaneously at the level of the population (scrupulously charting the biopolitical contours of the nation) and of the individual (like a cleric, shaping the individual souls and characters of the ruled).<sup>23</sup> The most obvious form in which the Company-state sought to reshape the subjectivities of the colonized was through its educational policy, particularly Thomas Babington Macaulay’s 1835 proposal that English literary education be used to produce “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English, in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” However, if we assume that imperial power was more diffuse (that is, not limited to the state and its policies), a different class of pastoral powerbrokers comes into view, and one more literally “pastoral” than the state. In colonial India, legions of would-be pastors roamed plains, hills, and valleys in search of prospective Christian sheep. The aims of these missionaries were certainly never reducible to the aims of the Company; but just as certainly their efforts were central to the diffusion of imperial power, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century. As British imperialism became more pastoral in form, framing its expansion as an ethical project devised to redeem the colonized, the work of missionaries became almost paradigmatic for the imperial enterprise. At the

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<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in Michel Foucault, *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 2000), 326-348.

forefront of the “spiritual invasion” of India, they represented pastoral power in its purest—or at least most literal— form.

A central document in the articulation of the new pastoral paradigm was Charles Grant’s (1746-1823) “Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain” (1792). Grant wrote the essay at the height of the Hastings debacle in order to persuade his friend Henry Dundas, President of the East India Company’s Board of Control, to allow missionaries to proselytize in India. It was circulated semi-privately in the 1790s and then published during the Charter debates of 1813.<sup>24</sup> In classic form, the text displaces despotism from the state onto religion. It does this both substantively and by way of a revealing simile. Grant proclaims that the Hindoo’s “understanding is chained and kept in perpetual imprisonment, like dreaded rivals for power in the East, who deprived of their eyes, and immured in dungeons, receive poisoned provisions from the gaoler’s hands.”<sup>25</sup> Just as the Oriental despot imprisons his subjects’ bodies, the Oriental priest imprisons his subjects’ minds.

In his “Observations,” Grant claimed that the Hindu religion was nothing but a “system of delusive fraud” even more odious than that of Catholic Europe. The brahmins are the “true idols” of this system, and they must be shattered (OSS, 62-63). As Grant goes on to explain, “Nothing is more plain, than that this whole fabric is the work of a crafty and imperious priesthood, who feigned a divine revelation and appointment, to invest their own order, in perpetuity, with the most absolute empire over the civil

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<sup>24</sup> See Oddie, *Imagining Hinduism*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Grant, “Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain, 1792,” *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online.*, 73. (Hereafter cited in text as OSS). [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:hcpp-us&rft\\_dat=xri:hcpp:fulltext:1812-003343](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:hcpp-us&rft_dat=xri:hcpp:fulltext:1812-003343)

state of the Hindoos, as well as over their minds” (44-45). An original cadre of crafty priests delegated proxy princes to take on the tedious work of statecraft, while retaining all substantial power for themselves. They thus ensured that, in India at least, states were superfluous to the actual business of rule. Even when “the Hindoos lost the dominion of their own country, the influence of their religion, and their priests, remained” (74). As Grant puts it, the “one complex system” of the “Hindoo religion” had impressed a principle of despotism into “the very frame of society” (44). The influence of the Enlightenment theory of religious imposture, detailed in Chapter One, should be clear. Its implications for the colonial context, however, bear pointing out.

According to Grant, a “singular species of despotism” haunts Hindustan (*OSS*, 46). This despotism is pervasive, inscribed into the fabric of society, and thus largely divorced from the apparatus of state. Grant uses the figure of the despotic priest to re-theorize power as something diffused throughout the social body. The priest thus prods the reconstitution of imperial power noted by Dirks. If the micro-circuitry of power depends on religion, the British must intervene in religion to assert their sovereignty in India.

At the end of his “Observations,” Grant poses a “decisive question.” The Company must decide whether it will leave its subjects in “darkness, error, and moral turpitude” or whether it will “communicate to them the light of truth.” It can “wink at the stupidity which we deem profitable to us; and as governors, be in effect the conservators of that system which deceives the people.” Or, it can explain “the divine principles of moral and religious truth, which have raised us in the scale of being, and are the foundation of all real goodness and happiness.” In other words, it can assume

the mantle of either priest or pastor. Priestly power would cynically maintain sacred hierarchies that it believes to be illusions (à la Hastings perhaps). Pastoral power, on the other hand, protests against religious authority and enjoins the formation of autonomous liberal subjects. The line between priest and pastor, however, was not often clear: both extended their rule by asserting authority over both mind and body. Imperial rhetoric vociferously condemned crafty priests in order to disavow the spiritual rule that was increasingly central to imperial governance.

### **Theorizing the Print Public**

The printing press was taken to be the major instrument for the production of liberal subjects, whether in a secular or a Christian modality. Presses promised to redeem the deluded multitude by exposing the sacred pretensions of charlatanic priests, as well as by remaking the crowd as a critical public through the solitary discipline of reading. These notions, common in Anglo-Indian writing from the nineteenth century, fit snugly within what Michael Warner has termed the “Whig-McLuhanite model of print history.” This paradigm, influential since at least the eighteenth century, attributes to the print medium an “ontological status prior to culture” while simultaneously tethering print to a culturally peculiar narrative about emancipation from “ecclesiastical and civil tyranny.”<sup>26</sup> The model thus deftly naturalizes the teleology of Enlightenment: the bourgeois social order spontaneously

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<sup>26</sup>Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 5-7.

unfolds from the material inevitabilities of print, having already been lodged there *in potentia*, a genie in a bottle.

Warner resists this techno-determinism by detailing the cultural codes that came to determine and define “public speech.” The concept *publication* as “a political condition of utterance” was the organizing principle for print publics: it was enmeshed with the commercial structures of the print market, with the legal regulation of authorship, and with the mutual constitution of private and political life.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, it highlighted a novel sort of assembly. “Unlike the public of the customary order, which was always incarnated in a relation between persons and which found its highest expression in church and town meetings, the public of print discourse was an abstract public *never localizable in any relation between persons.*” Ghostly though this abstract public may have seemed, it remained reliant on a very material base: the print artifact itself. In principle, print artifacts in their “routine dispersion” circulate without limit and thereby convene a public of unprecedented size. The hazy boundaries of this potentially unlimited public only serve to underscore its apparent universality. Even as print artifacts found this public and remain its material metonyms, they are also constituted by it: print artifacts gained their symbolic potency through “conventions of discourse that allowed them to be political in a special way.”<sup>28</sup>

This theory of print media, central to the modern political and social order, was a favorite of British writers in nineteenth century India. At first, it was mostly the province of missionaries. The grand era of missionary publicity in India might be said

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 8

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 62

to have begun in 1792, when William Carey arrived in Bengal and published his *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of Heathens*. Carey's semi-licit press at the Danish colony of Serampore (Srirampur) had a decisive influence on the publications to come. The work of the "Serampore trio" (William Carey, William Ward, and Joshua Marshman) provided a template for the radically expanded missionary scene that emerged after 1813, when changes to the East India Company's charter lifted the ban on proselytizing. Indeed, the intensification of missionary efforts in the years after 1813 significantly altered the modes of publicity available to missionaries concerned with India. Documents that had been circulated privately as late as the 1790s (Bishop Reginald Heber's journal, Charles Grant's "Observations") now found new life in the open pages of the press.<sup>29</sup>

The *Missionary Register*, cited heavily in this chapter, was the first of the major English missionary periodicals, entering publication in January 1813. Rev. Joseph Pratt of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) launched the *Register* to "awaken the Public to the state of the Heathen World, by giving information derived from all quarters."<sup>30</sup> Copies were sent free of charge to CMS members who collected at least one shilling per week in donations, as well as to select members of other societies. Between 1814 and 1824, the *Register's* monthly circulation rose from 5000 to 7500; actual readership was

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<sup>29</sup> See also Allan K. Davidson's study of Claudius Buchanan as a publicist: *Evangelicals and Attitudes to India, 1786-1813: Missionary publicity and Claudius Buchanan* (Appleford, Abingdon, Berkshire: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1990). Davidson argues that the major difference between Buchanan and his predecessor Charles Grant was the latter's insistence on the importance of print publicity.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Oddie, *Imagining Hinduism*, 205. For additional discussion of the CMS, see Charles Hole, *The Early History of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East* (London: CMS, 1896); and Eugene Stock, *A History of the Church Missionary Society*, 3 vols. (London: CMS, 1899). For additional discussion of missionary periodicals as a mechanism for publicity, see Davidson, Chapter 5, "Missionary Publicity," 96-107.

likely larger still, as copies were commonly passed among friends or read aloud in churches. Its success during its early years is indexed by the 1817 decision to start including woodcut illustrations of exotic subjects in each issue. The *Register* ultimately ceased publication in 1855.<sup>31</sup> Periodicals like the *Missionary Register* were important disseminators of other texts, as they routinely featured extracts from books, diaries, and other periodicals. Rev. William Bowley's journal was especially popular during the peak years of the *Missionary Register*'s run (roughly 1817-1829). As the *Register* wrote in the early 1820s, "it is by Journals of this nature that Christians at home become familiar with the habits of thinking among the Heathen and learn duly to appreciate the difficulties of Missionaries, and to feel and pray for them."<sup>32</sup>

The interpenetration of print periodicals with less overtly public literary forms raises several questions, most pertinently that of whether these more "private" modes of composition did in fact presume a depersonalized, general audience. Several scholars have argued that, in the context of eighteenth century European letters, they certainly did; or, at least, by cultivating a distinct private sphere of cultural endeavor, such genres helped produce social forms that contributed to the emergence of the democratic nation-state and its mode of political engagement. In the present context, a similar condition seems to structure "private" avowals of belief. If the Rev. Bowley kept his diary with the express purpose of eventual publication, then this most quintessentially interior literary form comes to presuppose the unlimited reading

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<sup>31</sup> Oddie, *Imagining Hinduism*, 205-209.

<sup>32</sup> *Missionary Register* (London: L. B. Seeley, 1823), 402.

public as its proper audience. In the act of writing, interiority and exteriority merge, and “belief” comes to function as a social fact, the product of intersubjective relations.

If missionary publications seem intent on producing divisions between the private and the public—or, more precisely, on using the print public to reconfigure the “private” domain of subjective interiority—this is no mistake. A major plank of the missionary program was the reform of “Hindoo” subjectivities. Where once the mad multitude thronged heathen temples, henceforth a rational public would peruse the pages of print media. Where once tropical bodies courted disease and danger, henceforth silent minds would convene a far more spiritual assembly. The former mode of collectivity was thought to promote ecclesiastical tyranny; the latter would usher in bourgeois egalitarianism. To redeem India, its *multitudes* would have to be remade as *publics*.

To get a sense for how missionary writers defined their project (and, perhaps more importantly, what they defined it against), one could do worse than to examine their descriptions of Hindu festivals, pilgrimages, and processions. The general sense in this literature is that the seething multitude is the primary social form hailed by Hinduism. This presumption structured several of the most noted controversies of the period, such as the debates about “suttee” or the wheel of the “Juggernaut” at Puri.<sup>33</sup>

William Ward, the most prolific member of the Serampore trio, confessed to hiding

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<sup>33</sup> In accounts of widow burning, the typical scene featured a maddened crowd led by a powerful priest who pushes the widow onto the pyre. Bowley’s journal includes an episode in which the *sati* herself addresses the “credulous multitude” in order to assert her pending divinity. See the *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1829), 322. The procession of the “Juggernaut” (i.e. the Lord Jagganāth, associated especially with his annual chariot procession in the Orissan coastal city of Puri) likewise featured crowds. In the words of one Lt. Col. Phipps of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bengal Native Infantry, “the approach of the Juggernaut” was generally preceded by a “loud shout from the multitude.” See *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1824), 580.

during Calcutta's Durga *pūja*. Festival-goers, alongside their brahminical "ringleaders in crime," would scandalously exhibit "licentious" images "to the public gaze." In order to avoid visual corruption, one should either stay home or, as Ward's brahman friend Gopal apparently preferred, hide "behind one of the pillars of the temple."<sup>34</sup>

Alexander Duff had a similar reaction to the same festival. He noted the "numbers without numbers" of crazed devotees who ripped to shreds the *mūrti* of the goddess, and he fell mute before the inexpressible multitude. "Here language entirely fails. Imagination itself must sink down with wings collapsed; utterly baffled in the effort to conceive the individualities and the groupings of an assemblage composed of such varied magnitudes." If the mobile assemblage of the crowd stymies representation, it also serves to excite speech: the unspeakable horrors of the multitude animated the print publics convened by missionary writers. They not only provided the motive for missionary work; the figure of the crowd allowed missionary writing to cultivate literary effects that they might otherwise forbid themselves. Routine protestations that they would rather not describe the horrors of heathenism allowed these writers to disavow their investment in salacious description. Such descriptions also, and perhaps more importantly, served to emphasize the subjective distance between the faceless multitude and the literate individual. Duff, for instance, reported having "stood on the banks of the Ganges, surrounded by the deluded multitudes engaged in ablutions." There on the banks he came to feel his "own solitude

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<sup>34</sup> *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1822), 422-425.

in the midst of the teeming throng,” and due to this sense of solitude, “a cold sensation of horror has crept through the soul.”<sup>35</sup>

In addition to reflecting on their own literary task obliquely via descriptions of devotional multitudes, British missionary writers also wrote explicitly about print media and its effects. In 1792, Charles Grant lauded print’s ability to demonstrate the “great use” of reason by the British (OSS, 78). Thirty years later, John Bentley argued that the press would free India from “the fetters of ignorance and superstition” just as it had done for “the nations of Europe.”<sup>36</sup> As a rule, “the triumphs of the press must in all countries bear a very great affinity.”<sup>37</sup> The medium is naturally a “mighty engine of improvement” that awakens and arouses the human mind; “in its mighty progress,” it “subdues the inveterate prejudices of ages, annihilates error, and not only elicits truth, but disposes the mind to welcome it in all its brightness.”<sup>38</sup> Above all, print media has the power to unseat despotic priests. The press pries open doors of knowledge barred by the “founders” of religion, who rely on ignorance to ensure the “blind submission” of the populace. It will undo the priests because it will “transform the natives into a reading people”<sup>39</sup>:

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<sup>35</sup> Duff, *India and India Missions*, 262-263.

<sup>36</sup> John Bentley, “On the Effect of the Native Press in India,” in *Essays Relative to the Habits, Character, and Moral Improvement of the Hindoos* (London: Kingsbury, Parbury, and Allen, 1823), 140-158. These essays were originally published in Calcutta’s *Friend of India*, a newspaper associated with the Serampore Baptists.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-54

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 142

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-153

The framers of the popular superstition could not have foreseen, that in the lapse of years, there would be introduced into their country and nourished by their countrymen, an engine of improvement, which had dispelled delusion in every country which enjoyed it—an engine which would necessarily unfold to the view of all India the grounds on which their spiritual belief rests. Their system was not contrived with a view to this future contingency, and we strongly suspect that it will not long hold out against the increase of light and knowledge.

Print breaks the “charm” of idolatry, and, once the “spell is broken, its disjointed and disorganized fragments can never be re-assembled into the same uniform and powerful system.”<sup>40</sup>

Triumphant claims about the rise of reading “among the Hindoos” recurred regularly in missionary and other publications of the period.<sup>41</sup> For example, an 1830 report by the American Board of Missions claimed that decreased temple attendance in Bombay had been caused by increasing literacy and the consequent decline in the brahmins’ “ascendency” and “influence over the mass of the people.”<sup>42</sup> However, complacency about the assured benefits of print was also often disrupted by a pervasive concern that India’s proliferating presses could produce other effects. The popular publication of “gross” mythological tales led one writer to condemn the “corruption” and “prostitution of the Press.”<sup>43</sup> As another writer opined, should the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 156-158

<sup>41</sup> The *Missionary Register*, for instance, praised the newspaper the *Samachar Darpan* for “the light it has diffused” during its nineteen years in Calcutta and its inculcation of a “a spirit of reading... among the Hindoos.” See “Native Press and Literature at Calcutta,” *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1830), 356-357.

<sup>42</sup> The report claimed that people had begun “to read, and reflect, and judge for themselves.” See “Decreasing Influence of the Brahmins,” *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1829), 450.

<sup>43</sup> “Corruption of the Native Press,” *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1822), 336-337.

press “become the auxiliary of Superstition,” then the “greatest engine of improvement yet discovered by man” would be fundamentally perverted.<sup>44</sup>

If some missionary writers fretted about the content of the print media, others fretted about the mode of distribution of print artifacts. To borrow a phrase from Homi Bhabha, missionaries thought that Indians would convert signs into wonders, bringing biblical texts back into the magical economy of material religion.<sup>45</sup> As Bhabha has argued, scenes of “native converts” marveling at Bibles indicated the parodic potential of imperial stereotypes and thus also the instability of imperial ideology. I would add that they further indicate the degree to which the conception of print publics as disembodied arenas could run afoul of the material circuits of print distribution and consumption. An overly eager desire for print objects undermined a print mythology that deemphasized mass distribution by insisting on the priority of lonely consumption. In the words of one writer: “eagerness for Tracts is sometimes overwhelming—a hundred hands lifted up at an instant, while one cries ‘I will have a book’ –another, ‘I can read: let me have one’ –another, ‘I wish to get one for my brother, who will read it to me:’ thus 50, 80, 100, or more Tracts are occasionally distributed.”<sup>46</sup> Despite the missionary’s effort to claim this scene as evidence of print’s popularity, his sense of the “overwhelming” demand for print objects suggest that, in the act of distribution, the feared frenzy of the multitude returns. This was not a

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<sup>44</sup> *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1831), 358.

<sup>45</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817,” in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 102-122. Cf. “Visit of Anund Messeeh to Delhi; and his Discovery of an extraordinary Body of Native Christians,” *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1818), 17-18.

<sup>46</sup> “Eagerness of the Natives for Tracts,” *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1827), 384.

problem unique to India; it was rather inherent to the ideological constitution of the print public more generally. However, the colonial context does lend this particular episode its precise political contours. The British missionary, in act of bequeathing tracts, loses some control over the crowd that the tracts had been designed to discipline.

In fact, missionary writings attest to the constant struggle for control that structured missionaries' relations with the multitudes that they had set forth to convert. Skepticism was often the site for this contestation: missionary writers arrogated Indians' critical attitudes and offhand dismissals of religious authorities to their own cause, registering the existence of Indian skeptics while tendentiously using their criticisms as support for the master thesis of native credulity. In the process, such texts came to rely on the figure of the subaltern skeptic. This figure was "subaltern" in a precise sense. As Gyan Prakash has defined, the subaltern "erupts from within the system of dominance and marks its limit from within" such that "its *externality* to dominant systems of knowledge and power surface *inside* the system of dominance, but only as an intimation, as a trace of that which eludes the dominant discourse."<sup>47</sup> Subaltern skeptics in missionary texts straddle the limit of pastoral power, reflecting the liberal mode of subjectivity enjoined by Evangelicals and others, while also intimating the existence of other histories of skepticism.

For instance, in December 1830 the *Missionary Register* printed a story about Atmaran, a "native convert" from Benares. Told in the first person, it narrated Atmaran's disillusionment with Hindu ritual and Hindu miracle during a pilgrimage to

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<sup>47</sup> Gyan Prakash, "The Impossibility of Subaltern History," *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1.2 (2000): 288.

Puri. The tale begins with a “Padree Sahib” preaching in a Benares bazaar. He announces to the gathered crowd that “Juggernaut” could not save them from hell for, at bottom, “he was all deception.” Atmaran heard this comment and, encouraged by his friends, resolved to travel to Puri to determine for himself the truth of the Padri’s allegations of divine fraud.

Atmaran planned to assess two of the Lord Jagganāth’s famed miracles. First, he would ascertain whether the god’s chariot (*rath*) moved forward by itself, propelled by supernal powers. Second, he would visit the temple kitchen to investigate its miraculous rice, which was said to cook backwards. The cooks would stack twenty pots of rice on a single fire and, contrary to natural law, the top pot’s rice would finish first. Atmaran formulated a hypothesis that could be tested empirically: “if this [the miracles] were the case, Juggernaut must be true.” And so the young man, in order “to be quite satisfied in my own mind regarding the power of Juggernaut to save,” set forth on his arduous journey. Several months later, “weary and emaciated,” he arrived in Puri to wait for the annual festival.

Eventually, Atmaran’s moment arrived. The Lord Jagganāth’s chariot issued from the temple, and Atmaran squeezed through the crowd so that he might stand near to the procession. “I waited a good while: but, at last, there came running several thousands of men, who took hold on the car ropes; and, after a deal of flogging and pulling, the car began to grate on its wheels. When I saw this, then I said, ‘This is all a lie.’” He asked a man near him in the crowd why the god did not move on his own; the man replied “that it was not his pleasure.”

Atmaran “now only waited to ascertain the truth about the rice cooking.” He made his way to “the Idol’s cook-rooms; but soon discovered that, while the bottom vessel was quite ready; the uppermost was quite cold.” Having found the miracles to be false, Atmaran concluded that the god must be false too: “I was now quite satisfied, that what the Padree had said was quite true, and that Juggernaut was all deception.” Before returning to Benares to seek salvation from the Padree, Atmaran rushed out of the kitchen and into the street to remonstrate the local pandits (“Pundahs”) for “their duplicity in deluding the people with lies.” Their reply to the skeptical youth challenges the clarity of his disenchanted sight: “Everybody sees that he is going by himself now; but the fact is, that you are so sinful that you can see nothing; and it is for your sins that Juggernaut has blinded your eyes that you cannot see.”

Atmaran’s “simple tale” was collected by one Mr. Lacey, a Baptist missionary. Lacey glossed the narrative as illustrative of “the deceptions by which the Native Superstition is upheld.” He praises Atmaran as “a man who seeks for evidence, and feels its importance; and who, when he finds evidence, yields to its authority.” Atmaran’s enemy and opposite is the priest who, in his “insolent effrontery,” tried to “persuade the man out of his senses.”<sup>48</sup> Atmaran comes to stand in for scientific empiricism, and the “Pundah” for the retrograde doctrinalism of institutional religion. According to Lacey, the failed miracle proves the truth of Christianity and the falsity of Hinduism; the non-duped will let their eyes lead them to Christ.

Atmaran’s tale demonstrates that the subjective position of the “native skeptic” was easily co-opted by British polemicists and thus rendered subaltern in the sense

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<sup>48</sup> *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1830), 541-42.

suggested above. At one level, Atmaran is simply a cipher, a literary character fully a function of Lacey's missionary narrative. The ideological use of this character is completely transparent to the postcolonial reader: Atmaran dramatizes the move into the system of dominance. The subaltern can speak, but only after he has taken on the language of the colonizer. However, there is surely also a trace here of an actual man named Atmaran, whose history and whose subjectivity cannot be reduced to the missionary narrative, but who rather inscribes that narrative's limit from within the narrative itself

In some of these texts, the co-opted stories of the colonized seem to put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the missionary writer, resisting and recording the effort to read them as evidence of colonial credulity. For instance, when a group of yogis casually confessed that their austerities were performed to earn a "livelihood," or when brahmans reciting a Bengali *Ramayana* "did not hesitate to avow" that "their views were entirely mercenary," they presumably did not mean to confess to dastardly greed. Likewise, when the audience of that same *Ramayana* agreed that the "Gooroos" were out to "get their money" rather than leading them "into the way of salvation," they were surely just conceding that specialists who recite the epic should be paid for their labors (and, perhaps, admitting disinterest in the theological business of "salvation").<sup>49</sup> Others among the missionaries' interlocutors seem to have gone so far

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<sup>49</sup> For the yogi, see *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1819), 143. For the Bengali *Ramayana*, see *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1821), 157.

as to celebrate a good swindle and admire the skill of the huckster (an especially clever “stratagem” might be appreciated with a cry of “Well done!”).<sup>50</sup>

Occasionally, missionary journals would print stories that had likely already enjoyed substantial popularity in networks of oral circulation (that is, what would later come to be classified as folklore). Such tales, playful and constitutively suspicious of those in power, permit the clever poor to dupe the credulous rich. One comic story tells of “Praun Poory, A Hindoo Fakeer” who convinces a king that his ulcer is the mystic source of his royal sovereignty.<sup>51</sup> Another more elaborate tale of “two Imposters” and a “credulous Monarch” introduces a poor brahman who, with his nephew’s help, devises a plot to dupe a king. He grows his hair and nails long, hides in a cave, and sends the nephew to tell the king that his guru, who commenced austerities during Rama’s reign, has just awakened from meditation. The “pretended Ascetic,” speaking in Sanskrit, proceeds to trick the king out of a fortune.

The editor packaged the story as an “Illustration of Hindoo Craft and Credulity,” claiming it as “a striking illustration of the cunning by which the credulous Natives are led away.” It “ought to stimulate the zeal of Christians to deliver them from the gross delusions under which they are held in bondage.” However, he further claims that this uncle and nephew team were “so notorious for every species of fraud, that their names continue even to this day to be used proverbially, in many parts of the country, to

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<sup>50</sup> *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1829), 316.

<sup>51</sup> *Missionary Register* ((London: L.B. Seeley, 1819), 277-281. This story seems to have previously been printed in Calcutta’s *Asiatic Researches*.

denote a fraudulent combination.”<sup>52</sup> The latter laudation, amused with the successful scam, persists even in the *Missionary Register*, where the tale is appropriated for a different public and for different ends. Although the journal tries to co-opt the skepticism of authority rife in oral literatures in order to bolster the stock narrative of Hindu credulity, this particular tale seems instead to attest to skeptical traditions not reducible to the theory of religious imposture.

### *The Secular Press*

By the 1850s, the journalistic sector was well developed enough to lay claim to the narrative of print modernity. The major papers of western India, for instance, celebrated their social function by adopting heroic mottos to emblazon on their front pages. The *Poona Observer* lifted its epigraph from Daniel Defoe: if the “impartial writer” dares “venture upon the dangerous precipice of telling unbiased truth... let him expect martyrdom on both sides, and then he may go on fearless.” The *Bombay Gazette* preferred Milton: “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, to argue freely according to conscience, above all others.”

Papers also regularly celebrated the mobility of print artifacts. In 1857, the *Oriental News* estimated that “the entire newspaper press of the world reaches about two hundred million of its inhabitants,” or “one-fourth of the adult population of the globe”; in its “unintermitted intercourse,” it is “traversing every region of the earth” (this article itself, reprinted from the *New York Times* attests to this global circulation).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “Illustration of Hindoo Craft and Credulity,” *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1821), 113-115.

<sup>53</sup> “The Colossus of the Advertising World: The Press and the People,” *Oriental News*, October 18, 1857

As another article noted, even nations that had tried to shield themselves from the intrusions of British imperialism and its information order had come under the sway of the English press: “Even in Khatmandu, in the very depths of the Himalayas, and with the real ruler of a country in which assassination is a virtue, English opinion as represented by the press has an influence.”<sup>54</sup>

Journalists were often quite forthright about the disciplinary functions of the press and its ability to adopt and diffuse the functions like those of the policeman or the priest. As the *Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce* described the role of print media:

The press penetrates every nook and corner of society; it searches out and apprehends the most recluse and the most unsocial— in the city and in the field, in the palace and in the cottage; it steals unawares upon the guilty and rebukes the conscience; it is an officer of justice who does not need to seek out the criminal, for the criminal himself seeks out the officer, and takes him to his home as a friend and a companion. Unlike the pulpit, the press preaches at home and in secret; the reader need not dress and walk one mile or five to church, in order to be addressed by the preacher of the press, for the preacher comes to him, and goes to bed with him, if he pleases, or takes a walk with him in the garden, or by the river side, and pours into the intellectual ears of his vision the words which he has the commission to utter.<sup>55</sup>

In other words, a newspaper lodges a priest inside the head of its reader, shifting the locus of command to produce exactly the sort of self-governing subject that J. S. Mill had in mind. Print would remake the souls of the colonized and, in doing so, upend priestly religion.

Despite their apparent confidence in print media’s ineluctable effects, however, Indian newspapers remained dissatisfied with the contours of the colonial public. They

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<sup>54</sup> *Poona Observer*, March 11, 1862

<sup>55</sup> *Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce*, January 3, 1859

compared the Indian public sphere to the paradigmatic English model, and India consistently came up lacking.<sup>56</sup> The conservative *Bombay Saturday Review* complained that there is no “public opinion” proper in India: colonial “functionaries” lack real “public feeling” and so can form only a “‘little-boy’ public; a public in the earliest stages of arriving at the consciousness of being so.” In India, the *Review* writes, “the journal represents the naked principle of publicity only, no more.”<sup>57</sup> Other papers complained the Indian public was not properly undifferentiated. A common view was that the “Press of this country certainly is not the press of the people”; every press “between the Himalayas and Cape Cormorin, is a Caste Press.” “They are all the organs of Caste interests, and they do not write for the universal people.” The article implies that, because its public is fractured, India cannot properly lay claim to nationhood.<sup>58</sup> A retort published in the same paper, however, insisted that Anglo-Indian publics were just as fractured. As all of the English in India are in “Service,” all of their papers are beholden to different interests (military, commercial, indigo, etc). “There is no such thing in existence in India as a Public, in the European sense of the term.”<sup>59</sup> As a *Bombay Telegraph and Courier* article put it, “Young India cannot yet succeed in producing anything better than a feeble parody of the English institution of free speech.”<sup>60</sup> If

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<sup>56</sup> This, of course, is an early instance of the phenomenon analyzed by Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986); and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>57</sup> “Indian Journalism,” *Bombay Saturday Review*, April 28, 1866

<sup>58</sup> “Anglo-Indian Press,” *Poona Observer*, June, 18 1861

<sup>59</sup> *Poona Observer*, June 20, 1861

<sup>60</sup> “Constitutionalism in India,” *Telegraph and Courier* (Bombay), April 8, 1861

Indian publics were taken as parodic of English paradigms, this seems to have derived in part from the continued importance of the “gup in the bazaar.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, if Indian public life was a “parody” of the eminently English institution of free speech, this was because Indian publics exceeded the sorts of speech that the English were inclined to read as “free”—“free speech” being a mode of utterance constrained by the legal and cultural norms of English liberalism.

Free speech was also conditioned by the economic imperatives of the print media market—competitive conditions exemplified by the “insane rivalry” among the dailies in Bombay and elsewhere.<sup>62</sup> In 1861, the *Bombay Times*, the *Bombay Standard*, and the *Telegraph and Courier* were amalgamated to form the *Times of India*. Other papers were acutely aware of the merger and its effects on the journalists involved; as the *Poona Observer* reported, the *Times of India* bought out the *Telegraph and Courier*’s editor George Craig and paid him to move to Australia.<sup>63</sup> During the coming years, the Bombay press would be dominated by the rivalry between the new *Times* and the *Bombay Gazette*. Newspapers often heaped caustic criticisms on their rivals. The *Bombay Gazette*, for instance, called the *Times of India* “a drug, recently thrown upon this market,” with “mephitic fumes and vapors” emanating from “the dregs that occupy his

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<sup>61</sup> *Poona Observer*, June 20, 1861. Cf. C. A. Bayley, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>62</sup> The phrase “insane rivalry of the old Bombay dailies” derives from the *Times of India*, shortly after its amalgamation of the *Bombay Times*, the *Bombay Standard*, and the *Telegraph and Courier*. Quoted in *Bombay Gazette* (the *TOI*’s chief rival) in November 11, 1861. For a chart that describes all of the papers in a slightly earlier period, see the *Bombay Telegraph and Courier* June 16, 1847.

<sup>63</sup> *Poona Observer*, June 27, 1861

correspondence columns.” “The *Times of India* is running amuck,” and under its intoxicating influence, so will the Bombay public.<sup>64</sup>

The rivalry between the two major Bombay dailies was joined by other rivalries, such as the one between the *Poona Observer* and its “little brother,” the *Deccan Herald*.<sup>65</sup> As the *Observer* once noted: “We have a great dislike to a newspaper warfare, more especially when the foe we have to fight with is a lighter weight than ourselves.”<sup>66</sup> Such disparagement sometimes verged on actual slander, as when the *Oriental News* alleged that both the *Bombay Gazette* and the *Bombay Times* had accepted bribes.<sup>67</sup> Rivalries were heightened by the regular poaching of material. Newspapers subscribed to competitor titles, even printing official lists of all the papers they received.<sup>68</sup> Cross-subscriptions enabled widespread cribbing. As the *Poona Observer* complained during a slow news season, “[e]verything is stagnant, nothing lively, and the bother of it is that all other editors being in the same fix, we cannot even crib an article worth the trouble from any of our contemporaries.” Quarrels often arose as a result of this practice.<sup>69</sup> Newspapers’ commentary on the newspaper business was so ubiquitous as to warrant its own species of meta-commentary. The *Poona Observer* even published a satirical tale about a

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<sup>64</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, June 20, 1861 (emphasis original)

<sup>65</sup> *Poona Observer*, January 30, 1862

<sup>66</sup> *Poona Observer*, August 29, 1861

<sup>67</sup> *Oriental News*, September 20, 1857

<sup>68</sup> For instance, on April 8, 1861, Bombay’s *Telegraph and Courier* reported receipt of papers from Calcutta, Madras, and the Northwest Provinces, plus the *Poona Observer*.

<sup>69</sup> *Poona Observer*, October 31, 1861.

meeting of the newspapers.<sup>70</sup> As the *Bombay Gazette* wrote, “we are sure the public, or at least our public, does not care for ‘shop quarrels.’”<sup>71</sup>

The publishing of sensational stories played an important part in these rivalries, piquing public interest and allowing those papers that refrained from sensationalism to claim the moral high ground over those who indulged. As one writer reflected, regarding gossip about bigamists and nepotism:

almost anything will tickle the ears of the crowd. At one time a talking fish charms them with its eloquence, or a Home imbues them with the belief that the furniture might be persuaded to go out and take a walk, while the rooms were being swept: spirit-rapping or horse-taming, prayers or pugilism, raree-shows or revivals—each and all are alike welcomed by a stolid John Bull.<sup>72</sup>

Scandal, as we shall see, extended to matters of religion. The salacious Maharaj Libel Case, which both the *Times of India* and the *Bombay Gazette* covered intensively in of 1861-62, likely owed much of its fame to scandal-mongering journalistic competition (Chapter 3). Nor was the case the only *cause célèbre* to thrill Indian reading publics in 1861-62: the Lucknow Libel Case and the Nil Durpan affair were both popular topics. As the *Poona Observer* said of the *Times of India*, “When it gets hold of a subject of temporary importance, it harps upon it until long after public interest in it has passed away.”<sup>73</sup>

Debates about the shortcomings of the Indian public were often motivated by the rivalries among papers. An 1861-62 quarrel among the *Bombay Saturday Review*, the *Times of India*, and the *Bombay Gazette* pondered whether Bombay could be said to

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<sup>70</sup> *Poona Observer*, December 28, 1861

<sup>71</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, November 13, 1861

<sup>72</sup> *Telegraph and Courier* (Bombay), April 11, 1861

<sup>73</sup> *Poona Observer*, August 20, 1861.

possess a proper “public.” As the conservative *Review* put it, “We want a public which shall be no counterfeit.”<sup>74</sup> Bombay’s public ailed, the paper opined, because the *Gazette* was a spiritless “newspaper dummy, a large body, containing the orthodox number of columns filled with printed matter, and having no life or soul within it.” The *Times of India*, meanwhile, it traduced with a quotation from John Stuart Mill about the “collective mediocrity” of public opinion: “Their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name, on the spur of the moment, through the newspapers.”<sup>75</sup>

As the *Bombay Gazette* once complained, the “secular press has hitherto been too secular”; the press should, the article explains, assume the mantle of the preacher.<sup>76</sup> As this quip makes clear, even Anglo-Indian periodicals without explicit missionary ties made regular reference to religion. Elsewhere, for instance, the *Gazette* advocated for the government adoption of the New Testament as a moral code for society.<sup>77</sup> The *Poona Observer*, however, was probably the most unabashed journalistic champion of British Christianity, and it used religion to advance its own cause. For instance, when the *Times of India* suggested that a society be established “for the improvement of public morals,” the *Observer* countered that there was only one such society, and it was founded about 1800 years ago.<sup>78</sup> The *Poona Observer* also held anti-Catholic views, and this led to its

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<sup>74</sup> “Public Opinion in Bombay,” *Bombay Saturday Review*, February 1, 1862

<sup>75</sup> *Bombay Saturday Review*, October 12, 1861

<sup>76</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, January 25, 1861

<sup>77</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, May 17, 1862

<sup>78</sup> *Poona Observer*, February 25, 1862

enthusiastic embrace of the polemics of priestcraft. It railed against European “Popedom” and the “witchery and trickery of priestcraft.”<sup>79</sup> It cheered at the instability of the Italian states.<sup>80</sup> Some criticisms were poetical (e.g. Tom the Snob’s “Some millions are supported by the fraud/ And therefore the mistaken notion laud”).<sup>81</sup> Others drew analogies between the Protestant Reformation and assaults on nineteenth century Hinduism. In such claims, the line between the secular and the missionary press became nebulous indeed.

### Epistemologies of Exposure

Scottish missionary Alexander Duff (1806-1878) included a curious equivocation in his 1840 “sketch of the gigantic system of Hinduism.” “Our present purpose,” he assures the reader, is not to “expose, but simply to exhibit the system of Hinduism.” Duff quickly goes on to explain that Hinduism’s “best confutation must be the extravagance and absurdity of its tenets”; that, in short, to exhibit Hinduism is to expose it.<sup>82</sup> The following discussion will dissect the major assumption behind Duff’s equivocation: that public speech about “false” religion undermines that religion, that to make Hinduism public—to *expose* it—is to undo Hinduism.

The rhetoric of exposure was pervasive in English writing about Indian religions, dating at least as far back as Charles Grant’s 1792 “Observations.” One of

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<sup>79</sup> *Poona Observer*, August 1, 1861

<sup>80</sup> *Poona Observer*, October 26, 1861

<sup>81</sup> *Poona Observer*, May 9, 1861

<sup>82</sup> Duff, *India and India Missions*, 199.

Grant's central assertions is that "false religion shuns fair examination." He argues that the "Hindoos err because they are ignorant; and their errors have never fairly been laid before them," and he urges the East India Company to deploy "reason and argument" in combating these errors (OSS, 77). According to Grant, if "the gross absurdities of Heathenism" were to be "clearly exposed... their abettors would find themselves extremely at a loss to defend by argument assumptions wholly destitute of evidence, internal or external" (83). For Grant, the public sphere is a discursive arena characterized by reasoned argument, determinative of truth, the work of which is to "weaken the fabric of falsehood" (79).

Crucially for Grant, Protestant Christianity is the one religion that can thrive in this rational public: Christianity "gains by being examined. It courts the light" (OSS, 90). This claim, of course would not hold true on the Catholic Continent, where "that pure religion has been changed into a mystery of imposture and corruption," itself the perfect mirror of Hinduism (63). In Grant's imperial imaginary, Protestant Christianity was *the* modern religion, operating in the mode of publicity, and Hinduism (with its Catholic cousin) was the anti-modern religion, operating under the tyranny of wily brahmans in the mode of "concealment" (78-79). Or, as one later commentator put it, the entire Hindu system was "admirably adapted to illustrate the Roman Catholic motto, viz. 'Ignorance is the mother of devotion.'"<sup>83</sup> The promise of the missionaries was that the "darkness" of this anti-modern religiosity would wither in the curative "light" of the rational Protestant public (77).

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<sup>83</sup> Statham, *Indian Recollections*, 69.

The rhetoric of exposure invoked by Grant, Duff, and others relied on a mode of magical thinking. Magic has long been defined as involving an irrational belief in the efficacy of mere words. Incantations, mantras, and spells do not merely signify real things; they really change those things.<sup>84</sup> Ernst Cassirer, for instance, has argued that in the magical worldview “the two factors, thing and signification, are undifferentiated because they merge, grow together, condesce in an immediate unity.” For magic, “there is no such thing as *mere* mimesis, *mere* signification.”<sup>85</sup> Just so, the epistemology of exposure presupposes the omnipotence of the printed word, investing ink with an nearly magical power to shatter belief. If “false religion” rules by enchantment, printed speech breaks the spell with its equally potent counter-magic.

To be sure, words are never entirely inert entities, nor separate from the things that they signify. Rather, as speech act theorists have amply attested, words always and inevitably do things. This was certainly the case for nineteenth century “exhibitions” of Hinduism. As scholars have repeatedly argued, colonial representations of Indian religions “invented” Hinduism. Or, less starkly put, the colonial contest over the representation of religion precipitated a series of shifts in belief and practice that enabled the consolidation of a “syndicated” Hinduism as one of the “world religions.” In some ways Duff is more honest than those who “exhibited” Hinduism both before and after him (William Jones, Monier Monier-Williams): he knew that description was never innocent, that to represent Hinduism was to change it.

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<sup>84</sup> See Randall Styers *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 219-220.

<sup>85</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955). Cited in Styers, *Making Magic*, 220.

Indeed, my interest in Duff's equation of "exhibition" with "exposure" stems in part from the ways it anticipates the work of J. L. Austin. In his influential lecture series *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin developed the concept of the performative utterance. We generally tend to think of our utterances as descriptive or "constative" in nature (e.g. "The sky is blue.") Austin calls attention to a different class of utterances that, when they are done right, actually alter conditions in the world. The classic example of such a performative utterance is the "I do" uttered at a wedding ceremony. To say "I do" is not just to say something; it is to do something (to become a lawfully wedded husband or wife). As such, it is a "speech act." Over the course of his lectures, Austin assiduously erodes the presumed distinction between constative and performative utterances, alleging that we do things with words far more often than we realize. In some ways, this is precisely Alexander Duff's point as well: to think that one can simply "exhibit" Hinduism is naïve; one also always does more than this. Where I depart from Duff (and depart dramatically) is in his claim that by exhibiting Hinduism, he actually exposes it. Duff is right to think that his description of Hinduism is also performative (it does things); he is wrong in thinking that what his words do might be characterized as "exposure." The illocutionary conditions of his utterance are, in Austin's terms, infelicitous: exposure is generally not a type of performative speech available to a print artifact.<sup>86</sup>

As discussed in the first chapter, the trope of exposure had been central to charlatan tales since the raucous raillery of the English Enlightenment. Early modern

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<sup>86</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 1955 William James Lectures (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

treatises on religious fraud, like those of Charles Blount (1654-1693) and Bernard le Boivier de Fontenelle (1657-1757), described the theatrical tricks that ancient priests and oracles had used to awe the masses. These texts circulated alongside popular enlightened entertainments, like models of fake oracles, which incorporated sight and sound into their theatrical apparatus. Treatises and theatrical entertainments were all, to use Simon During's phrase, part of the same "magical assemblage"; however, the trope of exposure operated differently in the different sectors of that assemblage.<sup>87</sup> Texts could not lift the curtain to expose the backstage treachery of priests in the same way that theatrical entertainments could. If they made considerable use of visual tropes, they did so to bolster their own claims to authority, in the process propagating a productive confusion between the verbal and the visual, between print publics and theatrical ones.

Even so, the trope of exposure was very important to early modern imposture theorists, who repeatedly averred that the printing press would necessarily extinguish the Hindu religion. By translating scriptures from Sanskrit into Bengali, it was said that Indian publishers were "opening" those scriptures to "the comprehension of all" and thus "hastening Hindooism in its progress to the grave." This is the Whig-McLuhanite paradigm in full force. "*Whatsoever doth make manifest, is light: and the effect of this publication will unconsciously be the exposure of the perplexity and confusion, the darkness and cruelty, of the whole system.*" The "more it is exposed, the sooner will it

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<sup>87</sup> Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

fall into deserved oblivion”<sup>88</sup> Such predications, of course, proved massively false. Vernacular translations of classical texts did change Hindu practice and Hindu public culture in important ways, but not according to the plotline of “exposure” prescribed by this theory of media effects. Print artifacts cannot expose a charlatan (or a religion) like theatrical entertainments can; they can only proliferate veils of representation.

To conclude, I would suggest that the same constitutive contradiction structures the tale of Atmran summarized above. The *Missionary Register*’s account of Atmaran’s disillusionment relays theatrical exposures into a print periodical, where it inevitably has a different set of effects. *The Missionary Register* may have hoped that its pages could “expose” Hinduism, but although visual tropes and narratives might have reinforced the journal’s authority, they could never produce the visual clarity available to conventional (that is, embodied) publics. Moreover, Atmaran’s tale suggests a further limitation on the narrative of exposure, even in such contexts: as the Pundah reminds Atmaran, what we cannot see is often as real as what we can see. This, as Slavoj Žižek has suggested, is why the non-duped err (see Introduction). Atmaran does not have to conclude from the apparent falsity of the miracles that Hinduism is false; much less that Christianity is true. This presumes not only the discursive coherence of the reified and mutually exclusive religions “Hinduism” and “Christianity,” but also the polemic association of the former with its immanent and the latter with its transcendent dimensions. As Žižek puts it, “the stepping out of (what we experience as)

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<sup>88</sup> *Missionary Register* (London: L. B. Seeley, 1831), 357, emphasis original.

ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it,” and this is amply demonstrated by the narrative of print media’s exposure of “false” religion.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “The Spectre of Ideology,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 6.

### 3: GURU IS GOD

For after you abandoned, as you did, for my sake, the world, the Vedas, your very Selves and all that was yours, O helpless ones, in order to follow me, I worshipped you, though my worship was not visible, when I disappeared. And so you, my loved ones, should not be angry with me, your Lover.

*Bhāgavata Purāṇa*<sup>1</sup>

Better have no opinion of God at all, than an injurious one

Francis Bacon<sup>2</sup>

The Maharaj Libel Case of 1862 thrilled scandalmongers throughout India with its tales of a Gujarati guru gone bad, earning acclaim as the “greatest trial of modern times since the trial of Warren Hastings.”<sup>3</sup> The controversial contest between reform-minded journalist Karsandās Mūljī and Jadunāthjī Brizratanjī, a leader or “Maharaj” of the Puṣṭimārgī Vaiṣṇavas, had been brewing for years in the Gujarati press. It was not until an especially umbrageous 1860 article spurred Jadunathji to sue Mulji for libel, however, that their row went national with the leap into English. The article in question not only denounced the Puṣṭimārg as heterodox, a latter-day corruption of the originary Vedic religion; it accused Jadunathji of foisting himself on his female devotees. Although Jadunathji had hoped that the Bombay High Court would clear his

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<sup>1</sup> Book X, Chapter 33, Verse 21. The translation above is James Reddington’s from his *Vallabhācārya on the Love Games of Kṛṣṇa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), 255. Reddington’s translation follows the gloss of ViTThala, Vallabha’s son, who insists that the Sanskrit “sva” be understood as indicating the gopis’ “very selves” (ibid., 256). Compare Edwin Bryant’s translation: “you had abandoned relatives, the Vedas, and the world for my sake.” See *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God (Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa Book X)*, trans. Edwin Bryant (New York: Penguin, 2003), 139.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in *Bombay Gazette*, 4 December 1861, a propos of Karsandas Mulji. The quotation is from Bacon’s essay “Of Superstition.”

<sup>3</sup> B. N. Motiwala, *Karsondas Mulji: A Biographical Study* (Bombay: Karsondas Mulji Centenary Celebration Committee, 1935), 33.

good name, he was sorely mistaken. After a grueling three-month hearing, the British judges decided that Mulji's libel was justified. As alleged, the Puṣṭimārg was held to be a heterodox debasement of authentic Hinduism, and Jadunathji a libidinous sham of a spiritual guide. The guru stood convicted of sexual and textual corruption.

In this chapter, I will consider the Maharaj Libel Case as a point of "application" for the imposture theory of religion. From the start, Mulji's allegations against the Maharaj had ventured a critical comparison to Christianity: in their tyranny (*julm*), he averred, the popes were the maharajas of Europe.<sup>4</sup> In casting himself as an Indian Luther, Mulji scripted a drama with scandalous appeal. The Maharaj Libel Case centered on what David Haberman has termed the "ontological hierarchy" of guru and disciple.<sup>5</sup> The court and the press both sought to sever that hierarchical bond, and in order to do so they entered it into the stock narrative of priestly imposture. As I have suggested, this narrative had a single fixed ending: priestly exposure, disenchantment, the end of illusion. Scripting religion as imposture was a way to constrain religion's public possibilities. The rhetoric of priestly imposture was rife throughout the trial. Consider Mulji's attorney's defense plea: it is "wicked and impious thing for a mere man to pretend to be a God or to be capable of begetting a God or to practice impostures in that behalf on any people."<sup>6</sup> Or the closing remarks of one of the judges: "We must suppose

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<sup>4</sup> Karsandās Mūljī, "Pop—yurap khaṇḍnā mähārājo," in *Nibandhamala: Essays on Social Subjects by Karsandas Mulji* (Bombay: Union Press, 1870), 152-156.

<sup>5</sup> David L. Haberman, "On Trial: The Love of the Sixteen Thousand Gopees," *History of Religions* 33:1 (1993): 52.

<sup>6</sup> *Report of the Maharaj Libel Case and of the Bhattia Conspiracy Case, Connected With It. Jadunathjee Birzrattanjee Maharaj, vs. Karsandass Mooljee Editor and Proprietor, and Nanabhai Rastamji Ranina, Printer, "Satya Prakash"* (Bombay: Bombay Gazette Press, 1862), 44-45. Henceforth cited in text as *MLC*.

the case of a weak and blinded people; a rapacious and libidinous priesthood; a God whose most popular attributes are his feats of sexual prowess” (MLC, 478-79). In the following discussion, I want to call that juridical supposition into question. What procedures were applied in order to produce this as a “case” of a “blinded people” and a “rapacious priesthood”? How else might the guru-disciple relationship be imagined?

The chapter’s argument is as follows. During the Maharaj Libel Affair, court and press worked in tandem to undermine the sovereignty of Gujarati caste polities; the court did so by criminalizing the polities’ efforts at self-governance, the press by opening caste polities to the powers of “publicity.” Both fixated on religious leaders as icons of caste power. There was an additional tension, albeit a suppressed one, between court and press: Karsandas Mulji’s journalistic criticism of the guru was co-opted by the court. Mulji espoused an oppositional heterodoxy; he amplified contradictions internal to Hindu, and especially Puṣṭimārgī, tradition in order to articulate an immanent critique of that tradition. The Bombay High Court, on the other hand, used such heterodox dissension as an excuse to extend its own ostensibly “secular” rule. The transcendent colonial state would arbitrate among competing religious communities and, in the process, come to *manage* religion.

As many scholars have noted, the Maharaj Libel Case exemplifies how the British state came to administer orthodoxy, by reducing religion to a set of canonical texts easily assimilated to the bureaucratic procedures of colonial rule. I use the imposture theory to call this process into sharper relief. The court attempted, in Max Weber’s terms, to routinize the guru’s charisma. The guru-disciple bond, with its unpredictable affective intensities, would be severed. In its place, a system of

regularities, of texts, codes, and bureaucratic procedures, would emerge as the “authentic” Hinduism. Although the imposture theory decried the multitude’s alleged credulity, the colonial state apparatus remained ambivalent about the powers of belief. As I will suggest, events like the Maharaj Libel Case aimed not to eliminate belief entirely, but rather to re-discipline it, by steering it away from lateral and local bonds; in other words, away from the caste polity. With its excesses curtailed, the remainder of credulity could be arrogated to the transcendently “secular” state itself via a managed, bureaucratic orthodoxy. In short, the imposture theory was used to evacuate Hinduism of *sacerdos* and render it a two-storey system fully amenable to the “pastoral power” of the colonial state (see Chapter 2). Thus bifurcated, it would operate at the level of the individual “soul” (e.g. Mulji’s ethical, reflective Hinduism) and at the level of the “population” (i.e. legal, ethnological Hinduism), but not in the spaces in between.

The second part of the chapter tries to return to the middle ground of belief—the zone of lateral solidarity undermined by the bifurcation of religion into liberal reflection and managed orthodoxy. I call attention to a religious modality that stands in stark contrast to liberal Hinduism (promoted by Mulji), bureaucratic Hinduism (promoted by the state), and sacerdotal Hinduism (the bogey projected by the imposture theory): bhakti. Drawing on Jadunathji’s own writings, as well as the work of his Puṣṭimārgī forbearers, I explicate the ethics of radical relationality that, I think, underlies the call for devotional self-surrender (ātma-nivedan). Against the imposture theory’s narrow conception of the guru-disciple bond, I array bhakti’s lush taxonomy of devotional affects (bhāvas), arguing that these affects return divinity to the web of human relationships. Enlisting the help of postcolonial theorist Leela Gandhi, I go on to

connect this ethics to the Derridean notion of the “fiduciary” discussed in the Introduction.

By drawing out bhakti’s utopian ethics of self-surrender, I do not mean to romanticize the “pre-colonial,” nor dismiss Mulji’s allegations. The “gopi morality” enjoined by Vallabha does seem to have produced abuses within the Puṣṭimārg. Moreover, Mulji was right to use the new discursive position opened by colonialism in order to critique social practices within his community. In doing so, however, he created a double critical conjuncture: just as English education could be used to criticize caste power, bhakti could be used to criticize the political forms of colonialism. The final sections of this chapter attempt to do just this, calling attention to contradictions produced by the conjuncture of bhakti and colonial law. I point to two ways that the juridical discourse of the trial obscured bhakti’s fiduciary ethics of radical relationality. I argue that the court split the guru-disciple bond in two to secure the autonomy of the liberal subject. Half of the relationship was handed to the Maharaj’s disciples as propositional “belief.” The other half was returned to the Maharaj himself as his “reputation.” All that was left to these coldly self-contained parties was the impersonal hierarchy of the dāsya bhāva (the servant’s emotion), an affect that Jadunathji could never quite bring himself to endorse.

Although Mulji’s critique of the Puṣṭimārg was, in part, internal to that tradition, it also, and perhaps more importantly, drew strength from its author’s English education (acquired at Elphinstone College). Mulji, like so many of the reformers of his era, articulated his criticism of religion at the interstices of two worlds. Nor was he alone in this. Take for instance the dedication to Mahipatram Rupram’s

1877 biography of Mulji, his late friend. First in English, it commends “the rising generation who, emancipating themselves from the thralldom of ignorance, superstition, and priestcraft, have dedicated themselves to promote the elevation of their country.” Second in Gujarati, it extols “those young men who have broken the chains of ignorance and superstition, escaped the net of foolish and wicked gurus, and persevered in promoting their country’s progress.”<sup>7</sup> There, on consecutive pages, are two analogous concepts: “priestcraft” and “the guru’s net” (gurūnā jāl). The primary task of this chapter (and the next) will be to measure the distance separating those two terms; its proper focus is neither English nor Gujarati, but rather the blank page space connecting the two.

### **Applying Imposture: The Anatomy of a Scandal**

The series of events that culminated in 1862’s scandalous trial had begun in the previous decade and in a different public arena. The controversy erupted in the Gujarati press, then migrated to the British legal system, and finally attained its canonical proportions in the Anglophone press. It thus demonstrates the degree to which Hindu reformism relied on the points of intersection among different formations of the public in order to promote its agenda.

The first Gujarati newspapers had been founded in the 1820s and 1830s. All of them were managed by Parsis, whose previous involvement in the Anglophone publishing industry lent them requisite professional expertise. In the early years, the

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<sup>7</sup> “je tarūṇ purūṣo agyān ane vahemṇī beḍīo toḍī tathā mūrkh ane duṣṭ gurūonī jālmāmṭhī chaṭī svadesh ūnnati karvāmāṇ maṇḍyā che.” See Mahīpatrām Rūprām, *Uttam Kapoḷ: Karsandās Muljī Caritra* (Amdāvād: Amdāvād Yunāiṭeḍ Printīng, 1877), i.

Gujarati press busied itself mostly with commercial matters. Not until Dadabhai Naoroji founded the *Rast Gofar* in 1851 did the Gujarati press take to reform.<sup>8</sup> The *Rast Gofar*, although run by Parsis and critical of Parsi customs, regularly found fault with Gujarati Hindus, venturing especially pointed criticisms of the Vallabhacārya Maharajas. In 1859, for instance, the paper reported on the “indecent” of Holi celebrations; prostitutes who danced at the temple for a Maharaj’s birthday; another Maharaj who hired a dancing Muslim prostitute; and the so-called “slave bond” (golāmī khat) that submitted devotees to the guru’s godlike authority).<sup>9</sup> The *Rast Gofar* took up the question of the Maharaj’s purportedly semi-divine status (he was held to be an incarnation of Krishna). It maintains that the Maharajas are merely men (māṇas); by claiming to be avatars of God (īśvar), they had turned their followers into servants (cākri). The paper describes the Maharajas as tyrannical (jūlmī), intoxicated (mastān), and immoral (anīti), and it denounces their temples as unholy places (apavītar jagā).<sup>10</sup>

In 1859, when these articles were published, the *Rast Gofar* had already enlisted the help of an energetic young Hindu, Karsandas Mulji. Since 1855, Mulji had been using the *Rast Gofar* facilities to publish his own paper, the *Satya Prakash*. Like so many in the reform party, Mulji had studied at Elphinstone College (described below). In his six years there, he made two friends who would remain his lifelong compatriots in the

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<sup>8</sup> The *Bombay Samachar* was founded in 1822, the *Mumbai Vartaman* in 1830, and the *Jam-e Jamshed* in 1832. Parsi dominance of the industry continued through the late 1850s. See Christine Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India: Politics and Communities in Bombay City 1840-1885* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> “Holi,” *Rast Gofar* (Bombay), March 13, 1859; Māhārājnā mandīrmām veshīāno nāc,” *Rast Gofar*, August 21, 1859; “Vāīśnavonā māhārājo bābe,” *Rast Gofar*, May 22, 1859; “Vīshnav lokonī hamaṇānī hālat,” *Rast Gofar*, January 30, 1859

<sup>10</sup> “Vīśnavonā māhārājo ‘īśvar’ che ke ādmī che?,” *Rāst Gofār*, January 30, 1859; “Vāīśnavonā māhārājo,” *Rāst Gofār*, June 19, 1859. See also “Māhārāj tathā vīśnavone cetavaṇī,” *Rāst Gofār*, January 23, 1859.

cause of reform: the poet Narmadāśaṅkar Lālśaṅkar (Narmad) and the educationalist Mahipatram Rupram.<sup>11</sup> After graduation, he enlisted Narmad, with his knowledge of Sanskrit and Old Gujarati, to help him study the scriptures of the Vallabhacārya sampradāya. Alarmed at their erotic content, Mulji published denunciations of the sect in the *Rast Gofar* and the *Satya Prakash*, as well as in handbills and pamphlets. Narmad, meanwhile, lectured against the Maharajas from his home.<sup>12</sup>

The leaders of the sampradāya soon took note. In mid-1860, Jadunathji Brizratnji Maharaj left his native Surat for Bombay in order to best the reform party in a public debate. He engaged Narmad, and the two publicly wrangled over the topic of widow remarriage; in the process, the poet revealed that he did not accept the shastras as wholly divine. After the debate, the furor continued in the papers. Jadunathji founded the journal *Svadharm Vardhak ane Saṁśay Chedak (Propagator of True Religion and Destroyer of Doubt)* in order to compete with Mulji's *Satya Prakash*. It was during the opening volleys of their paper battle, on 21 October 1860, that Mulji published the article that would land him in court: "The Primitive Religion of the Hindus and the Present Heterodox Opinions" ("Hīnduno asal dharm ne hālnā pākhaṇḍī mato").<sup>13</sup> October 21 seems otherwise to have been a routine day for the papers. The *Rast Gofar* published a long lead article on sundry commercial matters and went on to discuss a

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<sup>11</sup> Narmad, in particular, is a crucial figure in the history of modern Gujarati literature and has been dubbed "the grand litterateur" of the golden age of modern Gujarati ("govardhanyugnā garvā sākṣar"). See Vijayarai Kalyanrai Vaidya, *Gujarati Sahitya Ruparekha* (Amdāvād: Ravani Prakashan Grh, 1973), 282.

<sup>12</sup> Dobbin, *Urban Leadership*, 65-66

<sup>13</sup> Karsandas Mulji, "Hīnduno asal dharm ne hālnā pākhaṇḍī mato," *Satya Prakāsh* October, 21 1860. Reprinted in *Māhārāj Lāibal Kes tathā enī sāthe sambandh rakhnar Bhātiā Kanspīresī Kes* (Mumbai: Daftar Āškārā Chāpkhāna, 1862), 1-3.

war in China; the contest between the British and the Russians; the improvement of the police force; caste discrimination; Mumbai, Karachi, Calcutta; income taxes; coffee and opium; and the “English failings.”<sup>14</sup> None of these, however, would prove as significant as Mulji’s diatribe.

Mulji’s basic argument was that because scriptures like the Puranas and Shastras state that the Kali Yug will proliferate false religions, the Puṣṭimārg, which originated in the Kali Yug, must be “false” (khotā) and “heterodox” (pākhaṇḍī). Mulji enjoins a return to the purity of “primitive” (asal) Hinduism, whether Vedic or classical. He fulminates against the Maharajas for their misdeeds, and he specifies that Jadunathji had behaved nefariously with his female followers. He claims that the sect instructs male devotees to surrender their body, mind, and wealth (tan, man, and dhan) to the guru before enjoying them themselves and—much more scandalously—that “wealth” has been generally interpreted to include women. Some of the article’s acridity gets lost in translation.<sup>15</sup> Its basic allegation, however, is more than clear: the Maharajas stand convicted by Mulji of imposture (ṭhagāī). As he puts it, “there can be no greater heresy or deceit than this, to blind people and throw dust into their eyes.”<sup>16</sup>

It would be some time before the Maharaj sued Mulji for libel, and the reasons why he did so will be discussed below. In short, it seemed like the traditional caste

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<sup>14</sup> *Rast Goftar*, October 21, 1860. I have not been able to locate a copy of the *Satya Prakash* from that date.

<sup>15</sup> The bite of “hypocrisy” [pākhaṇḍī] is dulled by the legalistic “heterodoxy”; “original” [asal] is anthropologized by “primitive”; “dharma” loses some of its semantic mobility when rendered as “religion.” Mulji, “Hīnduno asal dharm.”

<sup>16</sup> “lokone dekhtī āṃkhe āndhlā karvā, ane teonī āṃkhmā dhul chāṃṭīne dharmne nāme ane dharmne bāne teonī kācī kuvārī vahu dīkrī bhogavvī enāṃ kartā vadhāre pākhaṇḍ ane vadhāre ṭhagāī kahī?” Mulji, “Hīnduno asal dharm.”

leadership was unable to manage Mulji, and so Jadunathji turned to the ascendant British power. When the libel suit came to court in January 1862, most Bania and Bhattia caste leaders sided with the plaintiff, the Maharaj. Only two *shets* stood with Karsandas: Mangaldas Nathubhai of the Banias and Lakhmidas Khimji of the Bhattias, both of whom were sympathetic to the reform agenda. The rest, including Gopaldas Madhavdas, the head of the Bania Mahajan, stood with the Maharaj. In total, there were thirty-one witnesses for the plaintiff and thirty-three for the defense. Both Gopaldas Madhavdas and his brother Varjivandas testified on behalf of Jadunathji, as did a number of relatively non-influential Bania and Bhattia merchants. Defense witnesses included Lakhmidas Khimji, Mangaldas Nathubhai, Dr. John Wilson, and leading Elphinstonians like Narmad and Dr. Bhau Daji. Their lurid accounts of the guru's sexual escapades, culminating in Daji's attestation to the Maharaj's struggle with syphilis, won the case for the defense. Arguing for the plaintiff were Mr. Bayley and Mr. Scoble. Arguing for the defendants were Mr. Anstey and Mr. Dunbar. Chief Justice Mathew Sausse presided over the trial, assisted by Justice Joseph Arnould.<sup>17</sup>

Extensive coverage in the two major Bombay dailies guaranteed the case its national notoriety. Competition between the *Bombay Gazette* and the *Times of India* shaped the development of both papers after the 1861 amalgamation of the latter from the *Bombay Times*, the *Bombay Standard*, and the *Telegraph and Courier* (see Chapter 2). Both papers doubtless hoped that the Maharaj Libel Case's irresistible admixture of salacious sex and reformist virtue would help sell copy. Sales and circulation are at this

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<sup>17</sup> For an evocative description of "Sausse the Silent," see *High Court at Bombay, 1862-1962* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1962).

point, of course, impossible to gauge. What is clear, however, is that other newspapers took note of the Bombay dailies' extended fascination with the case; both came to be identified with it by other voices in the Anglo-Indian press. For instance, the *Poona Observer*, never shy in its opinions, openly disapproved of the entire affair. "The Maharaj Libel case," it wrote shortly after the commencement of the trial, "is dragging its dirty length along in the Supreme Court of Bombay. The case is about as disgusting [a] one as can be imagined."<sup>18</sup> Two weeks later, the *Observer* complained that the "Maharaj's libel case still draws its slow and filthy length along in the Supreme Court, to the great disgust of all the respectable readers of the two Bombay dailies, the columns of which are occupied, to the exclusion of better matter, by the disgraceful revelations of the abominations of which the Maharaj is accused." The paper conceded the importance of the trial, and with characteristically racist invective, waxed aghast at how "a heathen is not to be trusted" because despite his "polite and liberal" appearance in "public," at home he remains an "abject slave of a superstition" that exceeds the bounds of even the "filthiest imagination." The reactionary *Observer* used the case to argue against the "tolerance" advocated by the *Times of India*.<sup>19</sup> Nine days later, the *Observer* reported that the *Times* had decided to stop publishing about the case; but, more than two weeks after this, it was still chiding the *Times* for having "worked its way into a state of religious frenzy about this wretched libel case."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Poona Observer*, January 30, 1862

<sup>19</sup> *Poona Observer*, February 13, 1862

<sup>20</sup> *Poona Observer*, February 22, 1862; *Poona Observer*, March 11, 1862

The English-language papers were quick to insinuate the case into the global history of priestcraft. As early as December 1861, during the trial of the Bhattia Conspiracy Case, the *Bombay Gazette* identified the trial as a “most suggestive and instructive chapter in the history of superstition; and also a most revolting one.” Comparing the Maharajas’ principle of “apostolical succession” to the papacy, the paper laments that they would “give out that they are incarnations of God” and yet persist in “the most loathsome filth of sensuality.” Their “exposure” should “result in making them ashamed of their creed and life.” Shame, the *Gazette* suggests, is what separates the “European” from the “native.”<sup>21</sup> The *Poona Observer* likewise compared the Maharajas to the Popes, going on to equate their followers with the credulous Mormons, and even trotting out a topical couplet from John Dryden (“In pious times ere priestcraft did begin/ Before polygamy was made a sin”).<sup>22</sup> In a decidedly unholy vein, the *Times of India* compared the Maharaj to Satan, the “Prince of Darkness,” who had held India’s “millions” in the “bonds” of superstition as his “miserable tools.”<sup>23</sup>

Upon the conclusion of the trial, the papers celebrated the “exposure” of the Maharaj and anticipated the decline of sacerdotal religion. On May 2, the *Bombay Gazette* observed that “the dark powers that tyrannize over the human mind... may be seen in every age of the world.” Just as the “priesthood in the dark ages” had subordinated others to their authority as though they were “a superior rank of mortals,” now “the

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<sup>21</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, December 4, 1861

<sup>22</sup> *Poona Observer*, March 11, 1862. The couplet, incidentally, is the first illustration of the word “priestcraft” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in *Poona Observer*, February 22, 1862

mighty mass of mind in India [is held] under the power of the Brahmins.” The Maharaj Libel Case has begun to undo this bondage by subjecting “spiritual tyranny” to “investigation and dissent.”<sup>24</sup> The next day, the *Times of India* asked whether it was possible that Jadunathji Brizrattanji would “be able to maintain his position as a sanctified teacher, as an incarnation of God” after the public revelation and exposure of his real character.” It praised the *Satya Prakash* for having “verified its name”:

Through a long night of superstition and darkness, vile creatures like this Maharaj have been able to make their dens of vice and debauchery seem to their spell-bound followers to be the holy temples of God. But as soon as the morning light comes, the place is found in full corruption and uncleanness; magical spells lose all effect; and all men of a better sort rise disgusted, and at any cost break loose from such a haunt.<sup>25</sup>

Disenchantment was the order of the day, and Mulji’s vindication seemed a harbinger of a Hindu enlightenment on the verge of dawning.

As coverage of the trial’s conclusion spread, the trope of the press as spell-breaking force of enlightenment spread with it. Calcutta’s *Friend of India* hailed “public opinion through the press” as the lone instrument “by which such practices as those of the Wallabhacharyas can alone be exposed.”<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, Bombay’s bilingual *Dnyanodaya* likewise claimed that the affair “serves more than anything else to reveal the abominations of Hindooism and the direct results of its doctrines upon the lives of

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<sup>24</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, May 1, 1862

<sup>25</sup> *Times of India*, May 2, 1862. Quoted in Karsandas Mulji, *History of the Sect of Maharajas, or Vallabhacharyas in Western India* (London: Trübner & Co, 1865), 134. The book was published anonymously, but the scholarly consensus is that it was authored by Mulji.

<sup>26</sup> *The Friend of India* (Calcutta), quoted in *Dnyanodaya* (Bombay), June 2, 1862. With its missionary affiliations, the paper also quickly added that the “light let into the hideous recesses of Wallabhacharya obscenity by the evidence in this case, far more than confirms all the statements of such scholars as Ward and H. H. Wilson.”

its votaries” (both papers were run by Christian missionaries).<sup>27</sup> The conservative *Bombay Saturday Review* declared the court’s ruling “the first legal vindication of the great principle of religious liberty in India, and the heaviest blow ever to the system of caste.”<sup>28</sup> Press clippings like these would later attain greater permanence in Mulji’s *History of the Sect of Maharajas* (1865). The book took the form of an Orientalist monograph, which included an abridged transcript of the trial and a sampling of the press coverage as an appendix. The *History*, like the affair as a whole, demonstrates the complex affinities and affiliations among philological scholarship, English education, Hindu reform, Christian missions, the colonial state, and the vernacular and English press.

As the trial unfolded, the Gujarati press also continued its coverage of the affair. For instance, a February *Rast Goftar and Satya Prakash* article on “The Gist of the Libel Case,” reports the major developments of the trial in its first month. The article reiterates the primary accusations made during the trial: (a) that many devotees take their gurus to be avatars of God or Krishna (īśvar athavā karśan), and (b) that these devotees submit their body, mind, and wealth to their guru-god; not to do so, the article alleges, is thought to be a sin (pāp). The devotee (sevak) rocks the Maharaj in a swing (hiṇḍolā), just as the Maharaj rocks the deity. The article further repeats the slanders made of the Maharaj in court: he salaciously splashes red dye (gulāl) on the chests of Puṣṭimārgī women; he has his devotees drink dirty water (melun paaNi) in which he washed his feet and dhoti; he gives out his chewed pān as prasādam; he

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<sup>27</sup> *Dnyanodaya*, June 2, 1862

<sup>28</sup> “Bhattia Conspiracy Case,” *Bombay Saturday Review*, December 21, 1861

solicits worshipful leg massages; he forced the community into a “slavery bond.” The article ultimately affirms that the Puṣṭimārgī sect (*panth*) is the opposite of the original (*asal*) Hindu dharma.<sup>29</sup>

As the trial dragged on, further articles used its notoriety to lodge criticisms against other allegedly “immoral” practices like Holi.<sup>30</sup> By the conclusion of the case in late April, the *Satya Prakash* could proudly proclaim itself satisfied (*saṁtoś*) with all its hard work (*mehanāt*). Today’s victory (*fateh*) is not ours, the paper wrote, but belongs to truth; they thank God (*īśvar*) and attribute the victory to him. The scandal, it seems, was meant merely as form of devotional service (*upakārī*).<sup>31</sup> A few weeks later, a follow-up article noted that much had already been said on the immoral (*anīti*) subject of the maharajas, and suggested that perhaps there was nothing left to say.<sup>32</sup>

The Maharaj Libel Case resonated widely due to its lurid dramatization of the discourse of priestly imposture, which throughout the nineteenth century had organized British depictions of Hinduism. The Case served in a sense as a point of “application” for the imposture theory of religion: the presuppositions of press and court derived from the priestcraft narrative, and both public bodies sought to right the wrongs implied by the trope of charlatanic deception. They sought, that is, to replace Hindu hierarchy with an egalitarian social order consistent both with liberal political theory and with the governmental exigencies of colonial rule. In many ways, what is

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<sup>29</sup> “Lāibelnā mukadamāno sār,” *Rāst Goftār tathā Satya Prakāsh*, February 23, 1862.

<sup>30</sup> *Rāst Goftār tathā Satya Prakāsh*, March 23, 1862

<sup>31</sup> *Rāst Goftār tathā Satya Prakāsh*, April 27, 1862

<sup>32</sup> “Lāibal kesnī asar keṅvī ūpavī joīe,?” *Rāst Goftār tathā Satya Prakāsh*, 18 May 1862

most notable about the case is the apparent inevitability of its outcome. This morality play about a nefarious guru was, I submit, pre-scripted. The trial was overdetermined by intersecting discourses that allowed it to emerge as a news “story” and that constrained that story’s possible endings. Later on in this chapter, I will attempt to read this tale against the grain. First, however, I will situate it within its broader political and cultural context—a context in which the line between the “political” and the “cultural” was very much a point of contestation.

### **Caste Heterodoxy and the Secular State**

“It is not a question of theology that has been before us! It is a question of morality.”<sup>33</sup> Judge Joseph Arnould’s proclamation resounded through the packed chambers of the Bombay High Court. Journalists scribbled frantically as the judge explained that

what is morally wrong cannot be theologically right—that when practices which say the very foundation of morality, which involve a violation of the eternal and immutable laws of Right—are established in the name and under the sanction of Religion, they ought, for the common welfare of Society, and in the interest of Humanity itself to be publicly denounced and exposed. (*MLC*, 480)

Arnould’s judgment relied on a very secular logic. Arched above the particularities of the world’s religions, there stands a single immutable law, inscribed in nature and preserved by the state. This state, through its appeal to moral philosophy, stakes its claim to a position of universality from which it can arbitrate among the competing claims of the many religious laws and communities that populate its territories. Such a

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<sup>33</sup> One might compare the Gujarati: “te dharm saṃbandhī nathī, paṇ nīti saṃbandhī che.” *Māhārāj Lāībal Kes*.

position had an obvious and enduring appeal for the British colonial state in India, never more urgently than in the early 1860s, as the state reframed its rule after the 1857 Uprisings. By claiming to stand above religions, the British state also produced itself as standing above Indians, a colonized population reduced to the religious identities by which they were ruled.

In the following discussion, I will parse Arnould's claim. First, I suggest that Karsandas Mulji's article operated in the mode of oppositional heterodoxy: his dissent was voiced from within Vallabhacārya tradition as much as from without. I then explore how British state used such heterodox to assert its sovereignty over Hindu caste polities. My general argument throughout this section is that colonial governmentality rendered Hindu "theology" an object of managerial control. It used the powers of publicity to sever the lateral bonds that constituted caste groups, in order both to convene an undifferentiated "secular" public and to produce a properly bureaucratic Hinduism.

As Gauri Viswanathan has suggested, oppositional heterodoxy serves many of the functions as secularism: it articulates a space outside of religious orthodoxy from which that orthodoxy can be criticized. Oppositional heterodoxy amplifies contradictions internal to received tradition in order to articulate its critique of hegemonic social forms.<sup>34</sup> This breed of heterodox critique is, I will suggest, precisely what Mulji attempted in his libelous article. Mulji referred to the Purāṇas and Śāstras in order to make his claim that because the Vallabhacāri panth was created (cālu thayo) long after the commencement of the Kali Yug, it must by definition be a fake religion.

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<sup>34</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, "Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy," *PMLA* 123.2 (2008): 466-476.

Like generations of traditionalist critics before him, Mulji bases his argument on scriptural authority (*hindu śāstranā vacan pramāṇe*).<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Vallabhacārya himself had used the concept of the Kali Yug to, in effect, criticize the Vedas. As he insisted, although the Vedas might have been a suitable basis for devotion in before the carnage of Kurūkṣetra, only bhakti can save corrupt modern humanity. Abstruse Vedic verses hardly even make sense in these dark times.

Mulji inverts this argument: bhakti is to blame for humanity's debased state. Drawing on his Elphinstone education, Mulji articulated an Enlightenment Hinduism predicated on a reformed humanity; but, as he framed it, Vedic revival was the key to reform. In order to redeem the modern age, the Vedas and Shastras must displace the gurus and their theology of love. Mulji thus attempted return Hinduism to Vedic "orthodoxy." His orthodoxy, however, was functionally heterodox: that is, espoused from within the Puṣṭimārg, it departed from and criticized the devotional norms of his community. Mulji astutely triangulated three vectors of critical thought: English Enlightenment, Vallabhacāryan bhakti, and neo-Vedic orthodoxy. Their convergence can be seen in one crucial concept that anchors much of Mulji's corpus: "uddhār," or "emancipation." In Puṣṭimārgī theology, uddhār referred to the subsumption of the soul into Krishna. For Mulji, it retains this sense while also indicating social reform.<sup>36</sup> Mulji's "emancipation" is thus positioned between traditions; through it,

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<sup>35</sup> Mulji, "Hindunā Asal Dharma," *ibid*.

<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, "kharo dharm tathā kharo mārg" and "tśvarbhakti ane nīti," in Karsandās Mūljī, *Nīti-Vacan*, ed. Keśavprasād Chotālāl Deśāī, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Amdāvād: Jīvanlāl Amarśī Mahetā, 1923), 68-70 and 127-138.

Enlightenment and bhakti each come to inflect the other, rendering “tradition” of whatever variety strange unto itself.

Mulji gave voice to an oppositional heterodoxy; Arnould, in the passage quoted above, used heterodoxy as an excuse for the extension of state power. Precisely because religious publics proliferate dissenting counter-publics, the state assumes the role of managing dissent. In the Bombay of the early 1860s, the legal management of heterodoxy often allowed the colonial state to intervene within what historian Amrita Shodhan has termed “caste polities.” Shodhan argues that between the 1850s and the 1870s, the Bombay castes stopped functioning as little publics and started to function as sociological descriptors borne by individuals situated within “a non-differentiated public,” defined by the centrality of the British state.<sup>37</sup> Mulji’s career demonstrates the shift: in the 1850s he took the caste polity as his primary public arena, but this was no longer possible in the same way by the 1870s. Caste had become “anachronistic identity” within the non-differentiated public; it had become the object, not the locus, of reform.<sup>38</sup>

The Maharaj Libel Case exemplifies this process. The Maharaj’s followers hailed from the Bania and Bhattia castes, two of the wealthiest merchant communities in Bombay. Each caste was divided into several sub-castes (like Mulji’s Kapol Bania caste), and each of these was presided over by a *shet*. The several *shets* of each caste met

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<sup>37</sup> Amrita Shodhan *A Question of Community: Religious Groups and Colonial Law* (Calcutta: Samya, 2001), 150.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125. If the early 1860s were volatile years for Bombay culture, this was surely in part because of the period’s economic volatility: the American Civil War pushed Bombay to the forefront of the global cotton market, prompting a massive financial bubble that, for a short time, drowned the city in champagne.

periodically to discuss matters pertinent to the caste as a whole. This body of all the shets was termed the Mahajan. Caste leadership traditionally had the power to excommunicate members, but recent regulations imposed by the British had constrained their ability to do so. Because of these regulations, if caste leaders were to excommunicate a member, they would run a serious risk of incurring a lawsuit. The Maharajas in particular did not want to defile themselves by court appearances, or to admit subordination to the British state; so, in January 1859, they circulated a caste contract that pledged its signatories both to support the excommunication of dissenters and to help keep the Maharajas out of court. Captained by the Kapol Bania shet, Varjivandas Madhavdas, most of the city's Bania and Bhatia leaders signed the contract—which, on January 23, Mulji excoriated in an article titled “The Slavery Bond” (golāmī khat).<sup>39</sup> These events were replayed two and a half years later, in the build-up to the Maharaj Libel Case. On September 6, 1861, two thousand Bhattias met to resolve that whoever sided with Mulji by testifying against the Maharaj in court would be excommunicated. Mulji got wind of the meeting and charged its leaders with conspiracy. The Bhattia Conspiracy Case was heard in December 1861, a preamble to the Maharaj Libel Case proper. The leading “conspirators” were fined for obstructing justice. By criminalizing the Bhatia alliance as a “conspiracy,” the court implied that the state alone, and not civil bodies, possesses the authority to protect the rights of its subjects. In other words, the caste was not permitted to govern itself.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Dobbin, *Urban Leadership*, 67; Karsandas Mulji, “The Slavery Bond,” *Nibandhamala*, 133-142.

<sup>40</sup> Shodhan, *Question of Community*, 138.

As Christine Dobbin has argued, the rift in Gujarati caste politics predated the 1850s. Two class fractions—the English-educated intelligentsia and the traditional elites—competed for hegemony among Bombay’s Gujarati Hindus, and it was this competition that drove the controversy that landed the Maharaj in court. As Dobbin demonstrates, the new “Bombay intelligentsia” used its English education to claim power away from traditional caste elites. Religion emerged as a prime site of contestation for these two groups: religious leaders’ authority was often intimately linked to that of the caste shets; thus, by bringing down a priest, a reformer might also bring down his secular counterpart.

The intelligentsia had gotten their degrees from Elphinstone College, which was founded in 1834 to spread English learning among the colonized; the curriculum featured instruction in courses in literature, history, natural science, and political economy.<sup>41</sup> Books circulating at the college included not only literary titles (Milton’s *Poems*, *Robinson Crusoe*, the *Arabian Nights*) and histories (Thomas Macaulay’s *History of England*, Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, James Mill’s *History of British India*), but also works on political economy (David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Malthus), utilitarianism (e.g. Jeremy Bentham’s *Principles of Morals and Legislation*), epistemology (John Locke’s *On the Conduct of the Understanding*, Thomas Reid’s *Philosophy of the Human Mind*), and natural theology (William Paley), as well as books by French thinkers like Pascal and Montesquieu. Some of these works were also distilled in primers like *Easy Lessons on Reasoning* and, in Gujarati, *A Youth’s Book on*

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<sup>41</sup> See Naheed Fatima Ahmad, “A History of Elphinstone College, 1827-1890: A Case Study in the Early Formation of an English-Educated Intelligentsia in Bombay” (Ph.D. thesis, Oxford University, 1982).

*Natural Theology*.<sup>42</sup> Elphinstone students were encouraged to criticize the social ills of India, and several won prizes for their essays on choice reformist topics like infanticide. In his prize-winning essay, for instance, the young Bhau Daji extolled those dignified, rational, and “active beings” who had devoted themselves to “dispelling the darkness, which covers the rest of our countrymen.”<sup>43</sup>

The disruption of Gujarati caste polities thus had its roots in British imperialism, but via an imperial organ other than the Bombay High Court. As discussed in the previous chapter (Chapter 2), the political logic of “reform” in colonial India was complex. As I suggested, drawing on work by Nicholas Dirks and Michel Foucault, the nineteenth century witnessed a shift in the form of imperial power. Where once it had concerned itself primarily with statecraft, it increasingly came to reframe its mission as an intervention in the field of priestcraft; that is, the colonial state extended the reach of its power by trying to redeem Indian souls and liberate the colonized from the unjust rule of religious leaders. As Leela Gandhi reminds us, the Utilitarian discourse of “improvement” was caught up with the “gospel of governmentality as a civilizing mission.”<sup>44</sup> The political logic of reform assumed a diffuse field of power, concerned with social practices and individual subjectivation. In place of fearfully submissive

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<sup>42</sup> Elphinstone College Files, vol. 3 (1842), Correspondence addressed to the Secretary of the Elphinstone Native Institution for January 1842- December 1842, pp. 4-183; vol. 6 (1846-50), “Correspondence relating to accounts for the years 1846, 1847, 1848 & 1850 for Subscription to the Elphinstone Institution and Books supplied by the Elphinstone Institution to Regimental and Government Schools”; vol. 8 (1848), “Correspondence addressed to the Secetry of the Elphinstone Institution Bombay January-December 1848, relating to supply of books for distribution of prizes in the Government Vernacular Schools,” Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Dobbin, *Urban Leadership*, 53.

<sup>44</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 94.

devotional subjects, proudly autonomous rational subjects would come to pervade the subcontinent, remaking its religious multitudes as rational publics. In Chapter 2, I analyzed this mode of “pastoral power” with primary reference to Christian missionaries. Here, my focus is on Hindu reformers.

The agendas of men like Mulji and Daji were not the same as the agendas of the imperial state; however, as the Maharaj Libel Case demonstrates, these two parties did enter into strategic alliance. The *Bombay Gazette* wrote that the case had served to “vindicate the liberty of the press, the justice of English law, the cause of progress in this land, and more especially the moral reform which is struggling to make headway in this community against the most powerfully antagonistic influences.”<sup>45</sup> As this comment suggests, the Maharaj Libel Case also demonstrated the mutual determination of these four fields: the free press, English law, “progress,” and moral “reform.”

For example, both the state and the press undercut caste politics’ claims to sovereignty by using the rhetoric of publicity (cf. Chapter 2). In Judge Arnould’s concluding remarks, he spoke at great length about the importance of the press in “opening” Hindu society. Arnould congratulated Mulji and friends for fulfilling their journalistic duty.<sup>46</sup> By his account, the legal outcome of the trial seems secondary to its use as a vehicle of publicity. Although the “trial has been spoken of as having involved a great waste of the public time,” Arnould disagrees. That the case was “discussed thus

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<sup>45</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, April 23, 1862

<sup>46</sup> “They have denounced—They have exposed them. At a risk and to a cost which we cannot adequately measure, these men have done determined battle against a foul and powerful delusion. They have dared to look Custom and Error boldly in the face, and proclaim before the world of their votaries, that their Evil is not Good, that their Lie is not the Truth. In this doing, they have done bravely and well” (*MLC*, 480).

openly before a population so intelligent as that of the natives of Western India,” is to be applauded: “it must have taught many to think; it must have led many to enquire” (MLC, 479-80). “A public journalist,” he wrote, “is a public teacher; the true function of the press, that by virtue of which it has rightly grown to be one of the great powers of the modern world—is the function of teaching, elevating and enlightening those who fall within the range of its influence.” The press must “expose and denounce evil and barbarous practices; to attack usages and customs inconsistent with moral purity and social progress.” The press has the ability “to change and purify the public opinion which is the real basis on which these evils are built and the real power by which they are perpetuated” (MLC, 423). For this reason, the “the liberty of the press” should be placed “upon an inaccessible height” (379). As is clear from Arnould’s remarks, the state served as the guarantor of the free press and did so eagerly insofar as both were involved in parallel projects of social reform.

Arnould’s comments bear comparison with a juridical defense of the press with a far more insidious ring. In 1853, Justice Erskine Perry observed that

in courts of justice the veil which shrouds the privacy of Oriental life is necessarily drawn aside, the strong ties which at other times bind together caste and family in pursuit of a common object are loosened under the pressure of stronger individual interests, and there, amidst masses of conflicting testimony, and with subtler intellects to deal with than usually appear before European tribunals, the motives, reasonings, and actions of the native population of India are displayed in broad light and may be traced with inestimable advantage.<sup>47</sup>

Perry attributes several powers to publicity. First, it allows the court to assert its authority over domestic life and therefore undermine the sphere of spiritual

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<sup>47</sup> Erskine Perry, *Cases Illustrative of Oriental Life and the Application of English Law to India, Decided in H. M. Supreme Court at Bombay* (London: S. Sweet, 1853), iv.

sovereignty claimed by the colonized. Second, it scrambles familial solidarity, temporarily severing domestic bonds by hailing subjects individually, their “interests” piqued by structures of legal responsibility. Third, it brings the “natives” into view as a *population*, a collective body to be mapped and managed by the ethnological apparatus of the state. Thus, the act of exposure reinforces the political logic of governmentality: it apprehends the governed as population and as individuals, eroding forms of solidarity that might run counter to the imperatives of pastoral power. I will have more to say about those lines of solidarity below. First, however, I mean to close this discussion by calling attention to the form of religion that the “secular” state actually promoted.

The colonial state did not do away with religion entirely, however. Instead, it bureaucratized it. In Foucault’s terms, religion would no longer just be used to manage the soul; it would be used to manage the population. The general effort of the British was to replace “irrational,” irregular, local religious practices with sets of religious rules and regulations that could be absorbed by the administrative apparatus of the state. To be sure, administrative religion had featured significantly in Indian political life well before the coming of the British. But as the Maharaj Libel Case so aptly demonstrates, the post-1857 “ethnographic state” consolidated and extended this modality of power in an unprecedented manner and, in the process, effected major changes within Hinduism itself.

In the Maharaj Libel Case, the imposture theory of religion was used to narrate a shift from charismatic Hinduism to bureaucratic Hinduism, from the affective intensities of bhakti to the calmly reflective liberal faith of Karsandas Mulji. Indeed it

seems to suggest that the two major modalities of “reformed” Hinduism (that is, liberal-reflective and legal-bureaucratic) were mutually reinforcing, both working in tandem to suppresses the alleged excesses of devotional self-surrender and spiritual eroticism. Part of what was at stake in the Maharaj Libel Affair was what Max Weber has called the “routinization of charisma.” During the trial, the guru would be leached of his godlike aura. This shift was most apparent in the discussion of which text enjoined faith in the guru; it was presumed that the Maharaj’s sacred authority inhered not in his person, nor in Krishna, but rather in the scriptural canon (*MLC*, 193-196, 238).

Textual fastidiousness did not, of course, originate with the British. Jadunathji himself had established belief in the śāstras as a major point of dissension between the orthodox and reform parties; in his public debate with Narmad, for instance, he demanded of the poet whether he held the śāstras to be divinely created (*īśvarkṛt*).<sup>48</sup> The poet did not, but the guru made it very clear that their divinity was a central tenet of his orthodoxy: the “śāstra-sayer” is God himself (*śāstra kahenār īśvar che*), and those who claim that the śāstras are the sayings of man (*manuṣya*) are ignorant (*agyānī*); they abandon the śāstra-sect (*śāstrano mat*) for whatever authority pleases them (*potānī marjī pramāṇe*).<sup>49</sup>

Hindu texts did, however, assume new functions as they entered the purview of the colonial state. It is now a scholarly commonplace that “Hinduism” is an invention

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<sup>48</sup> Narmadāśaṃkar Lālśaṃkar, *Mārī Hakikat*, ed. Ramesh M. Shukla (Amdāvād: Pārśva Pablikeśan, 2003), 102.

<sup>49</sup> Yadunāth Mahārāj Suratvālā, *Svadharm vardhak ane sanshay chedek*, vol. 1 (Amdāvād: Gujarat Printing Press, 1911), i. Notably, Jadunath finesses his double role as publicist and protector of the true religion by refraining from quoting *śruti* scriptures (anyone, even a shudra, can read a pamphlet); instead, he simply mentions that such a matter (*vāt*) is in the Ved somewhere, and the reader is to accept him on his word.

of the colonial period, and the Maharaj Libel Case is exemplary of the shifts wrought within South Asian religion by Orientalism and reformism.<sup>50</sup> Jürgen Lütt identified the trial as a fulcrum in the epochal shift from erotic to martial Hinduism, from Krishna-lila to Ram-rajya.<sup>51</sup> David Haberman used the case to illustrate the imperial complicity of textualist Orientalism with the colonial courts.<sup>52</sup> It seems that, during the Maharaj Libel Case, an erotic Hinduism predicated on the micro-politics of the caste polity was replaced by a chastely impersonal Hinduism predicated on managerial expertise of the state-sponsored Orientalist.

The Maharaj Libel Case put the Bombay High Court in the peculiar position of having to adjudicate Hindu orthodoxy—a peculiarity that was not lost on the court itself, which spent a good portion of the demurrer hearing debating whether such adjudication was legally appropriate.<sup>53</sup> To adjudge orthodoxy seemed to compromise the secularist constraints placed upon the state by the principle of “non-interference” in religion. The court also worried about the feasibility of trying orthodoxy, when the judges lacked professional expertise in Hindu scriptural traditions. Although

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<sup>50</sup> Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke, *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989); Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron, *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995); “Who Speaks for Hinduism?” spec. issue of *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68.4 (2000). For a discussion of the broader discursive field into which the newly reconstituted object “Hinduism” entered, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> Jürgen Lütt, “From Krishnalila to Ramarajya: A Court Case and Its Consequences for the Reformulation of Hinduism,” in *Representing Hinduism*, *ibid.*, 142-153. N. A. Thoothi has likewise suggested that Gujarati Vaishnavism has witnessed a general decline in emphasis on the *Bhagavat Purana* with concomitant rise in prominence for the *Gita* and Ram. See *The Vaishnavas of Gujarat* (Calcutta: Longmans, Green & Co., 1935), 74.

<sup>52</sup> Haberman, “On Trial”

<sup>53</sup> A demurrer is a plea filed by the defense to challenge the legal sufficiency of the claim made by the complaining party.

prosecuting attorney Bayley argued that the case be admitted because it “breaches of the moral law” and could thus be tried without reference to doctrine, Chief Justice Sausse concluded that the nature of orthodoxy was very much was confronted the court. Following the terms set forth in the alleged libel, they would determine heterodoxy by comparing Hindu practice to the regulations detailed in “Hindu Shastras” (MLC, 37).

As early as 1846, H. H. Wilson had noted that Vallabha preached “that privation formed no part of sanctity, and that it was the duty of the teachers and his disciples to worship their Deity, not in nudity and hunger, but in costly apparel and choice food; not in solitude and mortification, but in the pleasures of society, and the enjoyment of this world.”<sup>54</sup> The Orientalist sense that the Puṣṭimārg was a sort of Hindu Epicureanism was reinforced by the Maharaj Libel Case, which, through the testimony of missionary-Orientalist Rev. John Wilson, incorporated H. H. Wilson’s expertise. Later, this understanding of the Puṣṭimārg would be made even more canonical by Monier Monier-Williams, who expressed horror at the sensuous, gender bending of the Puṣṭimārg.<sup>55</sup> Karsandas Mulji also made a foray into the genre of the Orientalist monograph, with his *A History of the Sect of Maharajas* (1865).

It was through Orientalist texts like these that “orthodox” Hinduism came into view as an entity that could be managed by the courts. As I have suggested in this

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<sup>54</sup> Horace Hayman Wilson, *Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus* (Calcutta: Bishop’s College Press, 1846), 77-78. Some of this material was republished shortly after the affair by the *Bombay Gazette* (September 17, 1862).

<sup>55</sup> Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *Hinduism* (Delhi: Rare Books, 1971), 142-48. Compare Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India: An Account of the Religions of the Indian Peoples, Based on a Life’s Study of their Literature and on Personal Investigations in their own Country*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1883), 148-155.

section, the Maharaj Libel Case put the Bombay High Court forward as the caretaker of secular “morality”; in the name of this universal code, it came to intervene within religion and within caste politics closely associated with religion. As the locus of political life moved from the caste to the undifferentiated public, the Maharaj’s charisma was routinized. Authentic Hinduism was no longer to be invested in sacred persons, but rather in sacred texts overseen by the Orientalist state bureaucracy. Reflective ethics would govern the individual, and bureaucratic religion the population. I now turn to the social order that this arrangement sought to replace. As I will explain, Mulji’s individualistic Hinduism was pitted against a radical ethics of self-surrender.

### **Affective Bonds and the Erotics of Devotion**

In his *Nīti-vacan* (*Discourses on Ethics*) (1859), a collection of sixty-five previously published articles, Karsandas Mulji offered his thoughts on sundry topics, some familial (woman, father, son), some emotional (anger, joy, sorrow), some religious (e.g. “Real Religion and the Real Path” [“kharo dharm tathā kharo mārḡ”], “Devotion to God and Ethics” [“īśvar-bhakti ane nīti”]).<sup>56</sup> The collection opens with a meditation on the nature of God. As Mulji insists, God is one (*ekaj che*) and is not bound to any particular caste (*te jāte īśvar nathī*). He stands at a firm remove from this world, eschewing avatars, aloft on his heavenly throne (*takht*). From on high He shines light (*prakāsh*) on all the world and, in the process, gives life to all beings. Mulji enjoins his reader to

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<sup>56</sup> Karsandas Mulji, *Nīti-Vacan*, *ibid.*, 3. The printing of the *Nīti-Vacan* was announced in the *Rāst Goftār* on July, 3 1859 (“Nīti Vacan Pustak”). Essays collected in the volume were previously published in the *Satya Prakash* and the *Nītibodhak* between 1855 and 1858.

worship, praise, and love (pūjā, stuti, ane bhakti kar) this God, the maker of the world, the most powerful, the all-knowing.<sup>57</sup>

Here as elsewhere, Mulji proffers a disenchanting Hinduism that ensures its “rationality” by carefully divorcing divinity from the empirical world, lodging it instead in an ethereal arena of impersonal ethical precepts. As Mahipatram Rupram put it, Mulji tried to destroy the “rotten, immoral system called ‘Pushti Marga’” and replace it with “a more rational form of worship.”<sup>58</sup> By eliminating the allegedly arbitrary powers of hereditary god-men, Mulji sought to sever one potent point of physical contact between the immanent and the transcendent.

While Mulji is careful to include “bhakti” on his list of prescribed devotional forms, he effectively subordinates it to “praise” and “worship,” constraining its more capacious semantic range within the hierarchy implied by both those terms. To invoke a phrase elucidated below, Mulji reduces bhakti to the *dāsya bhāva*, the servile affect that a subject feels for his king or a servant for his master. While the bhakti of hierarchical abasement was the bhakti on trial at the Bombay High Court in 1862, it was not the only kind of devotion enjoined by Sri Vallabhacārya and his descendents. Jadunathji once complained of those who delimit bhakti’s rich panoply of devotional forms with the stale singularity of the divine father. Fools, he wrote, think that God can only be worshipped as a son respects his father; all emotions are divine, as are both genders.<sup>59</sup> Devotional praxis should reflect the innate multiplicity of human affects and

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<sup>57</sup> “sarva prāṇīṇe jīvtā rākhe che”; Karsandas Mulji, “God,” in *Nīti-Vacan*, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Rupram, *Uttam Kapoḷ*, ii.

<sup>59</sup> Yadunāth Mahārāj, *Svadharm Vardhak*, vol. 2, 22-24

human relations. In what follows, I will attempt to recuperate the ethics of radical relationality that, I think, undergirds Jadunath's claim.

According to postcolonial theorist Leela Gandhi, Immanuel Kant founded the "radical freedom of the ethical agent-subject" on a critical refusal of religion. The Kantian subject was "singular, self-identical, self-sufficient, immune, and transcendental," and in order to be all of these things, it had to secure the boundary separating its confident ipseity from divine alterity. As Gandhi puts it, religion threatened the liberal subject with "hybridity"—that is, with a messy admixture of self and other, of the empirical and the transcendent.<sup>60</sup> Drawing on Derrida's notion of the "fiduciary," Gandhi suggests that where Kant's "reflective faith" resisted subjective disjunction, "dogmatic faith" triggers an "interruptive unraveling" of the self by opening it to the unwavering demand of the other. As Gandhi explains, faith "that refuses to close itself off into a totality" by remaining open to the unknown is "the ether of the address and relation of the utterly other."<sup>61</sup> By traversing the limits of the liberal subject, such faith discloses "in place of a separated and disenchanting world, a concatenated 'multiverse,' strung together... in a horizontal web of relations."<sup>62</sup>

If we follow this utopian gloss on theistic devotion, the following rule emerges. It is precisely in its ability to promote hybridity—that is, to blur the boundary between the otherworldly and the empirical, between self and other—that religion offers its greatest challenge to liberal subjectivity and the political forms predicated upon it. It is

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<sup>60</sup> Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, 126-27.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

by diffusing divinity into the horizontal web of human relations that faith founds ethics. By Gandhi's account, both "prayer" and "desire" turn the self ever outward in an anxious address of an other that precedes, orients, and undermines it. As I will suggest, Gandhi's account of religion helps us clarify the ethical stakes of the bhakti devotionalism convicted of immorality by Mulji and the Bombay High Court.

As N. A. Thoothi defined it in the 1920s, bhakti "means prayer, devotion, worship, adoration. It presupposes complete self-surrender, surrender of the mind, body, and spirit of the devotee to the object of his worship, viz. God. It refers to the longings of the throbbing human heart which strives to be in tune with the love and will of God."<sup>63</sup> That is to say that bhakti uses prayer to cultivate an intense desire for the divine other, and this desire is meant to rupture the sovereign subject. "Love" does not remain a singular affect in the major treatises on bhakti; rather, bhakti's explicators have detailed a lush taxonomy of emotions that repeatedly returns devotion to the mundane arena of human relationships.

In his journal, the *Propagator of True Religion and Destroyer of Doubt*, Jadunathji specified nine modes of devotion (navadhā bhakti) central to Puṣṭimārgī tradition: śravaṇ, or hearing the praises of the deity; kīrtan, or devotional singing; smaraṇ, or remembering the deity at all times; pādsevan, worshipping the holy feet of the svarūp or image of Sri Krishna; arcan, worship of the deity<sup>64</sup>; vandan, praising the deity; dāśya,

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<sup>63</sup> Thoothi, *Vaishnavas of Gujarat*, 75-76.

<sup>64</sup> *Arcana* is generally understood to refer specifically to puja (i.e. the worship of icons). Jadunathji is at some pains, however, to distance his devotional prescriptions from mūrti puja. In this, he is fully consistent with Puṣṭimārgī tradition. See Richard Barz, *The Bhakti Sect of Vallabhacarya* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1992 [1976]), 46-52.

or servility; sakhya, or friendliness; and finally ātmānivedan, or self-surrender.<sup>65</sup> This list suggests a progressive work upon the self. Devotion begins with establishing habitual practices (hearing, singing, remembering); proceeds by extending these practices into pervasive attitudes (servility, friendliness); and culminates in the complete loss or surrender of the self. The *askesis* of bhakti thus interrupts the self-identical subject by reorienting daily life toward divine alterity.

Jadunathji's teachings derive, of course, from the writings of Vallabhacārya (1479-1531). Vallabha was born in modern Andhra Pradesh to a Telugu brahman named Lakshman Bhatt. During his life, he toured the subcontinent three times and earned many accolades, including the title "acharya" after winning a public debate (*śāstrārth*) at the court of Vijayanagara. Through most of his adult life, Vallabha's worked primarily in the north, spending considerable time in both Braj and Banaras. He is now considered one of the major expositors of early modern bhakti. His major teachings are outlined in commentaries on the *Brahma Sutras* and *Bhagavad Purana*, as well as in sixteen shorter treatises (the *Sodasagranthas*); his followers have further expanded the literature of the sect (the Vallabhacārya *sampradaya*, or Puṣṭimārg) in Sanskrit, Braj Bhasa, Gujarati, and Hindi. In addition to delineating of a pure non-dualist metaphysics (see below), Vallabha also insisted that the major Krishnaite text, the *Bhagavad Purana*, be included with the trio of scriptures that served as the foundation for orthodox philosophical debate (*Brahma-Sutras, Upanisads, Bhagavad-Gita*).

The devotional praxis described by Vallabha was firmly oriented to the *bhaktimārg*, the path of devotion. Unlike yogic and philosophical forms of religious

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<sup>65</sup> Yadunath Maharaj *Svadharm vardhak*, vol. 2, 9-20

practices, it taught that liberation from this world could only occur through the grace (*puṣṭi* or *anugraha*) of God, and not through the efforts of the human soul. During his life, Vallabha personally initiated eighty-four followers into the Puṣṭimārg. The most famous of these was surely the poet Sūrdās, whose lyrics are still recited throughout North India.<sup>66</sup> Vallabha organized his sect around his family. In a notable departure from the renunciatory norms of Vaiṣṇava orthodoxy, Vallabha decided to marry. He had two sons, Gopināth and Viṭṭhalnāth. The latter proved the more capable leader, and it is his seven sons whose descendents still structure the sampradāya. One of these sons, Yadunatha, moved with his *svarupa* of Krishna to Surat; the Jadunathji libeled by Mulji would have been his descendent.<sup>67</sup>

Jadunath's typology of the *navadhā bhakti* was common during Vallabha's era. An influential articulation, for instance, is to be found in the writings of Rūpa Gosvāmi (d. 1555), a follower of Vallabha's contemporary Kṛṣṇa Caitanya. Rupa Gosvami writes that as "both sakhya... and ātmā-nivedana... are very rare and difficult, it is only a very few deserving and qualified persons with ever deepening faith that are found to possess them as a result of their spiritual practices." The ecstasy of self-surrender, when it comes at all, comes as the endpoint to devotional praxis. Vallabha, as Richard Barz

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<sup>66</sup> See John Stratton Hawley, *The Memory of Love: Surdas Sings to Krishna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>67</sup> For discussions of Vallabhacharya's life and teachings, see the following studies: Mrudula Marfatia, *The Philosophy of Vallabhacharya* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967); Manilal C. Parekh, *Shri Vallabhacharya: Life, Teachings, and Movement (A Religion of Grace)* (Rajkot: Harmony House, 1969); Richard Barz, *Bhakti Sect of Vallabhacharya*, *ibid.*; Chimanlal Vaidya, *Shri Vallabhacharya and His Teachings*, trans. Bhailalbhai N. Shastri (Baroda: Shri Vallabha Publications, 1984); Maya Burger, "The Hindu Model of Social Organization and the Bhakti Movement: The Example of Vallabha's Sampradaya," in *Devotional Literature in South Asia: Current Research, 1985-1988*, ed. R. S. McGregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 56-66; Peter Bennett, *The Path of Grace: Social Organization and Temple Worship in a Vaishnava Sect* (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Company, 1993).

explains, inverted this arrangement by making self-surrender the prerequisite to the other eight modes of devotion. In the Puṣṭimārg, the young aspirant commits himself to Krishna by reciting the mantra “Sri Krishan is my refuge” (śrī kṛṣṇaḥ śaraṇam mama), and it is only after surrendering himself that he begins to practice the navadhā bhakti.<sup>68</sup> By placing self-surrender first, Vallabha minimized the agency of the devotee. Unlike religious disciplines in which aspirants accrue spiritual power through their own assiduous efforts, in the Puṣṭimārg, action follows from and is the sign of God’s grace (anugraha or puṣṭi).<sup>69</sup>

In an additional departure from the norms of renunciation, Vallabha married and encouraged his followers to do the same. Although the place of women and family life in writings of the sect remained fraught, Vallabha’s decision to discourage full renunciation seems to have stemmed from a belief in the virtues of human interdependence. As he put it, “[i]t is not necessary to take the vow of sannyāsa (world-renunciation) in order to practice the nine-fold bhakti, for in the practice of that bhakti the help of other bhaktas is essential; both the pride common to the state of sannyāsa and the duties of the state of sannyāsa are contrary to the bhaktimārga.”<sup>70</sup> To be sure, the ultimate thrust of bhakti is to turn the devotee away from his family and toward

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<sup>68</sup> Barz, 81-85. The ātmā-nivedan mantra of the sampradāya is as follows: “Om. The God Krishna is my refuge [Srikrṣṇa saranam mama]. Distracted by the infinite pain and torment caused by the separation from Krishna, which has extended over a space of time measured by thousands of years, I now, to the holy Krishna, do dedicate [*samarpayāmī*] my bodily faculties, my life, my soul, and its belongings, with my wife, my house, my children, my whole substance, and my own self. O Krishna; I am thy servant [*dāsa*].” F. S. Growse, *Mathura: A District Memoir* (Allahabad: N. W. Provinces and Oudh Government Press), 287. Cited in Barz, 85.

<sup>69</sup> The theological resonance with the Protestant “salvation by faith alone” is discussed in Jürgen Lütt, “Max Weber and the Vallabhacharis,” *International Sociology* 2. 3 (September 1987): 277-287.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Barz, 33

Krishna, from the world (laukika) to the otherworldly (alaukika). The more that Krishna comes to serve as the ideal locus of all love, of whichever type, the less love remains for daily life. Vallabha even went so far as to claim that familial relations entangle the soul in “delusions.”<sup>71</sup> To break with Maya is to break with the family and with all worldly relationships. The paradox of bhakti devotion, however, is that it is precisely the intensity of emotion generated by these relationships that is the surest means of world-transcendence. In order to lose the world, you first have to receive it.

Puṣṭimārgī praxis promotes five devotional affects, the “bhaktibhāvas” common to many bhakti sects. In dāsya bhāva, the devotee approaches Krishna as a servant to a master; in sakhya bhāva, as friend to friend; in vātsalya bhāva, as parent to child; in madhura bhāva, as a gopi, one of the female cowherds who cavorted with the amorous youthful Krishna in the fields of Braj; and, finally, in shānta bhāva, in complete tranquility. Vallabha did not favor this latter affect because his bhakti was, in Barz’s words, “based on the strong emotional ties already present in human beings.”<sup>72</sup> For similar reasons, the austere dāsya bhāva with its regal formalities likewise lacks his full endorsement. The most intimate affects are the most likely to launch the devotee into all-consuming love for Krishna. The friendly egalitarianism of the sakhya bhāva, while at the apex of the affective hierarchy, is generally reserved for luminaries like the poet Surdas. More common are parental tenderness (vātsalya bhāva) and romantic love (madhura bhāva).

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Barz, 34

<sup>72</sup> Barz, 92

The tender attachments cultivated by the sect are demonstrated by its daily regimen of service (*sevā*) to the deity. The Puṣṭimārgīs distance themselves from the worshipful formalism they view as common in South Asian religions. For the Puṣṭimārg, the statue of Krishna is not a *mūrti*, or representation of the deity; it is his *svarūp*, or actual living form. The structure housing Krishna's *svarūp* is not a temple (*mandir*), it is his mansion home (*havelī*). The act of devotion is not worship (*pūjā*); it is loving service (*sevā*). Early in the morning, devotees awaken Krishna and leave him a light breakfast. A little later they dress him for the day, making sure to suit his clothes to the season. After this, the devotees present him with a full lunchtime feast, put him down for a nap, rouse him again for a light lunch, offer him an evening meal accompanied by honorific lamp lighting, and then put him to bed with a snack in case he gets hungry.<sup>73</sup> While the devotees might act in part as servants, this ceremony in its overall tenor seems to position Krishna as a child who needs the tender attention of loving parents (i.e. the *vātsalya bhāva*).

If the Puṣṭimārg teaches devotees to find God in the world, this makes good metaphysical sense. Vallabha was a strict non-dualist, and he wrote at length about the ultimate unity of God and world. Vedānta, one of the six orthodox (*āstika*) schools of classical Indian philosophy (*saddarśana*) had long pondered the relationship of the visible world and the divine. Non-dualist (*advaita*) thinkers maintained that there was no difference between the two. All entities in the physical world are part of a single ontological ground, known as Brahman. It is due to ignorance that humans perceive difference where none exists in reality. Devotional praxis is meant to liberate the soul

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<sup>73</sup> Barz, 46-49

by revealing the world to be an illusion. The ninth century philosopher Śaṅkarācārya produced the most influential articulation of the advaita position, and it was Shankara's metaphysical system that Vallabha sought to revise. Briefly, Shankara posited Māyā, a discrete agent of illusion, to account for the emergence of the physical world from self-sufficient Brahman. Although the physical world cannot properly be said to *exist*, that it even seems to do so is an illusion produced by Maya. In Shankara's thought, the ontological status of Maya remains ambiguous. He maintains that Maya is both real and unreal (it is real as long as illusion lasts, but has no existence apart from Brahman); but the nuance of his apophasis has often been lost on later commentators. To many, Shankara seemed to grant Maya a status on par with Brahman: eternal truth and eternal illusion seem to exist independently of one another, producing the cosmos out of their joint energy.

Vallabha and his followers went so far as to dub Shankara a “Māyāvāda,” a believer in Maya—as if illusion was the ultimate driving force in the cosmos. Vallabha tried to purify Shankara's non-dualism by insisting that Maya was simply a power (śakti) possessed by Brahman. Brahman thus creates the world himself using this power, rather than sitting inert while being acted upon by it (it is common to use the male pronoun “he” in discussing Vallabha's Brahman, as Brahman is most typically figured as Krishna). Brahman gives rise to the world out of his own will (icchā) and his joyful sense of play (līlā). Notably, nothing is created or destroyed in the making of the world. Aspects of Brahman are simply concealed (tirobhāva) in order to produce the differences endemic to the cosmos. Vallabha delineates three major aspects of the Supreme Being: truth (sat), awareness (cit), and bliss (ānanda). He then details which of

these are apparent and which concealed in various worldly forms (e.g. in the jagat, or material world, sat is manifest, while cit and ānanda are hidden; in the soul, sat and cit are both manifest, while ānanda remains hidden). The technical details of Vallabha's monism are less important to the present discussion, however, than his mystical apprehension of cosmic oneness. To his mind, the soul is just a fragment of Brahman, a spark from his fire.<sup>74</sup>

Maharaj Jadunathji Brizratanji was in full agreement. The essays in his journal, the *Propagator*, assiduously fuse the material and the spiritual in a rigorously advaitic vein. In this world, Jadunath explains, every form is made from God's own parts (sarve rūp īśvar pote anś karīne thayā che). Indeed, the world is simply God at play with himself (pote ramaṇ kare che).<sup>75</sup> To take this claim seriously means that a mother's love for her child is not simply *like* her love for Krishna; when she loves her child, she is *loving* Krishna. The child is simply a spark from the god's divine fire. Following Leela Gandhi, one might say that it is by confusing the empirical and the metaphysical that bhakti unmoors the subject, securing its affective surrender both to divine and human others. The individual soul is not only predicated on the ontological priority of the divine; it is subsumed by the divine's pantheistic extension into the material world.

The Advaitic confusion of the material and the spiritual was a source of great consternation to the court, which saw only moral catastrophe in the idea that

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<sup>74</sup> For discussions of Vallabha's intervention into Advaita Vedanta, see Marfatia, *The Philosophy of Vallabhacarya*, and Barz, 56-79.

<sup>75</sup> Elsewhere, he refutes the claim that the entire world (jagat) is the child (chokara) of maya, insisting instead that it is one of being with god, or arose from within god's soul (ā jagat bhagvān nā ātmā māhethī ūtpann thayuṃ che). Yadunāth Mahārāj, *Svadharam Vardhak*, vol. 1, 7

adulterous couplings might be described as God “at play with his own spirit” (MLC, 49-50). In his closing remarks, Anstey pronounced the “modern” doctrines of the Puṣṭimārg to be “monstrous” insofar as they supersede “the ancient doctrines of morality.” If the Maharajas are but extensions of God and his *lila*, then they cannot be held individually accountable for their misdeeds. The “god—this atrocious hypocrite, the Maharaj—is simply at amorous dalliance with his own spirit!” (369). Without metaphysical justification for the doctrine of the discrete subject, Anstey implies, anyone can do anything, “however immoral and abominable.” Still worse, advaitic ontology erodes the epistemological certainties of empiricism. According to Anstey, the “doctrine of the ‘maya’ delusion” leads devotees to mistrust their own sensory perceptions, particularly in matters involving the faults of the guru himself. They thus subordinate their critical faculties to the guru’s authority (371, 376). Sensory perception here undergirds liberal autonomy, and Vallabha’s metaphysics undoes both simultaneously. The justice of the court was based on these two very entities (accuracy of evidence and individual culpability), and so, for the trial to proceed, the Advaitic challenge to both had to be dismissed.

During the trial, bhakti’s ethics of self-surrender was seriously challenged. Indeed it seems likely that Vallabha’s call for radical relationality had, by the 1850s, come to undergird devotional practices in dire need of critique. The Maharaj Libel Affair fixated on two devotional affects, the *jār bhāva* (“adulterine love”) and the *dāśya bhāva* (“slavishness”). Each of these threatened the self-contained liberal subject much more vividly than did the other *bhāvas*. The scandal took the two up in tandem. Rotating tableaux of erotic debasement were presented to the court for dispassionate

adjudication. Physical intimacies bled together: the guru's sexual liberties with Puṣṭimārgī girls and his Holi gropings; devotees' desire to drink the dirty water in which he washed his feet and dhoti and to chew his old pān.<sup>76</sup> Religion, sex, and power converged in the Maharaj Libel Case to render the scandal an unusually titillating chapter in the history of "priestcraft." The following two sections will discuss the *jār bhāva* and the *dāsya bhāva* respectively.

### **Gopi Morality: Jār Bhāv**

The Vallabhacārya sampradāya had emphasized the rich relationality of the human subject by cataloguing and sanctifying several kinds of love (master-servant, parent-child, friend-friend, wife-husband, lover-lover). In doing so, it inevitably entangled its devotional prescriptions within the actual gender economies of Puṣṭimārgī homes. During the nineteenth century, domestic space was reconfigured by the colonial usurpation of the "public." In consequence, traditional gender practices came into view as something open to alteration. The "Hindu woman" was more than just one possible object of reform; she was in many ways the quintessential such object, her domestic spaces the crucial meeting ground of religion, nation, and popular culture. The Maharaj Libel Affair's scandalized panic over what might be termed "gopi morality" needs to be understood within this historical context.

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<sup>76</sup> Christopher Pinney interprets the guru's dhoti dirt semiotically as an index of his holy presence; he suggests that the symbolic economy of bhakti devotion be read in parallel to that of the court, with its photographic standards of evidence. See Christopher Pinney, *The Coming of Photography in India* (London: British Library, 2008).

Much has been said about the place of sexuality in the Maharaj Libel Affair. As Jürgen Lütt suggested, the 1860s were a pivotal period for the repression of Vaiṣṇava erotics.<sup>77</sup> Hindu reformists, informed by both Victorian and brahmacārya mores, put public sexuality under increasing pressure during the latter part of the nineteenth century—and, as feminist historians have astutely reminded us, they did so as part of a broader intervention into the gender economies of the Hindu home.<sup>78</sup> Usha Thakkar has shown how the Maharaj Libel Case staged its conflict between tradition and modernity on the silenced bodies of bourgeois women.<sup>79</sup> As Amrita Shodhan has further clarified, the scandal prompted a transfer of patriarchal control from priests to families. With the temple now seen as a site of sexual corruption, husbands and fathers began to keep “their” women at home.<sup>80</sup> The conjuncture of gender and Gujarati reformism dated to the 1850s and, in particular, to the 1857 founding of the journal *Stree Bodh*. Mulji had been heavily involved in this publication, which collected short stories and educational essays on diverse topics for consumption by Gujarati women. For example, in perusing the January 1861 issue, a woman could learn about South American slave markets, the emperors of China and Austria, the greatness of the

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<sup>77</sup> Lütt. “From Krishna-Lila to Ram-Rajya”

<sup>78</sup> See Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds, *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001). Bourgeois Muslim men launched a parallel effort. See, for instance, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf ‘Alī Thanawi’s Bihishti Zewar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>79</sup> Usha Thakkar, “Puppets on the Periphery: Women and Social Reform in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Gujarati Society,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 32.1-2 (January 4-11, 1997): 46-58.

<sup>80</sup> Amrita Shodhan, “Women in the Maharaja Libel Case: A Re-examination,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 4:2 (1997): 123-139.

ancient Greeks, women in Italy and Africa, William Penn, or the kangaroo. She could also delve into topics of more practical relevance to her daily life, such as how to make friends or how to be critical of superstitious tales (vahem) about ghosts and witches.<sup>81</sup> The presumption that drove journals like *Stree Bodh* was that, in order for India to be reformed, its women had to lead the way.

Male sexuality too came under a renewed scrutiny. Traditionally, male devotees had cultivated their desire for Krishna by imaging themselves as gopis, the female cowherds who sported amorously with the young god. As Anstey summarized in his opening plea, members of the sect cultivated humbleness before the guru by believing that “he the said member is not a man, but a woman servant of such leader.” In God, “the two species of man and woman do not exist” (*MLC*, 47-50). The love between Krishna and the gopis was paradigmatic of the madhura bhāva, or honeyed romantic love, central to Vaisnava bhakti movements. There were generally held to be three different kinds of gopi. First are the gopis who were the objects of Krishna’s childhood pranks; their feeling for the Lord aligns more closely with vātsalya than madhura bhāva. Second are the unmarried gopis who hope to wed Sri Krishna; with Rādhā as their ringleader, their licit love remains within the fold of familial propriety. Third are the married gopis, whose desire flouts social mores, moral codes, and even religious laws. Their all-consuming love exemplifies devotion impatient to transgress worldly

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<sup>81</sup> *Stree Bodh*, January 1861. Many of the essays from *Stree Bodh* were later collected in the volume Karsandās Mūljī, *Sansārsukh: Domestic Happiness* (Mumbai: Rising Star Printing Press, 1887 [1860]), i. For additional contextualization—and celebration—of the *Stree Bodh*, see the essays in Sir George Birwood, ed, *The Stree Bodh and Social Progress in India: A Jubilee Memorial* (Bombay: The Stree Bodh Office, 1908).

limitations.<sup>82</sup> This was the “adulterine love,” or *jār bhāva*, that proved so scandalous in the nineteenth century.

By 1860, “adulterous love” had come to seem a dubious virtue. Even in the first issue of the *Propagator*, a defensive Jadunathji intently evacuates bhakti of its erotic content. Many people, he writes, have misunderstood the sakhya bhāva by taking “friendship” (*mitratā*) to be something sinful (*duṣan*) and indiscriminating (*avivek*). It is, he assures us, simply the practice of loving the Lord’s form just like you love a friend and feeling anxious longing like you would for a friend would when you do his darshan.<sup>83</sup> The second issue retranslates the key terms: sakhya means “friendship” (*mitratā*), and bhakti “love” (*sneh*). While worshipping Krishna, the devotee is to experience an anxious desire (*ātūrtā*) for the Dark Lord; alternately, he or she might experience *vātsaltā*, the doting love that a parent feels for a child. Jadunathji wants to guard against the imputation that Puṣṭimārgīs worship God (*bhagvān*) with the *jār-bhāva*, the “adulterine emotion.” He angrily dismisses as fools those who would make such an allegation; they have dirtied bhakti and are thus immoral (*anītinī*) and irreligious (*adharmnī*). To love God adulterously is, he assures his reader, a sin. Jadunathji tidies up the gopis’ love for Krishna by insisting that they were avatars of Parvati come for Mahadev, Sitaji for Sri Ram. Gopi love is marital love: where is the sin in this?<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Barz, 89-90

<sup>83</sup> “prabhunā svarūpmā mitrnī peṭhe sneh vāchṭā rākhvī ane mitrnī peṭhe tenā darśan karvāmām āturtā rākhvī.” Yadunāth Mahārāj, *Svadharm Vardhak*, vol. 1, 18.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 21-24

Mulji's allegations against the Maharaj brought this gopi morality before the public eye, and added an extra twist to it. According to Mulji, devotees' ethereal love for Krishna had been debased by heterodox sexual practices. Mulji railed against a Sanskrit verse that said it was the duty (kartavya) of devotees to give all their belongings (sarvavastu) to the guru before enjoying them themselves (svopabhogātpūrvameva). As his Gujarati translation scandalously emphasized, "belongings" was to include women; wives were to be offered (sopvu) to the Maharaj before being "enjoyed" by their husbands (bhogveā pehelā). This teaching, Mulji wrote, was pure and simple fraud (ṭhagāī).<sup>85</sup> The allegation that Puṣṭimārgī women had performed their "worship, implicit obedience and service" via "carnal intercourse" was the central allegation during the libel trial, and it was cinched by Dr. Bhau Daji's account of the Maharaj's struggle with syphilis (*MLC*, 45). It seems that, within the Puṣṭimārg, self-surrender (ātmā-nivedan) had come to be enacted symbolically using gifts as indexical substitutes for the devotee. Prayer, desire, and anxious longing for the Lord came to be triangulated through these objects of exchange—and most notably, or so the allegations went, through the exchange of women. Puṣṭimārgī men averted cross-sex identification and same-sex desire by forcing (or perhaps allowing) Puṣṭimārgī women to enact the love-game with Krishna for them.

Or such, at least, was Mulji's allegation. Regardless, it is clear that by the 1850s, all parties had come to distance themselves publicly from the more challenging ethical precepts of the Vallabhacārya sampradāya. If the erotic represented the limit to the self-possessed subject, the erotic was what would have to be excised for religion to

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<sup>85</sup> Mulji, "Hīnduonā asal dharm"

endear itself to reason. My argument in the two previous sections has, in many ways, echoed Behramji M. Malabari 1889 description of the “Maharajism.” With a breezy tone, Malabari condemns “that disturber of social virtue, the Vallabhacāryan Maharaj” and praises Mulji, the “truly enlightened Bania reformer.”<sup>86</sup> Although he cannot fathom the “incomprehensible psychological phenomenon” of Puṣṭimārgī devotion,<sup>87</sup> he remains sympathetic to what he sees as the original ideals of bhakti. As he puts it,

What is the meaning of Maharaj worship? The idea originally meant to portray the soul’s yearning for its Creator, more intense than the mother’s love for her child, more passionate than the attachment subsisting between man and wife, between the two that are but one.<sup>88</sup>

Malabari admires this “beautiful idea,” while criticizing contemporary practice. In the previous discussion, I hope to have demonstrated that this ideal was not lost to the Vallabhacārya sampradāya of the 1850s and 60s; it continued to inform how the sect presented itself. Reading bhakti texts alongside the court record allows those texts to emerge as a criticism of the liberal selves enjoined by the legal system.

### **Examining Belief: Dāsya Bhāv**

At the heart of the Maharaj Libel Case was a single troubling proposition: “Guru is God.” The proposition, framed by the court, reduced the rich relational web of bhakti

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<sup>86</sup> Behramji M. Malabari, *Gujarat and the Gujaratis* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1983 [1889]), 226-227.

<sup>87</sup> “It is unspeakably sad to find men and women, whose lives in other respects are regulated by the best domestic and social virtues, men of keen wits and women of pure habits, becoming so utterly infatuated by a vile tradition—a tissue of fantastic fables and transparent myths.... What power of faith is theirs! But how perverted!” (ibid., 129).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 129

devotion to a single theological claim, a statement of abstract fact to which one either did or did not assent. In this, the claim was fully amenable to the managerial imperatives of the colonial state and its bureaucratic Hinduism. As would become clear during the course of the trial, however, this particular proposition tended to exceed the use to which the court put it. It dictates the relationship between two entities (“Guru” and “God”), establishing the sacred equivalence of Krishna and his incarnation, the Maharaj; but it also inevitably refers to a third entity, the believing subject. When the court asked witnesses whether they believed Guru to be God, what it wanted to know was how they believed in the guru. With what sense of hierarchy? With what intensity of affect? “Guru is God” is a troubling proposition for anticlerical modernity because it returns theology to the arena of sociality—its antiseptic abstraction cannot be divorced from the affective attachments of human relationships, nor is its claim to faith separable from the “fiduciary,” the loving trust in the other that is the ether of the social bond.

The claim “Guru is God” was highly overdetermined during the trial. Thus, not surprisingly, in a courtroom where the ramifications of assenting to this proposition were under extreme scrutiny and anything but predictable, witnesses found themselves in a very uncomfortable position. Take, for instance, the testimony of Jumnadas Sevaklal. At first, he hesitated. But after being threatened with a fine of one hundred rupees, he finally capitulated to Anstey’s aggressive interrogation. As he explained, carefully detailing the meanings of his terms: “By God I mean Krishna.... In my opinion, the Maharaj is a representative of Krishna.” This clarification, however, did not suffice:

Mr. Anstey—Do some Baniyas believe the Maharaj to be a God?

Witness— We consider him to be our gooroo.

Sir. M. Sausse—Tell witness if he does not answer the question, he will be sent to jail.

Witness—What is the precise question? (Interpreter explains) Some consider the Maharaj a god in the shape of gooroo.

Mr. Anstey—Is Gooroo a God?

Witness—Gooroo is gooroo.

Sir M. Sausse—Tell him if he does not answer the question, most indubitably he will go to jail.

Sir Joseph Arnould—Tell him he is asked what others believe, not as to his own belief.

Witness—I don't know if others believe him as God; I consider him simply a gooroo.

The examination continues, and Sevaklal is eventually fined fifty rupees for his unsatisfactory answers (*MLC*, 134-36).

Several intersecting imperatives converge on this testimony, signaling Sevaklal's reticence as an emblematic moment in the trial. Sevaklal is invited to speak as a specimen of his caste; that is, he speaks doubly for himself and for a collectivity, his own "private" beliefs evidence of the religious customs of the Baniyas more generally. Indeed, the court defers to Sevaklal's reticence in confessing his "own" faith (the Bombay High Court is not, after all the Inquisition); rather, it wants simply to

determine the “public” question of what patterns of belief prevail within the Puṣṭimārg. Belief becomes an ethnological property.

Thus, in the conditions of its utterance, “belief” belies the modern mythos of religious interiority and autonomy: belief is solicited by power in order to situate individuals within collectivities. Sevaklal’s testimony may be an extreme instance; but, as several theorists have suggested, a similar dynamic structures most (and likely all) attestations of belief. Ludwig Wittgenstein has explained that a claim to belief establishes a relation between a person and a proposition. Despite referencing an internal state, the claim is always already oriented outward toward the language game that lends it meaning and defines its stakes.<sup>89</sup> These games are often, and certainly in matters of religion, deeply implicated in political structures. As Simon During put it in his study of modern magic, “to declare one’s belief or disbelief in magic is to position oneself in relation to the discursive web of rationality, civility, and enlightenment, and in a context where it is difficult to be a fully rational citizen and to declare a serious belief in magic.”<sup>90</sup> Belief situates the believer. Sevaklal could assent to the proposition “Guru is God” and exclude himself from the Anglo-Indian public, or he could dissent from it and exclude himself from the Bania caste polity. Gauri Viswanathan argues that colonial conjunctures like this one reveal the “insufficiencies” endemic to modern notions of religious belief more broadly: “even as liberal discourse upholds a notion of individual subjectivity as the emergence of the free, private self under bourgeois

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<sup>89</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).

<sup>90</sup> Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 48-49.

capitalism, the colonial context denies that such a notion can be accommodated by the logic of institutionalized social practices.”<sup>91</sup> Here, foremost among these practices was that of cross-examination itself. Anstey repeatedly suggested that, because the plaintiff’s witnesses had been unduly “influenced” by Jadunathji’s charismatic authority, their “wholly partial and interested evidence” was invalid and should be dismissed (*MLC*, 375).<sup>92</sup> Despite itself, the cross-examination implies that belief is always, in a sense, “coerced”—that is, solicited by structures external to the believing subject

In other words, even propositional belief needs to be understood as, at bottom, relational in nature. I would tentatively suggest that Sevaklall knew this implicitly. His tautological insistence that “Guru is Guru” was, at second glance, one of the more astute comments made during the trial. Precisely as a guru, the Maharaj could invite the sort hierarchical devotion that the court and Mulji found so alarming. When Mulji professed that he “never believed” in Jadunath’s divinity, even though he was and is “one of those who believe in the Maharaj as a *guru*,” he rather missed the point (*MLC*, 190). Propositional belief does not determine the form of relational belief. The affective intensity of the latter is relatively independent of theological claims.

As I suggested above, Vallabhacārya’s regimen of bhakti devotion sanctified the dense web of human relations—indeed it elevated the ethical act of self-surrender to the beloved as the quintessential devotional act. The court, on the other hand, split

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<sup>91</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 88, 97.

<sup>92</sup> On “influence,” cf. David Gilmartin, “Election Law and the ‘People’ in Colonial and Postcolonial India,” in *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition*, ed. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Majumdar, and Andrew Sartori (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 55-84.

bhakti relationality in two. Half of it was returned to devotees as propositional “belief,” the sort of faith that one “has,” rather than the sort of faith that possesses the believer (Derrida’s fiduciary). The other half was, via libel law, returned to the Maharaj as his “reputation.”

### **Spiritual Defamation: Reputation as Privatized Charisma**

As Sean Latham has put it, “the civil law of torts provides a legal forum where truth can be separated from fiction and where those who use mass media’s power to disseminate lies can be called publicly to account.”<sup>93</sup> The law of torts also, I would suggest, does more than this. Specifically, as I will argue in this final section of the chapter, during the Maharaj Libel Case the question of charisma was rendered as a question of “reputation.” Where charisma implies the affective intensities of bhakti devotion outlined above, “reputation” is much cooler legal category. Bhakti *askesis* facilitated the undoing of the self-identical subject through acts of loving surrender to the divine other (i.e. *atmanivedan*); the legal concept “reputation,” on the other hand, returned sociality to the subject as a form of personal property that reinforces self-identity. Because a “spiritual person” by definition could not be libeled (the “spiritual” is constitutively public), Jadunathji had to file suit as a private citizen. But in doing so, he shifted the terms of the debate about the ethical possibilities opened by Krishna devotion. In the following discussion, I will sketch a short history of libel law before returning to the concept “reputation.”

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<sup>93</sup> Sean Latham, *The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel Law, and the Roman à Clef* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 78.

The Indian Penal Code of 1860 would have governed the Bombay High Court's inquiry into the alleged libel charges. Although the roots of Anglo-Indian libel law could be traced back to the ancient Mediterranean world, and even to the dawn of writing itself, its most important principles were of more recent derivation.<sup>94</sup> The tort of defamation was substantially refined by both the Reform Act of 1832 and the Libel Act of 1843. These pieces of legislation created new protections for those who criticized "public" persons and also articulated the principle of "justification" that was enshrined in the Indian Penal Code. For a libel to be justified, it had to be proved by the defendant that its allegations were true and that their publication was in the public interest.<sup>95</sup> Both were upheld in the case of Mulji's libel.

Libel law was, not surprisingly, held to be of particular pertinence to newspapers. The press was bound by two discourses: the law of defamation and the "duty" to publish (a moral code identified in Chapter 2 as part of the Whig-McLuhanite narrative of print media).<sup>96</sup> Papers that followed the latter imperative without proper attention to the former were likely to end up in court. Legal regulations about what

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<sup>94</sup> Francis Ludlow Holt, *The Law of Libel, in which is Contained a General History of this Law in the Ancient Codes and of its Introduction and Successive Alterations in the Law of England, Comprehending a Digest of All the Leading Cases upon Libels, from the Earliest to the Present Time* (New York: Stephen Gould, 1818 [London, 1812]). See also William Blake Odgers, *A Digest of the Law of Libel and Slander* (London: Stevens and Sons, 1881); Peter Frederick Carter-Ruck, *Libel and Slander* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1973); Sean Latham, *The Art of Scandal*, 69-88.

<sup>95</sup> Latham, 75-77; Indian Penal Code Section 299 lists three exceptions to the illegality of defamation: (1) "imputation of truth which public good requires to be made or published," (2) "public conduct of public servants," and (3) "conduct of any person touching any public question."

<sup>96</sup> As one legal primer puts it, "[e]ven if in a sense newspapers owe a duty to their readers to publish any and every item of news that may interest them, this is not such a duty as makes every communication in the paper relating to a matter of public interest a privileged one." Ratanlal Ranchhoddas and Dhirajlal Keshavlal Thakore, *The English and Indian Law of Torts*, 19<sup>th</sup> ed. (Bombay: Bombay Law Reporter Private Ltd, 1965 [1897]), 174.

constituted “publication” are of some interest.<sup>97</sup> It was generally held that, in the case of newspapers, the moment of sale constituted the act of publication (“tale-bearers are as bad as tale-makers”). Distributors were seldom held liable for the contents of the newspapers that they sold, but everyone involved in the production process was vulnerable to a libel suit, including the proprietor, editor, printer, and publisher.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, the definition of publication was open-ended enough to include less formal communications like letters.<sup>99</sup> As one legal guide puts it, “[c]ommunicating defamatory matter to some person other than the person of whom it is written is publication in the legal sense... you cannot publish a libel of a man to himself.”<sup>100</sup>

This is because “libel” pertains to how a person is perceived by others—that is, speech is defamatory insofar as it affects “reputation.” In the words of the 1860 Indian Penal Code, in the estimation of others, [it] lowers the moral or intellectual character of that person, or lowers the character of that person in respect of his caste or of his calling, or lowers the credit of that person, or causes it to be believed that the body of that person is in a loathsome state, or in a state generally considered as disgraceful.”<sup>101</sup>

In other words, “reputation” distills the complex web of an individual’s social and

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<sup>97</sup> Cf. Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>98</sup> Ranchhoddas and Thakore, *English and Indian Law of Torts*, 181.

<sup>99</sup> Ranchhoddas and Thakore specify several modes of libel distinctive to the Indian context. For instance, if one sends a letter in the Urdu script to a person not conversant with that script, who then has a third party read the letter to him, this act of publication cannot qualify as libel if the sender of the letter did not know that the recipient did not read Urdu. In addition, it amounts to defamation to publicly exhibit an effigy of a person and then beat it with shoes; to write a letter to man that accuses his wife of witchcraft; or to claim that a man’s wife is of low caste (*English and Indian Law of Torts*, 170-73).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>101</sup> Indian Penal Code (1860), chapter XXI.

professional relationships into a discrete object. It reifies a community's fluid perceptions so that the person can hold them as a form of property. In a sense, "reputation" inverts the process whereby a subject is hailed by her social order and offered a fixed position within it: one "has" a reputation, rather than being had by it.

In the estimation of one legal guide, reputation is "if possible, more valuable than other property. No mere poetic fancy suggested the truth that a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches." This special form of property requires a special form of regulation. "Every man has an absolute right to have his reputation preserved inviolate."<sup>102</sup> If anyone deprives a person of a reputation to which he or she has a right, the wronged party can sue for defamation. But there is a crucial caveat to this rule. The "law will not permit a man to recover damages in respect of an injury to a character that he does not, or ought not, to possess."<sup>103</sup> In other words, it is possible for a person to claim a reputation wrongly. This is a public crime, but not necessarily one open to police intervention. It becomes the duty of public actors like journalists to regulate the representational property of "reputation." The law promises implicitly to reinforce their regulatory authority, if they have acted properly.

When Jadunathji sued Mulji for libel, he had to claim damages to his reputation. As I suggested above, this claim implied a concept of the religious person very different from that implied by the claim that "guru is god"—that is, an incarnation of Krishna. In Puṣṭimārgī tradition, the guru's sanctity was inscribed in his body, an effect of his blood descent from Vallabha; Jadunathji Brizratani was a guru through and through. In the

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 164-65.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 182.

eyes of the law, on the other hand, “guru” was a public office held by the man Jadunath Brizratan; by definition, he was distinct from his office. In court, the “private” person carried rights denied to “spiritual” person. The notion that Jadunathji had a split self was ubiquitous in the trial, as in Bayley’s claim that Mulji had libeled the plaintiff “in his double capacity as man and as Maharaj” (*MLC*, 167).

The precise nature of the “spiritual” person proved a point of contention during the trial. There was some sense that, in his spiritual capacity as Maharaj, Jadunathji was a “public” person and therefore not protected by the tort of defamation. Anstey, the defense attorney, also argued that there was no “law of defamation of a spiritual man” in British India because there was no precedent for a spiritual man suing for libel. There had been no such suit in Bombay, and in England such a suit would fall into the purview of the ecclesiastical court.<sup>104</sup> The novelty of a “priest” even appearing in court was evident throughout the trial, as in the imbroglios leading up to it: Jadunathji had broken with custom when, rather than defiantly avoiding subpoenas, he actually volunteered himself for a court appearance. Bayley, the prosecuting attorney, countered by insisting that if a “spiritual” man cannot sue to protect his reputation, then “no Brahmin in the land would be safe; he could be slandered and libeled with impunity, and redress denied to him because he happened to be a spiritual person” (*MLC*, 31-32). Even so, the prosecution seemed to think it safer to argue that the Jadunathji had been defamed in his “private character,” not his “spiritual capacity”

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<sup>104</sup> Anstey claimed that, if the case were tried in England where the courts do entertain “spiritual suits,” the Court of Common Law would “decline to entertain” it, but would rather refer it to the “Ecclesiastical or Courts Christian.” The Court of Common Law can never assume a concurrent jurisdiction with the Ecclesiastical Court, and will refer to the latter all defamation cases pertaining to it (*MLC*, 14-15).

(170). In other words, even gods were privatized by the British court. Religion was, as I have been suggesting, fundamentally refigured by the trial.

### After the Trial

After the trial, Jadunathji Brizratanji and several other Maharajas quickly left Bombay, lest they be indicted for perjury.<sup>105</sup> A new crop of primers on libel law, like Jehangeer Merwanjee's "exceedingly comprehensive" Gujarati guide, entered the book market.<sup>106</sup> Meanwhile, Mulji was feted for several months by his fellow reformists.<sup>107</sup> Eventually, however, he too moved on to new challenges—most notably, a trip to England that got him banned from the Bania caste.

Many had predicted that the trial would extinguish belief in the Maharaj.<sup>108</sup> But the actual impact of scandalous publicity seems to have been much more ambivalent. During the trial, Anstey claimed that while the public's "love" for Jadunathji had diminished, their "respect" had not (*MLC*, 152). Others pointed out that much of the community had mistrusted the Maharajas for decades; the trial only told people what

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<sup>105</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, May 3, 1862

<sup>106</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, May 1, 1862

<sup>107</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, July 16, 1862

<sup>108</sup> The much-quoted Judge Arnould: "It may be allowable to express a hope that what they [Mulji et al] have done will not have been in vain—that the seed they have sown will bear its fruit—that their courage and consistency will be rewarded by a steady increase in the number of those, whom their words and their examples have quickened into thought and animated to resistance, whose homes they have helped to cleanse from loathsome lewdness and whose souls they have set free from a debasing bondage" (*MLC*, 480).

they already knew. As for the believers, the *Poona Observer* noted that the scandal had “only increased the ardour” of their devotion.<sup>109</sup>

I would suggest that the real effects of the Maharaj Libel Affair were in a domain other than that of “belief.” Because of the case’s scandalous notoriety, “fraud” and “priestcraft” rose to renewed prominence as the choicest invectives for traducing religion. For example, in the early 1860s a separate scandal was brewing within another of Bombay’s Gujarati communities: the Khojas. This Muslim community was split over the figure of the Agha Khan, who had come to western India from Persia in the 1840s. Many Khojas accepted the Agha Khan as their spiritual and temporal leader, and they allowed him to bring their hybrid religious practice in line with Ismaeli norms. A significant minority, however, resented the Agha Khan’s influence, and they proclaimed themselves orthodox Sunnis in order to thwart his authority claims. Property disputes and rumors about a sensational murder brought the Khojas before the print public and before the court.<sup>110</sup> Particularly in the former, the imposture theory was used to narrate the contest among critics, disciples, and charismatic authority. The Anglophone press compared and even conflated the Khoja and Puṣṭimārgī controversies, as when the *Poona Observer* referenced the evil “rites of the Khojah Maharajahs.”<sup>111</sup> An 1864 pamphlet, written by a Khoja in London, followed in a

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<sup>109</sup> *Poona Observer*, March 11, 1862

<sup>110</sup> See James C. Masselos, “The Khojas of Bombay: The Defining of Formal Membership Criteria During the Nineteenth Century,” in *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims*, ed. Imtiaz Ahmad (Delhi: Manohar, 1973), 1-20; Amrita Shodhan, *A Question of Community*, *ibid*; Teena Purohit, “Formations and Genealogies of Ismaili Sectarianism in Nineteenth Century India” (Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 2007).

<sup>111</sup> The *Observer* decries the new policy at the *Friend of India* of demanding the compulsory prepayment of postage. “The paper duty is nothing to this compulsory prepayment; the Income Tax, injurious as it is, is

this vein by comparing the Agha Khan to the Pope: he practices “imposture upon the credulity of the uneducated class,” who “in their superstitious infatuation” believe him “to be a personification of God.”<sup>112</sup>

In the next chapter, I will discuss how the polemics of “priestcraft” shaped the work of famed Hindu reformer Swāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī. As I will suggest, his translation of “priestcraft” as “pope-lila” plays a central role in his 1875 opus, the *Satyārth Prakāsh*. The links between Karsandas and Dayanand are legion. Both men were Gujaratis. Both chose to write in Hindi; Dayanand may have been influenced by Karsandas’ advocacy of the “national” language in his late tract *Ved Dharm*. Both championed the Vedas and tried to peel away the heterodox accretions of priestly Hinduism. Both worked with the same cadre of reformists in Bombay; Mulji’s inner circle would go on to help found Dayanand’s Arya Samaj thirteen years later.<sup>113</sup> As several scholars have noted, the Maharaj Libel Case was likely a major influence on Dayanand; when the scandal broke, he was studying in Mathura, the epicenter of Krishna consciousness. In his later work, Dayanand would reserve his harshest invectives for the Maharajas of the Puṣṭimārg, often recycling the major allegations from the trial (the surrender of *tan man dhan*; the contraction of sexually transmitted

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not half so wicked; the rites of the Khojah Maharajahs are not half so evil in their results as the prepaying of postage. It is really *bad*.” *Poona Observer*, December 10, 1861

<sup>112</sup> “A Voice from India, Being an Appeal to the British Legislature by Khojahs of Bombay, against the Usurped and Oppressive Domination of Hussain Hussanee, Commonly Called and Known as ‘Aga Khan’ (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1864), 5. The pamphlet is anonymous; the author simply bills himself as a “Native of Bombay, Now Resident in London.”

<sup>113</sup> Dobbin, 254-256.

infections; the guru's reliance on nets of delusion [mithyā-jāl]).<sup>114</sup> Most strikingly, the title of Dayanand's book, the *Satyārth Prakāsh*, echoes that of Karsandas' newspaper, the *Satya Prakāsh*.

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<sup>114</sup> SP, 303-305

#### 4: PURĀṆIC POPERY

The spiritual life of Swāmī Dayānanda Saraswatī (1824-1883) began the night he lost his faith. One fateful boyhood evening, he followed his father to the temple to keep the vigil of Śivarātrī. Late that night, while his father and the other devotees snoozed, he watched a mouse scramble over the stone image of Shiva and munch on the god's *prasādam*. As the rodent clambered across the unprotesting deity, the boy (not yet Dayanand) had a revelation: the dumb matter of the mūrti could not be divine. Something changed in his heart that night, and although when he left the temple he returned home to his mother, it would not be long before he abandoned his family entirely. The mouse had made him a man, and as man (born again under a renunciant's name) he resolved to take on the mouse's mantle: he would travel India, exploding ritual illusions to bring his countrymen to the truth of transcendent religion.<sup>1</sup>

Dayanand's was an intolerant, fundamentalist orthodoxy, and during his period of greatest activity (c.1872-1883), he lashed his opponents—Hindu and Jain, Christian and Muslim—with acerbic, unbending polemics, in print and in person.<sup>2</sup> He published his major written work, the *Satyārth Prakāś* (*Light of Truth*), in 1875. Now reckoned the “bible” of the Ārya Samāj (the religious association founded by Dayanand), the book proffers a disenchanting Hinduism with a decidedly empirical ethos, firmly divorcing the transcendent divine from the material world.

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<sup>1</sup> Dayanand included this story in the 1879 autobiography that he composed for *The Theosophist*. The valuation placed upon it here follows the way in which the adult Dayanand himself positioned this event as the major transformative moment of his childhood. “Autobiography of Dayanand Saraswati, Swami” *The Theosophist* 1.1 (October 1879): 9-13.

<sup>2</sup> For an argument as to why Dayanand should be considered a fundamentalist, see J. E. Llewellyn, *The Arya Samaj as a Fundamentalist Movement* (New Delhi: Mahohar, 1993).

In this chapter, I argue that Dayanand centered the *Satyārth Prakāsh* on a translation of the term “priestcraft.” I pay particular attention to the eleventh chapter of Dayanand’s polemic text, which I take to be the most important chapter for delineating the devotional stakes of his proposed reform. Totalling over one hundred pages, it is by far the longest chapter in the *Satyārth Prakāsh*. Its exhaustive discussion of religious error not only preempts much of the polemic to follow (the remaining three chapters vituperate against Jains, Christians, and Muslims respectively); it also resituates the neo-Vedic beliefs and disciplines laid in the first ten chapters. Where other scholars have looked to the *Satyārth Prakāsh* for its contributions to communalist invective or the formation of a neo-orthodox scriptural canon, I will consider how Dayanand’s eminently polemic text uses this historical narrative to articulate an alternative anticlerical modernity that takes a reconstituted Hinduism as its native domain.

My reading of the *Satyārth Prakāsh* unfolds from one particularly curious passage. Dayanand, whose rhetorical skills were honed in the arena of public debate, peppers his first book with fictive dialogues. One such dialogue features the following singular interchange:

Dayanand: “But you are not a brahman.”

Interlocutor: “So who am I?”

Dayanand: “You are a Pope (*tum pop ho*).”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mahārṣi Dayānand Saraswatī, *Satyārth Prakāś* (Dillī: Ārya Parivār Yojnā, 2007). (Henceforth cited in text as *SP*).

Here Dayanand dismisses his Hindu nemeses with a curiously hybrid accusation: *tum pop ho*. He proceeds to elaborate this insult by introducing another critical and critically hybrid term: “pope-līlā.”

“Pope-lila” serves, in its way, as a translation of the term “priestcraft” discussed in the previous chapters of this dissertation. With this translation, Dayanand quite cannily invokes a rich register of polemic English, honed by centuries of slander against alleged charlatans and deployed throughout the nineteenth century to chart divine fakeries worldwide—and especially in India. But “pope-lila” is, of course, only as a partial translation of “priestcraft” and “popery.” “Pope” is transposed from English into Hindi and paired with “lila,” a term with a sense very different from that of “craft” and “craftiness.” “Pope-lila” functions then not so much as a translation of “priestcraft,” but rather as a “creative adaptation” of a term redolent with the mythologies of modernity.<sup>4</sup>

The central argument of this chapter is that “pope-lila” proves a uniquely productive term for Dayanand because it allows him to marshal two critical traditions (one British, one Indian) without rendering him beholden to either.<sup>5</sup> The interstitial space that he opens allows Dayanand critical purchase on each of these only by granting him access to the critical vocabularies honed by the other. Although Dayanand’s ultimate goal is to establish the Vedas as the transcendent platform for the

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<sup>4</sup> I borrow the phrase “creative adaptation” from Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “On Alternative Modernities,” in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 1-23.

<sup>5</sup> I would clarify that I do not think that either set of discourses is pre-given as a coherent “tradition” of critical thought; rather, they are marshaled as traditions, and as distinct ones at that, precisely by interventions such as Dayānand’s.

critical appraisal of all religions, Indian and otherwise, my analysis in this chapter will, repeatedly, seek to arrest Dayanand en route to the universal and transcendent, to catch him in the provisional moment of critique, which is where I think he is at his most interesting. Hence the chapter's focus, its opening note, is not the pristine purity of the Vedas, but rather the earthy ambivalence of "pope-lila."

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I outline the broad contours of Dayanand's career and the Vedic modernity that he articulated, offering a short survey of existing scholarship in the process. Second ("Imposture Theory I"), I introduce the concept of "pope-lila." I note how Dayanand uses the concept to offer an account of the religious history of Europe and how he then asserts an easy equivalence between European and Indian popes. Briefly contrasting Dayanand's *Satyarth Prakash* with William Howitt's *A History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations* (1833), I note how Dayanand anchors his notion of "pope-lila" in an event (the epic battle from the *Mahābhārata*) and a theological concept (the *avatār*) drawn from Hindu tradition. Finally, I further note how "pope-lila" allows Dayanand to speculate about the technological accomplishments of the ancient Aryans and also to cast his "heterodox" opponents into semantic exile by transforming them into foreign "popes."

The third section ("Truth and the Nation") outlines the history of India that Dayanand includes in Chapter 11 of the *Satyārth Prakāsh*. I draw on Gyan Prakash's analysis of the irruptive archaic temporality of the Vedic nation to argue that, for Dayanand, pure truth is fundamentally pre-historical, and the Hindu nation proper is founded on a lie. The perennial eruptions of truth propel this history dialectically, as scheming popes revise their lies to subsume and pervert truthful criticisms. The lie

thus comes to serve a supremely productive function, as it is what drives history. Next (“Subaltern Skeptics”), I ask how Dayanand uses the narrative form of the dialogue to co-opt different critical positions into his Vedic program. I examine at length a tale about a Jāṭ who comes to see through the ruses of the popes, and then I argue that Dayanand never quite manages to consolidate such tales into the dominant authorial voice of the *Satyārth Prakāsh*. At the same time that Dayanand’s book “reduced” oral tales to writing, the circulating print artifact remained embedded within networks of oral exchange. To substantiate this claim, I trace the circulation of a story about “nose-cutters.”

Fifth (“Imposture Theory II”), I ask how the strategy of critical cooptation determined Dayanand’s use of the concept “pope-lila” itself. I suggest that a major piece of Dayanand’s program in the eleventh chapter of the *Satyārth Prakāsh* was to reclaim the great philosopher Śaṅkarācārya (henceforth Shankara) away from the philosophical school that he founded. Advaita Vedānta’s strict monism had undermined the empirical certitudes of this world, and Dayanand was determined to limit the illusions plied by thinkers in that tradition. He used the term “pope-lila” tententiously to argue that illusion is always human (the product of popes) and never divine (the product of cosmic māyā). Dayanand reclaims Shankara from non-dualism by collapsing his metaphysics into his rhetoric: all his ontological musings were just a tactical tool in his polemical contest with the Jains. Finally (“The Criticism of Religions”), I interpret the parliament of religions with which Dayanand concludes his history of Hinduism. Dayanand distances himself from the arena of interreligious debate (*matmatāntar vivād*), using the Vedas to claim transcendent authority. I read his

fable against the grain, arguing that it highlights the productive capacity of the lie. If anything transcends the immanent plane of interreligious debate, it is truth as absence, that which prods the proliferation of religious speech.<sup>6</sup>

### Vedic Modernity: A Brief Introduction

The boy who would be Dayanand was born in 1824 to a brahman family in Gujarat's Kathiawar peninsula.<sup>7</sup> His father insisted that, from a young age, his son adhere to a strict devotional regimen; and at least until his encounter with the mouse, Dayanand did not question his unusually scrupulous religious observance.<sup>8</sup> After that night, however, he grew increasingly distant from his family. A few years later, having refused his parents' efforts to marry him off, he ran away from home to pursue the life

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<sup>6</sup> Although I have in my possession a heap of papers pertaining to the scandalous fourteenth chapter of the *Satyārth Prakāsh*, which takes the Prophet and the Qur'an to task, I have decided to defer analysis of that material. This chapter is preliminary to that project. Here, I work through the imaginary of imposture developed by Dayānand in the main body of the *Satyārth Prakāsh*. Whether the fourteenth chapter was or was not, as sometimes alleged, a later interpolation into Dayānand's magnum opus, its general method is certainly not in keeping with the first twelve chapters of the text, and so it would serve as a strange point of entry onto Dayānand's reformist project. Having worked through the problematic of fraud in the pivotal eleventh chapter, I plan to return to Dayānand's critique of the Qur'an—and the controversy it occasioned in Sindh in the early 1940s—at a later date.

<sup>7</sup> The only autobiographical reflections authored by Dayānand are the three essays that he published in *The Theosophist* in 1879-1880. He composed in Hindi, and his account was then translated into English; the Hindi original was not published, although an alleged copy surfaced in the late twentieth century. "Autobiography of Dayanand Saraswati, Swami" *The Theosophist* 1.1 (October 1879): 9-13; *Theosophist* 1.3 (December 1879): 66-68; and *Theosophist* 2.2 (November 1880): 24-26. Major biographies in English written by Arya Samajis, often with hagiographical tendencies, include Bawa Chhaju Singh, *Life and Teachings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati* (New Delhi: Jan Gyan Prakashan, 1971 [1903]); Har Bilas Sarada, *Life of Dayanand Saraswati, World Teacher* (Ajmer: Vedic Yantralaya, 1946). The most thorough scholarly biography is J. T. H. Jordans, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī: His Life and Ideas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Curiously, the original version of this narrative omits the mouse. The "Autobiography" published in *The Theosophist* only claims in a general sense that mice can run across mūrtis. The mouse assumes its canonical proportions in later literature, which elides the apparent absence at the heart of this primal scene. Jordans, for instance, includes the mouse (*Dayānanda Saraswati*, 5). Chhaju Singh likewise reports on the "little creature"; he, however, re-enchants the moment by inserting the voice of an all-powerful "Being" who commands Dayānand to preach Vedic monotheism (*Life and Teachings*, 3-4).

of a wandering renunciant. After several years, he came to Mathura (the great center of Krishna devotion) where, from 1860 till 1863, he studied under the blind grammarian, Swami Vīrajānanda — a man whose dislike of modern learning was so acute that he only agreed to teach Pāṇini to Dayanand once he had drowned all his own books in the Yamuna.<sup>9</sup> This period was the second decisive event in Dayanand's life. The third was his 1872 trip to Calcutta, at the invitation of Debendranath Tagore. After four months hobnobbing with the city's reformist elite (including notable Brahmo Samajis like Keshab Chander Sen), Dayanand was a changed man. He resolved to abandon his loincloth and his learned Sanskrit in favor of ordinary clothes and Hindi, a new language for him and one politically on the rise in the 1870s. Henceforth, Dayanand would be a populist reformer committed to a new kind of religion.<sup>10</sup>

The next ten years moved quickly for Dayanand. In 1873, during a visit to Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Aligarh's district collector Raja Jai Kishen Das urged him to write a book about his teachings.<sup>11</sup> Dayanand took the advice and completed the *Satyārth Prakāsh* in 1874 while living in Allahabad; it was published in 1875.<sup>12</sup> Also in 1875, he traveled to Bombay, where he founded the Arya Samaj on the model of the Brahmo Samaj and Bombay's Prārthana Samāj. In 1877, while in Delhi for the Durbar proclaiming Queen Victoria the Kaiser-i-Hind, he was invited to visit Punjab, the region that would prove

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<sup>9</sup> J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1977 [1914]), 106-107.

<sup>10</sup> For Dayānand leaving Calcutta totally "transformed," see Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Punjab* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 34-35.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements*, 109.

the most fertile field for his ideas.<sup>13</sup> After his death in 1883, the Arya Samaj continued to expand and formalize its institutions; in 1887, it opened the Dayananda Anglo-Vedic College in Lahore.

The success of the Arya Samaj has driven scholarly interest in Dayanand. As early as 1914, John Nichol Farquhar granted the society pride of place in his discussion of modern religious movements committed to “defence of the old faiths.”<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Jones’ pioneering 1976 study further developed this basic paradigm by examining how Punjabi Hindus made use of the Arya Samaj to negotiate between colonial and traditional cultural frames.<sup>15</sup> More recently, scholars have debated Dayanand’s influence on twentieth century Hindu nationalism. Arya Samajis were prominent in the creation of the All-India Hindu Mahāsabhā, and Dayanand’s attempted restoration of the “Aryan” nation resonates unmistakably with the ideals of “Hindutva” propounded by V. D. Sāvarkar (1883-1966) and others. While many scholars have argued for a direct connection between nineteenth century reform movements and twentieth century communalism, others have preferred to emphasize the discontinuity between these two distinct historical moments.<sup>16</sup> In either case, it is also clear Arya Samaj that reform

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<sup>13</sup> Jones, *Arya Dharm*, 36-43.

<sup>14</sup> Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements*, 101-128.

<sup>15</sup> Jones, *Arya Dharm*. The paradigm is further elaborated by Jones’ later survey of “socio-religious reform movements,” which divides movements into two major classes, “acculturative” (i.e. responding to British influence) and “transitional” (i.e. pursuing reform agendas unrelated to colonialism). See *Socio-religious reform movements in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Arguments for continuity include: Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996 [1993]); A. R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1976 [1948]); Daniel Gold, “Organized Hinduisms: From Vedic Truth to Hindu Nation,” in Martin Marty and J. Scott Abbleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 531-93; Gene R. Thursby, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in British India* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975). Additionally, Jaffrelot begins his recent Hindu nationalism reader with a selection from the *Satyārth*

programs contributed to the nationalist reconstitution of race and gender ideologies, and to debates over “the woman question” in late colonial Punjab.<sup>17</sup>

More important to the present discussion, however, is how Dayanand intervened in the religious debates of the nineteenth century. He articulated a self-consciously rational Hinduism that proudly returned to Vedic origins. He was not the first reformer to advocate such a revived Hinduism (Karsandas Mulji is a clear precedent; see Chapter 3); but his twist on this popular pattern would prove particularly influential. Like other Hindu intelligentsia of the period, he denied the Western origin of science by claiming a Vedic provenance for scientific knowledge and technical expertise.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, he reshaped the Hindu scriptural canon itself—or, rather, as J. E. Llewellyn has suggested, he borrowed classificatory procedures from Virajanand (the blind grammarian) in order to sort and consolidate the canon. In the process, he granted the Vedas a practical importance that they had previously lacked.<sup>19</sup>

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*Prakāsh*; see Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). In the other camp, John Zavos has emphasized the importance of the “ideological dislocation” of the 1920s. See John Zavos, “The Arya Samaj and the Antecedents of Hindu Nationalism,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 3:1 (April 1999): 57-81. For another revisionist argument that also emphasizes the 1920s, see Catherine Adcock, “Religious Freedom and Political Culture: The Arya Samaj in Colonial North India” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> The ambiguities entailed by Dayanand’s Aryanism have been explored by Romila Thapar, “The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics,” *Social Scientist*, 24.1/3 (November 1996): 3-29; and Dorothy Matilda Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002). For gender in Punjab, see Anshu Malhotra, “The Moral Woman and the Urban Punjabi Society of the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Social Scientist* 20.5/6 (May-June 1992): 34-63; and Anshu Malhotra, “Every Woman is a Mother in Embryo: Lala Lajpat Rai and Indian Womanhood,” *Social Scientist*, 22.1/2 (January-February 1994): 40-63.

<sup>18</sup> Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 86.

<sup>19</sup> Llewellyn, *Arya Samaj*, 30-34.

Mostly, however, he remained haunted by the mouse that forever changed his perception of Shaiva ritualism. In order to spread his revelation, he would have to make like the mouse and expose the illusions of material religion. His chief means of doing so was through public debates, through polemical force and rhetorical wordplay. In the *Satyārth Prakāsh*, one wordplay in particular distills Dayanand's persistent concern with priestly illusion.

### **Imposture Theory I: Popes or Brahmans?**

Dayanand wrote most of the *Satyārth Prakāsh* in a primly Sanskritized Hindi. Indeed, when he wrote it, he had only recently deigned to switch from Sanskrit to the vernacular. As a consequence, his decision to make central use of an English word in his history of Indian religions is particularly notable. Dayanand claims that most contemporary brahmans are brahmans in name only (they are “nām-mātra” brahmans); it is therefore not appropriate (yogya) to serve them or even to call them by the name “brahman.” Dayanand provides these imposters with a new epithet in an accusatory dialogue: “But you are not a brahman.”

Question: So who am I?

Answer: You are a pope.

Q: What is a ‘pope’?

A: Actually, in the Roman language, influential people and fathers were called ‘popes,’ but now ‘pope’ refers to those who take advantage [make use] of others by duping them with tricks and deceits.<sup>20</sup>

Dayanand, having accurately summarized the etymology of “popery” (if not “pope” itself), goes on to offer a quasi-anthropological description of priestly fraud in Europe. His sums up this corrupt condition with the single pivotal phrase “pope-lila.”

Under the regime of pope-lila, Roman popes would rob their disciples (chelas) of all their rupees by selling them indulgences (hunḍī). The pope-ji would lay the paper contract in front of an image (mūrti) of Jesus or Mary, and then instruct the devotee to carry it with him to the grave, so that he could hand it to the angel who comes to bring him to heaven. There, the pope said, the paper would purchase celestial amenities, such as a house, a garden, servants, food, drink, and clothing. The suggested donation for this magical paper is 100,000 rupees. As Dayanand explains, this regime of pope-lila prevailed in Europe as long as ignorance prevailed.<sup>21</sup> With the spread of knowledge (vidyā), however, deceit (jūṭhī līlā) became less pervasive; even so, it has not yet been rooted out (231-232).

Having painted this scene, Dayanand goes on to establish his critical comparison between Europe and India. He does this glibly, with a confident claim to pure

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<sup>20</sup> In Hindi, the dialogue is as follows:

“praśan: to ham kaun haiṃ?

uttar: tum ‘pop’ ho.

P: ‘pop’ kisko kahete haiṃ?

U: asal iskī rūman bhāṣā meṃ to baṛā aur pitā kā nām ‘pop’ hai, parantu ab chal-kapaṭ se dūsre ko ṭhag kar apnā proyojan sādhanewāle ko ‘pop’ kahete haiṃ” (SP, 231).

<sup>21</sup> “jab tak yūrop meṃ mūrkhṭā thī, tab tak vahāṃ poplīlā caltī thī” (SP, 231-232).

equivalence (“Just like this” [vaise hī]). Dayanand’s description of Indian popery echoes many of the claims made by James Mill and other apologists of empire. He fulminates against the harsh (kaṛā) system of rules that the priests had established in India, such that a person could no longer do anything without a pope’s command (popoṃ kī āgyā). By Dayanand’s account (as by Mill’s), there is no outside to the regime of popish rule. The priests have captured all of India with their verbal traps (vacan-jāl) and illusions (mithyā), with rumor (gap), trickery and deceit (chal-kapaṭ). Under their guidance, “dark tradition” (andhaparamparā) overtook the world, and all humanity came under their sway (vaś). Dayanand’s description is dominated by imagery of hierarchy and abasement: the worship of the pope’s feet (caraṇoṃ kī pūjā), and shepherd gurus (gaṛiye ke samān jūṭhe gurū) using their pope-lila to control their herds and extort their for milk (SP, 232).

Even while asserting the equivalence of European and Indian popery, however, Dayanand also introduces points of critical difference. Two are immediately apparent in this introductory passage. First, Dayanand refits the world history of fraud to a Hindu chronology: the great war narrated in the epic *Mahabharata* ushered in the current corrupt era. Although the first sprout (amkur) of wickedness may have preceded those tragic events, it was only after the massacre at Kurūkṣetra that this sprout was able to grow into a tree (vṛkṣ). In the spiritual vacuum produced by the epochal battle, false gurus and brahmans were able to assume the roles of the ancient rishis. Second, in order to conceptualize his comparative task, Dayanand deploys the notion of the avatar, (literally, a descending or coming down; more generally, the

incarnation of a deity in human form). The popes have spread deceit in India by taking on countless such avatars.<sup>22</sup>

In both cases, a comparison with William Howitt's *Popular History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations* (1833) is instructive. Where Howitt faults the Flood for opening the profane era of priestly imposture, Dayanand faults Kurūkṣetra. Where Howitt uses the figure of the hydra to conceptualize how the discrete manifestations of priestcraft stem from a single source, Dayanand uses the figure of the avatar. Howitt and Dayanand are engaged in strikingly parallel projects: primal traumas set the present at an irrecoverable remove from a sacred golden age; in the present age, a quasi-transcendent corruption tyrannizes the world through its local manifestations. The primary difference is one of vocabulary and imagery: the hydra's heads become the Pope-ji's avatars, without altering their basic conceptual structure. Howitt's and Dayanand's histories of priestcraft are, in an important sense, the same.

But by transporting "popery" into a novel context, Dayanand does more than simply echo the Empire's choicest epithet for demonizing Hinduism. Rather, he transposes that epithet into a different constellation of terms and a different cultural imaginary. The ultimate effect of this appropriation and transposition of "popery" is to reterritorialize both this word and the polemical, anticlerical modernity of which it is a signal part. Dayanand insists that the roots of religious modernity—secularism's prehistory, to use Gauri Viswanathan's phrase—are to be found in ancient India as much as in early modern Britain.<sup>23</sup> In his hands, "popery" becomes something more

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<sup>22</sup> "āryyāvartt desh meṃ bhī popjī jāno lākhoṃ avatār lekar līlā phailā rahe haiṃ" (SP, 232).

<sup>23</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, "Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy," *PMLA* 123.2 (2008): 466-476.

than a merely imperial idiom; he makes it sets down multiple roots and gestures toward multiple, off-secular modernities.

The imposture theory would have appealed to Dayanand for several reasons. First, it dovetailed with his interest in science and technology: religious frauds provided Dayanand with an opportunity to fantasize about priests' theatrical and technical accomplishments.<sup>24</sup> At Somnāth, for instance, massive magnets suspended the temple in mid-air (until invading Muslims ruined this proto-scientific special effect) (SP, 266-267). At Kāliyākant, equally ingenious priests engineered a statue to smoke a hookah. The mūrṭi's mouth was fitted with a tube that led to a secret room behind the sanctum sanctorum; there, a hidden man ("pīchewālā ādmī") blew his hookah smoke back into the temple proper (265-66). At Puri, the priests equipped the Lord Jagganāth's chariot with a mechanical apparatus that propelled it forward, as if by magic (263-265). Where a skeptic earlier in the century had found only laborers, Dayanand found a technological wonder.<sup>25</sup> Although he denounced the miracle as a fraud, he seems impressed nonetheless with its technical wizardry. As elsewhere, charlatanic special effects fuel the techno-scientific imagination.<sup>26</sup>

Second, the imposture theory provided Dayanand with a foreign vocabulary that had clear tactical use value. Dayanand's hybrid attack on his Hindu nemeses

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<sup>24</sup> On Dayanand's interest in science, see Prakash, *Another Reason*.

<sup>25</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, "native convert" Atamaran traveled to Puri to investigate the miracle of the Lord Jagganath's self-propelled chariot. When he saw that it was pulled by men, he accepted the truth of missionary Christianity. See "Deceptions Practised on the Worshippers of Juggernaut," *Missionary Register*, December 1830, 541-542.

<sup>26</sup> See Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

heightens the stakes of heterodoxy by refracting it through the discourses of the nation. If a brahman is not properly Hindu, he is also not properly Indian (or, to use Dayanand’s term, Aryan). Instead, he is a pope, an avatar of a global type obviously affiliated with the Christian West. Dayanand’s use of “avatar” here is slightly peculiar: these popes descend not vertically, from on high, but laterally, from the West. Where British writers depicted the crafty priest as quintessentially Indian, Dayanand does just the opposite. The pope can be named only in English, and his pious fraud points emphatically toward the British Isles. To insist that a brahman is not a brahman, but rather a pope, is to effect a semantic exile. This is a forced conversion of sorts, a rhetorical excommunication. Dayanand stakes his claim to Hindu orthodoxy by expatriating his Puranic, Tantric, and Vedantic opponents. In the *Satyārth Prakāsh*, to be heterodox is to be a resident alien, and to be a charlatan is to be both.<sup>27</sup>

### **Truth and the Nation: The History of Aryan Religions**

Dayanand positioned his recalibrated Hinduism as the religion of the Aryan nation,<sup>28</sup> and he did so by writing a thorough history of religious error in India. In many ways, Dayanand’s history simulates the “natural history of religion” genre that was so

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<sup>27</sup> Dayanand’s tactical use of “popery” further mangles the cultural logic of caste and, in doing so, contributes to another major plank of his reform project. Dayanand deracinates his opponents by extruding them from their kinship networks into a space of popish exile. In this opening dialogue, Dayanand’s fictive interlocutor resists being rechristened a pope by asserting that because he was born a brahman, he must still be a brahman. A person is always of the same caste as his mother and father. Dayanand corrects this claim sternly. Birth does not make a brahman. Virtue, deeds, and inner nature (*guṇa*, *karma*, and *svabhāva*) are what makes a brahman. Those who claim religious authority but lack virtue are to be called popes. This polemic epithet thus contributes to Dayanand’s larger effort to reform caste by replacing the *varṇa* of birth with the *varṇa* of virtue. The assault on familial *jāti* and *varṇa* extends throughout the *Satyārth Prakāsh*.

<sup>28</sup> As he wrote, his task is to critique (*khaṇḍan-maṇḍan karna*) the religions of the Aryans (*āryya log*), the people who live in India (*jo ki āryyavartt desh mem vasnevāle haiṃ*) (*SP*, 227-229).

central to the English Enlightenment.<sup>29</sup> Like those narratives, its world historical tale unfolds from a moment of traumatic rupture that sunders the present from the lost plenitude of divine truth (here, the great war of the *Mahabharata*). Like those narratives, it makes use of a fourfold taxonomy to classify the world's religions.<sup>30</sup> According to Dayanand, anti-Vedic religions (*vedviruddh mat*) falls into four categories: Purāṇī, Jainī, Kirānī, and Kurānī (i.e. Puranic Hinduism, Jainism, Christianity, and Islam). The thousand other false religions all stem from one of these four branches (*shākhā*), each of them refuted in one of the *Satyārth Prakāsh*'s final four chapters (*SP*, 226).

In a sense, Dayanand's history founds the nation on a lie. Truth precedes history proper and persists in the present only as trace, as something in need of retrieval. The actual history of the nation, especially of the religious nation, can only be told as a history of errors. Gyan Prakash has argued a similar point. By founding the modern Indian nation in a lost Vedic past, Dayanand splits the nation from the inside. The revenant classical moment erupts into the present. It functions "as an anteriority, not as an origin," in that it interrupts the homogenous, empty time of the nation with an "archaic" temporality; it disrupts the "organicist" pretension that the nation evolves continuously from its point of origin.<sup>31</sup> "As the contemporary national self emerges in

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<sup>29</sup> Although it seems unlikely that Dayanand would have known any of these works—there are no indications that he read English—it is quite likely that historical arguments in this mould worked their way into polemics of the period. Orientalists, missionaries, Theosophists, Hindu reformists: all participated in the broad inquiry into the history of religions in one way or another.

<sup>30</sup> In the West, the typical categories were Judaism, Christianity, Muhammadanism, and Paganism. See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Prakash, *Another Reason*, 119.

the differential sign of the return, as *its* time is expressed in the repetition of *another* time, an alienating otherness becomes the medium of expressing the fullness of the nation.” The nation becomes strange unto itself, as a “searing sense of loss” inscribes it with a constitutive lack, a “trace of inadequacy” that leads ineluctably to the “prior presence” of the Vedic era.<sup>32</sup> Dayanand may promise a future time when the plenitude of primordial truth will be restored; but, in this book, he can deliver only the mythos of the lost golden age.

The story begins “before five thousand years ago,” when there was no religion (mat) other than the Vedic religion (vedmat). A seed of ignorance that had been planted in this golden age came to fruit on the battlefield of Kurūkṣetra, which turned wisdom (buddhī) upside down (ūlṭī) (226-230). In the new dark age, ignorant gurus spread tricks, deceits, and irreligion. False brahmans, thinking only of their livelihood, proclaimed themselves deities to be worshipped. Members of the others castes, without any access to Sanskritic knowledge, accepted whatever rumor (gap) was put before them as the truth. Helplessly enchanted (vaśībhūt), they came to belong to these false brahmans. Wisdom was hooked to delusion (buddhī bhramyukt), and imagination replaced truth; people came to spread whatever religion happened to come into their minds.

At this earliest stage of history, India still ruled the world. From the Creation until the Great War of the *Mahabharat*, the world-kings (sārvabhaum cakravartī) all hailed from the clan of Aryans. Sanskrit was the great scientific language, and the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 90.

unparalleled wealth of Arya-vart was the envy of all. The imperial echo in such claims is sometimes eerie. When Dayanand asks who would next establish a kingdom crossing continents, his ambition becomes clear: Vedic India anticipates British India. It is no coincidence that in this passage Dayanand specifically repudiates the ability of Europeans like Max Müller to interpret the ancient texts properly. Here Dayanand inscribes even the fulsome Vedic Age with a lack. The Vedic nation not only splits the modern Indian nation; it is itself split by an anachronism in that it is made to carry the trace of the British Empire.

Dayanand narrates the rupture between the lost Vedic past and the modern Indian nation as a fall from *truth*. The nation proper is born of a lie, conjured by the clever ruses of crafty popes determined to quash Vedic piety. The history of the Hindu nation turns into a catalogue of these lies, a survey of “pope-lila.” Truth, the fundamentally prehistoric province of the Vedas, continues to erupt within this history of error. Indeed, it drives history in an almost dialectic manner: the popes devise newer, cleverer ruses to subsume the criticisms of their neo-Vedic opponents, and the consequent elaboration of their popery propels the fraught history of India. Truth then (Dayanand’s titular “satya”) serves as the differential sign of return that inscribes the nation with searing lack and alienating otherness. But this truth—as absence, as the deferred—is also, above all, productive: it spurs on the proliferating lies that drive history.

The perennial opponent of the popes is the Man of Truth (the satpurūṣ), who in his saintly avatars has resisted dark tradition through the ages. A telescoped history of this perennial conflict follows. In those first dark years, the popes devised the Wām

Mārg, the orgiastic left-handed path of Tantra. The first great critic was soon to follow. The king of Gorakhpur had been pressured by the popes to have his beloved queen attempt intercourse with a horse (samāgram ghoṛe se). She died in the process. The disillusioned monarch gave the kingdom to his son and became a sadhu determined to expose the pretensions of the popes (popoṃ kī pol nikalne lagā). His efforts produced the materialistic Cārvāka sect, and when the sect spread, the popes took notice.

They devised Jainism to co-opt the Cārvāka critique. The new religion claimed critique for pope-lila by turning its sarcasm against the Vedas themselves. Still more devastatingly, the Jain popes invented an entirely new form of devotion: mūrṭi pūjā, the worship of stone images. Statues of the Jain tirthankars soon displaced the transcendent God in the public's imagination. The period of Jain rule over Aryavarta—their “Raj”—extended from about 2800 years ago until about 2500 years ago (SP, 236-237). Then, about 2200 years ago, Lord Shankara stepped forward to restore the Vedic religion and bring an end to Jain corruption. Shankara is central to the *Satyārth Prakāsh* and will be discussed in greater depth below. Here suffice it to say that, after his death, his critique too was subsumed by the grand system of religious fraud. This was in part because of his questionable philosophical claims (non-dualism, Dayanand tells us, is a delusion). But it owed more to the perennial cleverness of the popes, who claimed that Shankara was an incarnation of Shiva. It was about 1900 years ago that, under King Vikramaditya, the Shaivas and Wam Margis gained in influence and tried to collapse all duty, work, and desire into the worship of the lingam.

Around this time, the “Purani” religion was consolidated. In order to compete with the Jains, the Purani popes fabricated the eighteen Puranas, came up with twenty-

four avatars (counterparts to the twenty-four Jain tirthankars), and proliferated temples, images, and stories (SP, 249). Dayanand built his career castigating Puranic Hinduism for its excesses, and his discussion here is no exception. He claims that all of the *Purāṇas* were composed by unlearned Purani popes, who forged the names of dead authors like Vyāsa; lest doubt remain as to his textual targets, he enumerates them. These scriptures should, he quips, be called Navīṇas (New Texts) rather than Puranas (Old Texts).<sup>33</sup> In addition to faking their scriptures, the Purani popes also took up the image-worship of the Jains and rendered it a general practice. Visual devotion has rendered millions of people in Aryavart useless, beggarly, and lazy and has spread foolishness and lies across the entire world (262).

Dayanand concludes his history of Indian religions with quick jabs at early modern religious movements, including the followers of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and Kabir (1440-1518).<sup>34</sup> The sternest critique, however, is reserved for the Puṣṭimārg (the movement founded Sri Vallabhacārya [1479-1531] that is discussed at length in Chapter 3 of this dissertation). According to Dayanand, all the majesty of the Vallabhacārya Maharajas derives from their trickery (chal-prapañc) and fraud (dhūrtā). He assures his reader that the sect rested on a lie from the very first (Lakṣmaṇbhaṭṭ, Vallabha's father, was an illusionist [mithyāvādī], and his lie [lila] was taken up by his son).<sup>35</sup> Dayanand

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<sup>33</sup> jo saccī haiṃ, voh vedādi satyashāstrom kī aur jo jhūṭhī haiṃ, vo in popom ke purāṇrūp ghar kī haiṃ (SP, 273).

<sup>34</sup> The Kabir panth is faulted for worshipping the bedstead, mattress, pillows, sandals, and lamp of the saint. Dayanand praises Guru Nanak's character, but faults him for his "village language" (grāmoṃ kī bhāṣā) and ignorance of Sanskrit (SP, 296-299).

<sup>35</sup> The father lied about being married when he entered sannyās; the son violated his sannyās by marrying a low-caste girl (SP, 305).

consistently uses the word “lila” when describing the misdeeds of the Vallabhacaryas, and he opposes Vallabha lila to the Vedas and the Shastras. The Gosains use a net of illusion to trap the hapless and convince them of their sovereignty.<sup>36</sup>

Dayanand’s diatribe against the Puṣṭimārg recycles many of the same complaints made in the 1862 trial of the Maharaj Libel Case. It harps on the trio of offerings that the gurus allegedly demanded of their devotees (“tan, man, dhan”; that is, body, mind, and wealth). It mentions those same devotees drinking the water that the guru used to wash his feet and his dhoti (SP, 306-7).<sup>37</sup> It even discusses the venereal diseases to which the sect’s leaders were allegedly prone.<sup>38</sup> Rather sensationally, Dayanand allows himself to speculate about the theology of such infections: if Krishna’s human incarnations have contracted a disease, then Krishna must have contracted it too. Dayanand knows he is being mischievous here, and he adds a killjoy moral maxim for good measure: where there is “bhog” (enjoyment), there is also “rog” (disease) (306-307). In short, Dayanand is never more himself than when he caustically congratulates the Puṣṭimārg: “Bravo, sir, bravo! What a good religion it is!”<sup>39</sup>

Dayanand’s whirlwind history of Hinduism raises several critical questions about the relation of religion to the Indian nation. First, it suggests that even an effort to debunk Hinduism can reinforce Hindu hegemony. Dayanand was committed to Hindu theism; but even had he been a radical atheist, his skeptical procedure would

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<sup>36</sup> “isī prakār mithyājāl rac ke bicāre bhole manuṣyom ko jāl meṃ phasāyā aur apne āpko śrīkrṣṇ mānkar sabke svāmī mānte haiṃ” (SP, 305)

<sup>37</sup> The incantation “tan-man-dhan” also occurs elsewhere in the *Satyārth Prakāsh*. See, for instance, the indictment of “today’s lineages of selfish brahmans” (ājkal ke sampradāyī aur svārthī brahman) (65).

<sup>38</sup> Dayanand refers to these as “bhagandarādi rog.”

<sup>39</sup> “vāh jī vāh! acchā mat hai!!” (SP, 305).

have borne the impress of the religion that produced it. Dayanand remaps the subcontinent's miraculous Hindu terrain as a geography of fraud. Popish illusion sweeps up Kashi, Gaya, Calcutta, Puri, Rameshwar, Kāliyākant, Dwarka, Somnath, Punjab's Jwala-Mukhi, Amritsar, Haridwar, and Mathura (262-269). In debunking these Hindu miracles, Dayanand reinforces this geography's fundamental Hindu-ness: it is Hindu sites and Hindu sites only that must be reformed in order to redeem the nation. Muslims enter Dayanand's history only to destroy the popes' ruses. For instance, when Mahmud of Ghazni attacks Somnath, his army destroys the temple's miracle magnet, discovers the cache of jewels hidden in the idol, and whips and enslaves the popes. However ambivalently, Dayanand does align himself with Mahmud's iconoclasm. The overall project of the *Satyārth Prakāsh*, however, is to take such non-Hindu critical positions and enfold them within a criticism position marked by Vedic reform.

### **Subaltern Skeptics: Social Location and the Dialogic Form**

According to Gyan Prakash, Dayanand articulated his Vedic nation not only through a constitutive temporal fissure (the rupture with the past), but also through a synchronic social fissure. Prakash argues that Puranic Hinduism is inscribed within the field of neo-Vedic discourse as a "subaltern" mode of religiosity, and he means this in a precise sense. The "subaltern" functions internally to the system of dominance as that which signifies the limit to that system. To conceive of the subaltern as a "pure externality" is to collude with dominant knowledge systems, which rely on just such a myth of unknowable externality in order produce their own inevitable hegemony. The figure of the peasant serves as Prakash's example. Although dominant knowledge

systems have depicted the superstitious peasant as the absolute “outside” to modern rationality, knowledge of which is not accessible, such systems always already recognize and “know” the peasant precisely as the figure of unreason and incomprehensibility.<sup>40</sup>

This formulation, of course, does not address the question of how “the peasant,” as ideological figure, determines what sorts of political utterance are available to actual subaltern individuals—or whether one might ever make empirical claims about “actual” subalterns without reinforcing the very discursive structures that bring groups into political being precisely as subaltern. Prakash finesses this question by suggesting that the subaltern, as ideological function, does provide a space in which traces of that which is external to systems of dominance can surface within the dominant discourse: “subalternity erupts from within the system of dominance and marks its limit from within, that its *externality* to dominant systems of knowledge and power surface *inside* the system of dominance, but only as an intimation, as a trace of that which eludes the dominant discourse” (*SP*, 288). Subalternity can be known either as a function of dominance or as a trace of that which eludes dominance, but not as a full presence that stands beyond the dominant discourse. Indeed, it is the fragmentary nature of subalternity and its refusal of wholeness that provides the most potent critique of the totality of dominant discourse.

Prakash suggests that Puranic Hinduism occupies just such a subaltern position within Dayanand’s Vedic modernity. Puranic devotion—and, I would add, “pope-lila”—acts as a “subaltern otherness” that, while allegedly “unintelligible as a category of

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<sup>40</sup> Gyan Prakash, “The Impossibility of Subaltern History,” *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1:2 (2000): 288.

knowledge and belief,” is nonetheless “completely knowable as superstition.” Because Puranic Hinduism exists within Vedic discourse and is, indeed, constitutive of that discourse, it cannot be extinguished—Dayanand’s reform project is thus an impossible project. It fumbles over its “inability to extinguish the self-exteriority” of magic and superstition. True religion is thus forced into “self-alienation” at the very moment that it produces itself as “true” (*SP*, 292-93).

One might amplify Prakash’s claim about the subaltern position of Puranic religion in the *Satyārth Prakāsh* and later Arya Samaj writings by referring to Dayanand’s biography. If Puranic religion was subaltern for Dayanand in the abstract sense developed by Prakash, it was also subaltern to him in another sense: it would have been redolent of caste groups that stood below his family in the social hierarchy of Kathiawar. Dayanand’s reformism might well be read, rather than as a program of simple caste uplift, as an attempt to brahmanize his social others.

J. T. H. Jordans has argued that Dayanand’s early Kathiawari background had a profound influence on his later life, much like the influence it had on later Kathiawari reformer M. K. Gandhi—both, for instance, were likely inspired in their rigorous vegetarianism by the region’s Jain ethos, and Dayanand’s iconoclasm may have been inspired by that of the Sthānakavāsī Jains. Practices prevalent in the region, like the shraadha ceremony, would later become the primary objects of Dayanand’s reformist scorn.<sup>41</sup> Jordans argues that young Dayanand (whose pre-initiatory name we do not

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<sup>41</sup> Jordans, *Dayananda*, 7-18.

know) would have been very aware of his minority status as a Shaiva brahman.<sup>42</sup>

Brahmans composed only seven percent of Kathiawar's total Hindu population, and most of them were Shaivas, who would have prided themselves on their spiritual descent from Śaṅkarācārya and their preservation of the Vedic rites.

The differences in ritual practices between the Shaiva Smarta brahmans and other caste groups, who were largely Vaiṣṇava and Jain, would have underscored the caste division. Although young Dayanand's family was very observant and emphasized their religious heritage, other brahmans probably did not. "Fallen brahmans" would have associated with the Vaiṣṇavas of other castes and would have been very visible to young Dayanand.<sup>43</sup> His later efforts to eliminate these practices and replace them with "orthodox" Vedic worship can easily be read as an effort to reclaim the fallen brahmans and eliminate the caste cultures that had corrupted them. The rhetorical production of Puranic Hinduism as heterodox or subaltern thus has clear stakes in terms of caste hierarchy, with caste at the all-India level made to enact a drama scripted in Kathiawar.

In order to persuasively depict his neo-Vedic orthodoxy as possessing a universal appeal, Dayanand has to expand it beyond the bounds of the brahmans. I will argue that a key method by which he does this is through the formal device of the dialogue. By shifting from history to this more fictive and literary mode, Dayanand imagines the subjectivities of his social others and appropriates their imagined voices to his own agenda.

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<sup>42</sup> In the autobiographical essay published in *The Theosophist*, Dayanand identified himself as having been born in Kathiawar, to a "Brahmin family of the Oudichya [Audichya] caste."

<sup>43</sup> Jordans, *Dayānanda*, 7-13.

One dialogue in particular suggests how Dayanand sought to co-opt subaltern voices for Vedic modernity. “Once, there was a Jat” (ek jāṭ thā). This opening phrase signals the stylistic shift to a fable about a Jat, a member of a farming caste from northwestern India (SP, 282-4). Once there was a Jat who had a cow who gave copious quantities of delicious (svādiṣṭ) milk. Every once in a while, the local “Pope-ji” would get a taste of this milk, and as the family priest (purohit), he plotted that when the Jat’s old father died, he would take the cow as a ritual gift (saṅkalp). When the father’s time arrived, the Pope-ji came and demanded that the Jat give a cow in the name of his father (“iske hāth se godān karāo”). The Jat got out ten rupees, put it in his father’s hand, and told the pope to pronounce the benediction. The pope demurred, insisting that a father dies only once: the Jat should fetch a young milk-giving cow of the best sort.

Here Dayanand’s narration begins to give way to a dialogue, perhaps the most characteristic formal device of the *Satyārth Prakāsh* as a whole. This is to be a verbal contest between the Jat and the Pope-ji. The Jat protests that he has only one cow with which to support his family, and he offers the Pope twenty rupees to buy himself a cow. The Pope scorns him (“vāhjī vāh!), suggesting that he values a cow more highly than his father. He then marshals the support of the Jat’s family, whom he had duped previously and now controls at a signal (un sabko pahile hī se popjī ne bahekā rakkhā thā aur us samay bhī ishārā kar diyā). Under pressure, the Jat gives the cow to the Pope, who takes it home before returning to perform the funerary rites and other pope-lila.

Thenceforward, the Jat goes from house to house begging milk in order to care for his children. In the morning of the fourteenth day, he comes to the Pope-ji’s house

where he finds the Pope filling the milk-jug (baṭloī) from the cow. The Pope invites the Jat in (āiye baiṭhiye) and tells him that he will put the milk away and be right back (duddh dhar āuṃ). The Jat demands, and rather impolitely, that the Pope bring the milk-jug with him (popjī jā, baṭloī sāmne dhar, baiṭhe).

Jat-ji: You are a big liar.

Pope-ji: What lie have I committed?

Jat-ji: Why did you take the cow?

Pope-ji: To help your father cross the river of death.

Jat-ji: Then why didn't you send it to death's riverbank? I trusted you. Who knows how deep my father must have drowned in the river of death.

Pope-ji: No, no. As an effect of the merit of this gift, a second cow has appeared there, and it carried your father across.

Jat-ji: How far is the river of death from here, and in which direction?

Pope-ji: Probably about thirty thousand miles (tīs kroṇ koś dūr)...

Jat-ji: Show me the letter or telegram with the news that the second cow appeared and carried my father across.

Pope-ji: Aside from the writings of the *Garūṛa Purāṇa*, I have no letter or telegram.

Jat-ji: How can I accept the *Garūṛa Purāṇa* as true?

Pope-ji: Just like everyone does.

Jat-ji: Your fathers made this book for your livelihood. Nothing is dearer to a father than his son. When my father sends me a letter or a telegram, then I will send the cow to death's riverbank so that it carries him across; afterwards, I will

bring the cow back to my house, so that I can feed the milk to my children and myself.

The Jat takes the cow and its accoutrements and goes home. The Pope scolds him for taking his gift back and threatens him with ruin, but the Jat tells him to shut up (chūp rahol). Dayanand glosses the moral of the story thusly: “When men are like this Jat, then Pope-lila will not exist in the world.”<sup>44</sup>

This is a striking fable of class uplift through critical inquiry. The Jat, an uneducated peasant, sees through the ideological ruses cast by the Pope, and, having shed his false consciousness, takes back his rightful property. Newly enlightened, he can lead his duped relatives—and, Dayanand suggests, all of humanity—towards a future free of priestly manipulation. In the process, he attains a status deserving of respect—early on in the story, Dayanand switches from referring to him merely as “Jat” to referring to him as “Jat-ji.” This appellation may well be ironic, especially in light of the Jat’s comic ignorance (“have you received a telegram from the underworld?”); even so, the story holds the lowly Jat up among the ranks of the Men of Truth.

The Jat thus becomes Dayanand’s subaltern mouthpiece. In this, he is not alone: throughout the *Satyārth Prakāsh*, and particularly in its dialogues, Dayanand writes in voices other than his own so that he can claim these others for his Vedic revival. The real subalterns, Dayanand suggests, are the religious subalterns. Those marginalized because of their caste or class can join the dominant discourse and speak in the voice of the Vedas. While reform Hindu agendas like Dayanand’s did open up very real

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<sup>44</sup> “jab aise hī jātjī ke se purūṣ hoṃ, to poplīlā sāmsār meṃ na cale” (SP, 284).

opportunities for caste and class mobility, they also foreclosed certain possibilities in the process. As Jordens suggests in his analysis of Dayanand's biography, this reform program stipulated that in order to speak the subaltern had to adopt the lifestyle of a Shaiva brahman.

I would argue, however, that traces of subjective positions other than Dayanand's are to be found throughout the *Satyārth Prakāsh* in fables just like this one. Dayanand clearly extracted stories from networks of oral exchange to include them in his book (indeed, much of the learned Sanskritic material as well had only recently entered print circulation). Some of this material seems to put itself in quotation marks against the will of its compiler, resisting his effort to conflate all skeptical positions into his neo-Vedic reform program. Indeed, it would be possible to write Dayanand's text into a very different kind of history, one in which it plays a subordinate role as a stopping point in the larger life of one of these stories. In such a history, the folktale would subsume the reformist tract, rather than vice versa.

In this vein, I can offer a partial account of one of the *Satyārth Prakāsh*'s stories. Dayanand writes of a thief who was punished for his crime by having his nose cut off. Much to everyone's surprise, the noseless man started to dance, laugh, and sing. When people asked why he was so happy, he explained that, with no nose, he could now see the Lord Narayan. The thief grew famous as a great sage, and he started to draw disciples. One of these disciples decided to cut off his own nose so that he too could see the Lord. When he did, the thief leaned in and whispered: "You do just as I do, or else

we will both be ridiculed.”<sup>45</sup> Soon a full sect of nose-cutters formed, and news of them spread to the king. But before the monarch chopped off his nose too, a wise old minister intervened. Reasoning that he had very few years left anyway, he cut his own nose off first. When the thief leaned in to tell the minister to join the cheat, he exposed the whole movement, and the king had them all arrested. As Dayanand glosses the tale: “All the trickery of the anti-Vedic religious lineages is just like this.”<sup>46</sup>

A version of the same story had previously been recorded in November 1817 by the Rev. William Bowley. This version takes place at “Juggernaut,” where a blind man “feigned” to see Krishna. A deluded multitude gathered and fed the huckster a daily diet of “dainties.” Soon he drew a disciple, who blinded himself and was rewarded only with harsh words from his guru: “Thou fool! What dost thou wish to see? Is it not enough that we are supplied with every thing that is delicious? Hold your peace.” These two charlatans fed off the crowd until a more “cunning” disciple came along, blinding himself in only one eye. The guru, “not knowing the cheat, told him the secret.” The one-eyed man then proceeded to chastise the “imposter” and “exposed him to the people.” Bowley glossed the tale thus: each of the “Hindoo” sects “knows its own fraud,” but is “ashamed to divulge it.”<sup>47</sup>

Other versions of the tale were collected in the decades after the publication of the *Satyārth Prakāsh*. These include a Tamil version collected by E. J. Robinson in 1885; a version included in the 1894 *North Indian Notes and Queries*; and a version in Pandit

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<sup>45</sup> “tū bhī aisā hī kar, nahīm to merā aur terā upahās hogā” (SP, 308).

<sup>46</sup> “isī prakār vedvirodhī sab sampradāyoṃ kī līlā hai” (SP, 310).

<sup>47</sup> *Missionary Register* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1819), 143.

Ganga Datt Upreti's 1894 collection of tales from Garhwal.<sup>48</sup> Most recently, anthropologist Kirin Narayan was told the same story in 1983 by a man in Nasik who recalled having read it as a child in the *Satyārth Prakāsh*. This teller, Swamiji, nimbly adapted the written tale for an oral context, combining it with Dayanand's frame story and pulling listeners in by pretending to cut their noses and by getting them to dance. Swamiji presented the story as a critique of transnational guru culture, with its many famous frauds; although, as Narayan demonstrates, several listeners walked away with divergent interpretations.<sup>49</sup>

I have not been able to trace similar trajectories for other stories included in the *Satyārth Prakāsh*, but it is worth asking how Dayanand tried to position his book within an oral as well as a print public. For instance, he peppers the text with sayings (kathan) that seem to invite oral repetition. Examples of these include “blind of eye and full of purse” (ānkh ke andhe aur gānṭh ke pūre) and “whether you live or die, fill the pope's stomach” (jīvo vā māro popjī kā peṭ bharo) (*SP*, 288). Suggesting that he meant for these slogans to circulate beyond the text is decidedly speculative, but it does seem plausible, given Dayanand's attunement to overlapping oral publics.

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<sup>48</sup> E. J. Robinson, *Tales and Poems of South India* (London: T. Woolmer, 1885), 31-32; *North Indian Notes and Queries IV* (1894), no. 30; Pandit Ganga Datt Upreti, *Proverbs and Folklore of Kumaun and Garhwal* (Lodiana: Lodiana Mission Press, 1894), 50-51. All cited by Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 142-143. Narayan identifies this as tale type No. 1701, “The Noseless Man,” in Stith Thompson and Warren E. Roberts, *Types of Indic Oral Tales: India, Pakistan, and Ceylon* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1960).

<sup>49</sup> Narayan, *Storytellers*, 132-159.

## Imposture Theory II: The Metaphysics of Pope-Lila

In the *Satyārth Prakāsh*, Dayanand tries to construct a distinctively Indian skeptical tradition by co-opting several differently positioned voices. While the Jat is an important conquest for this project, he cannot compare with Shankara (c.788-820), the great founder of the philosophical school of Advaita Vedānta. For Dayanand, Shankara is the paradigmatic Man of Truth and the most iconic enemy of illusion. However, Dayanand's ultimate agenda is very different from Shankara's. Where Shankara sought to dissolve the perceptual world into its otherworldly ontological ground, Dayanand remained committed to the empirical reality of this world. Thus, in order to insinuate himself into Shankara's skeptical lineage, Dayanand has to claim Shankara away from non-dualism. As a consequence, in the *Satyārth Prakāsh*, Vedānta serves as both the idiom and the object of critique.

Dayanand has two major techniques for upending Vedānta. First, he collapses metaphysics into rhetoric, arguing that Shankara did not believe his own ontological claims but rather espoused them tactically to undermine the false religions of his enemies. Second, Dayanand appropriates Vedantic idioms of illusion and tethers them to worldly ends. In his hands, "maya" loses its status as overarching cosmic principle and comes to indicate merely human fraud. The hybrid conjunct "pope-lila" performs this work in miniature. While it amplifies its component parts by widening the resonance of each, it also quite tendentiously redefines "lila." As Dayanand makes clear, "trickery" is never divine, and maya is to be understood as fraud, pure and simple.

Shankara is arguably the most famous philosopher in the Indian tradition, and what he is most famous for is his espousal of a strict non-dualism. Despite his own

dualistic commitments, Dayanand likely felt the need to reckon with Shankara due to his training in Vedantic thought.<sup>50</sup> The extensive body of writings attributed to the great sage, such as his influential commentaries on the *Upaniṣads*, the *Brahma Sūtra*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, insists that this world's plurality of beings is an illusion. In order to achieve liberation from the material world (saṃsāra), the individual soul (jīva) must realize its fundamental unity with Brahman, the one Being that subsumes all others. Shankara was at particular pains to explain that because Brahman exceeds the descriptive capacities of the human mind, it should be understood as formless or “without qualities” (nirguṇa).

Shankara, without entirely denying the reality of the material world (jagat), did nonetheless present it as an illusion. The standard metaphor is that of the serpent in the rope. Just as an ignorant (avidyā) person immersed in darkness might mistake a coiled rope for a snake, the ignorant soul (jīva) misapprehends Brahman.<sup>51</sup> Like the serpent, the material world is thus but an appearance (vivarta) of Brahman and does not exist in its own right. As Dayanand puts it, the false is that which appears, but does not exist (jo vastu na ho aur pratīti hove). The creative force whereby Brahman gives rise to the illusion of the world is known as māyā. This force inheres in the ignorant

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<sup>50</sup> See Jordans, *Dayānanda*, 20.

<sup>51</sup> In addition to explicating the example of the serpent and the rope, Dayanand also gestures to other metaphors: the silver in a shell, the water in a mirage, a fairy city (gandharvanagar), and a sorcery (indrajāl). Dayanand also describes the serpent in the rope: andhakār aur kuch prakāsh ke mel meṃ akasmāt rajjū ko dekhne se sarp kā bhram hokar bhay se kaṃptā hai. jab usko dīp ādi se dekh letā hai, usī samay bhram aur bhay nivṛtt ho jātā hai. vaise brahm meṃ jo jagat kī mithyā pratīti huī hai, us kī nivṛtti aur brahm ki pratīti (SP, 239-40).

soul rather than in Brahman, and it falls away as soon as the soul sheds its ignorance.<sup>52</sup>

Dayanand pithily distills Shankara's non-dualistic doctrine thusly: "The ultimate being is true, the world illusion, and the soul one with the ultimate being" (brahm satya, jagat mithyā, aur jīv brahm ki ektā) (SP, 239).

While Dayanand's text does recycle substantial portions of Shankara's Advaitin vocabulary, it does not intervene extensively within Shankara's argument. Dayanand does manage several retorts to the Vedantins whom he writes into dialogues. For instance, he objects strenuously to the claim that something can appear without first existing.<sup>53</sup> It is completely impossible for that which does not exist to be represented, just as it is impossible for there to be a reflection of a barren woman's son.<sup>54</sup> After making these arguments, however, Dayanand somewhat surprisingly announces his victory by proclaiming the following principle: only when a philosophical position is indestructible (akhaṇḍaniya) is it acceptable (mānniya). That is, because Dayanand can mount cogent objection to the Vedantin's ontological claims, those claims must be false (239-243). By placing the burden of proof on the Vedantin, Dayanand saves himself from having to outthink Shankara. In fact, it seems fair to say that Dayanand is

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<sup>52</sup> For Sankara, see the following: *Advaita Vedanta up the Samkara and his Pupils*, ed. Karl H. Potter, vol. 3 of *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (Delhi, 1981); *A Thousand Teachings: The Upadeshasaahasrii of Shankara*, trans. Mayeda Sengaku (Tokyo, 1979); *The Vedanta Sutra, with the Commentary by Sankara*, trans. George Thibault, *Sacred Books of the East* (New York, 1962); Jonathan Bader, *Conquest of the Four Quarters: Traditional Accounts of the Life of Sankara* (New Delhi, 2000); N. V. Iseva, *Shankara and Indian Philosophy* (Albany, 1993); Roger Marcaurelle, *Freedom through Inner Renunciation: Sankara's Philosophy in a New Light* (Albany, 2000); George P. Victor, *Life and Teachings of Adi Sankaracarya* (New Delhi, 2002); Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu, 1969); Arvind Sharma, *The Rope and the Snake: A Metaphorical Exploration of Advaita Vedanta* (New Delhi, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> "jo vastu hī nahīm, uskī pratīti kaise ho saktī hai?" (SP, 239).

<sup>54</sup> "kyomki jo vastu nahīm, uskā bhāsmān honā sarvathā asambhav hai, jaisā bandhyā ke putr kā pratibimb kabhī nahīm ho saktā (SP, 243)

considerably less interested in metaphysical niceties than he is in philosophy's worldly effects. He clearly disapproves of the ethos of modern day Vedantins, whom he depicts in the *Satyārth Prakāsh* as idlers, their unkempt hair a testament to their dubious moral constitution.<sup>55</sup> If the purpose of religion is to develop character, Vedānta has, in Dayanand's view, clearly failed.

Dayanand extricates Shankara from Advaita by turning the great sage's metaphysics into a polemical tactic: the philosopher only adopted the non-dualist thesis to refute the anti-Vedic religion of the Jains.<sup>56</sup> By Dayanand's account, Shankara's career centered on public debates (śāstrārth), rather than on philosophical reflection. The axial event in Shankara's life was a debate held at Ujjain, where his ace argumentation convinced the local king and several neighboring monarchs to return to the Vedic fold.<sup>57</sup> Afterwards, Shankara roamed India criticizing the Jains and praising the Vedas, until the fateful day when he was poisoned by his enemies.<sup>58</sup> Baldly put, Dayanand turns Shankara's career into a premonition of his own and, in doing so, asserts the supremacy of rhetoric over metaphysics. In the *Satyārth Prakāsh*, the agonistic arena of debate overwhelms all else.

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<sup>55</sup> For example, in one passage, the straw man Vedantin shirks duty (kartavya) by denying that there is a real difference between good and bad behavior (pāp-puṇya). A person should simply recognize himself as brahm and rest content (santuṣṭ rāhenā). Dayanand excoriates him: like ears that do not hear or eyes that do not see, these men are useless burdens on the world (SP, 111).

<sup>56</sup> "jainmat kā khaṇḍan karne hī ke liye" (SP, 244).

<sup>57</sup> The phrase used to describe their reconversion to Vedism is "vedmat kā svīkār kar liyā"; they "accepted the Vedic religion" (SP, 237-238).

<sup>58</sup> The important phrase here is that Shankara wandered India for ten years attacking the Jain religion and defending the Vedic religion; "das varṣ ke bhītar sarvatra āryāvartt meṃ ghūmkar jainioṃ kā khaṇḍan aur vedoṃ kā maṇḍan kiyā" (SP, 237-238).

The overriding concern with the powers of speech is evident throughout the text. Dayanand chastises Vedantins, for their tendency to babble.<sup>59</sup> He tells mothers how instruct their children in correct pronunciation and socially appropriate modes of address, as well as in essential mantras, shlokas, and sutras. Rhetorical discipline, he writes, will protect the child from the lures of the charlatan (dhūrt) (32). Dayanand reinforces his pedagogical program with a series of maxims and moral teachings about the central place that right speech should hold in a system of ethics. Speech is the root of all right action, and to lie is to steal from speech.<sup>60</sup> Because truth speaking is first among the virtues, there is no one as base as a liar.<sup>61</sup> One knows the true renunciant (sannyāsī) because he speaks truth ceaselessly (nirantar satya hī bole) (108). Speech is to be closely regulated and without excess.

As I have suggested, a glowing instance of Dayanand’s verbal economy is to be found in the compound “pope-lila.” This creative adaptation of “priestcraft” redefines the scope of Advaitin illusion by yoking it to a decidedly different imaginary of deception. Where the first emphasizes human frauds, the second suggests more metaphysical modes of deceit. The overall work done by the conjunction of the two words “pope” and “lila” is to assert the primacy of human deception over cosmological deception. Dayanand makes this project explicit in a dialogue that treats the creation of the world. His interlocutor, addressed sarcastically as “Pope-ji,” claims that Vishnu

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<sup>59</sup> Modern Vedantis (āj-kal ke vedānti) babble falsely and uselessly (kutarkī vyarth bakna) and speak nonsense (are bakvād karne wāle) (SP, 87).

<sup>60</sup> “vāñī hī se sab vyavahār siddh hote haiṃ; us vāñī ko jo cortā arthāt mithyābhāṣaṅ kartā hai, voh sab corī ādi pāpoṃ kā karnevālā hai” (91).

<sup>61</sup> “jaisī hāni pratigyā-mithyā karne wāle kī hotī hai, vaisī anya kisī kī nahīṃ” (35).

created the world through the power of his maya. Dayanand, however, will have none of it. God (parameśwar) could not have made the world through the purposeless power of his maya,<sup>62</sup> because maya inheres in men (manuṣya) only. Here the divine power of cosmic illusion is equated with more commonplace forms of trickery (chal-kapaṭ). To be an illusionist (māyāvī) is to be a cheat; since God is no cheat, He cannot be called an illusionist.<sup>63</sup> However, “illusion can exist among men, who are tricky and deceitful; it is precisely these men who are to be called ‘illusionists.’”<sup>64</sup> The Pope-ji is a case in point: all of his obscurantist tales about Vishnu’s divine illusions are themselves nothing but a fraud (dhoka), devised to distract from true religion.

“Lila,” of course, has a different set of associations than “maya.” It recalls in particular Krishna’s playful dalliance with Radha and the gopis. Dayanand’s apparent obsession with this word, and the negative charge with which he invests it, likely derive from the three years that he lived in Mathura, then as now a major center of Krishna devotion and Krishna pilgrimage.<sup>65</sup> During this period, when he was learning to value only texts written by the original rishis, Krishna’s “lila” came to stand in for all “modern” forms of Hindu devotion. He was especially wroth with the more crassly commercial aspects of the pilgrimage industry, which led him to proclaim in the *Satyārth Prakāsh* that Braj was the place “where ignorance came to set up house.”<sup>66</sup> For

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<sup>62</sup> “vinā kāraṇ apnī māyā se sab sṛṣṭi khaṛī kar dī hai” (SP, 275).

<sup>63</sup> “parameśvar meṃ chal-kapaṭādi doṣ na hone se, usko māyāvī nahīṃ kahe sakte” (SP, 275).

<sup>64</sup> “māyā manuṣya meṃ ho saktī hai, jo ki chalī-kapaṭī haiṃ, unhīṃ ko ‘māyāvī’ kahete haiṃ” (SP, 275).

<sup>65</sup> For a history of pilgrimages to the Braj region, see David Haberman, *Journey Through the Twelve Forests: An encounter with Krishna* (New York: Oxford, 1994).

<sup>66</sup> “jahāṃ avidyā ne ghar kar rakkhā hai” (SP, 305).

Dayanand, the Krishna country was the epicenter of pope-lila. Not coincidentally, the years that Dayanand spent at Mathura (1860-1863) were also the same years that Krishna's lila came under national scrutiny due to the notoriety of the Maharaj Libel Case then under trial in Bombay. As Jürgen Lütt has suggested, the famous trial most likely influenced the budding student of Sanskrit grammar, shaping his later distaste for all things "lila."<sup>67</sup>

The overriding objective of the *Satyārth Prakāsh* is to undo the regime of "lila." Where lila implies playful confusion of being and appearance (one might think of Krishna's mother Yashoda opening her young son's mouth and, much to her surprise, getting a glimpse of the entire universe), Dayanand has no patience for things that are not what they seem. Religious hypocrites are threatening because they flout the correspondence between seeming and being: they are like cats that crouch before springing to kill, or herons that stand meditatively while hunting. Dayanand aims to expose their dissemblance, to bring appearance (pratīti) into alignment with reality (vastu). While the shape of his skepticism owes something to Vedānta, his determined empiricism does not. Where Shankara sought to lift the material veil from the formless divine, Dayanand sought to pull the curtain on unscrupulous mortals.

To be sure, Dayanand does lay out a devotional, metaphysical program in the *Satyārth Prakāsh*. He is a strident dualist, and his book makes this very clear. Dayanand insists that the individual soul must be different in kind from the ultimate Being (brahm), because while the soul is little and knows little (it is "alp aur alpagya"), God is

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<sup>67</sup> Lütt, "From Krishnalila," 148.

omnipresent (sarvavyāpak), omniscient (sarvagya), and never wrong (SP, 111). Counter-intuitively, however, it is precisely Dayanand's passionate commitment to transcendent divinity that enables his worldliness and his practical disinterest in matters divine. Dayanand's dualism disenchantments the world by relegating God to a separate sphere. Unlike in the Advaitin system, where the things of this world dissipate mistily into ultimate Being, in Dayanand's dualistic system they have ontological weight of their own. Cleared of constitutive illusion and divine mystery, they open themselves to clear apprehension by the knowing subject—and to instrumental manipulation by this same masterful agent. Dayanand's dualism was therefore an epistemological precondition for his interest in science, which could not proceed if, as in Vedantic thought, illusion remained the horizon of the real.

As the above discussion has demonstrated, Dayanand conceived of his work as a religious polemicist as central to the disenchantment of India. His book would expose the regime of pope-lila with all its illusions. It too, I would suggest, draws on the critical metaphors of Advaita Vedānta. In his explication of the serpent and the rope, Dayanand mentions a lamp (dīp) that brings light to the dark corner, revealing the snake for what it is. For Dayanand, his book is this lamp. The *Satyārth Prakāsh* offers both the “light of truth” and “light for truth”: it rescues the Vedic religion both by detailing its teachings and by shining its critical scrutiny on India's religious delusions. Dayanand conceived of the book as “straight talk” (siddh bāt) that would build up true religion and tear down falsehood.<sup>68</sup> When the deluded saw it (isko dekhnā), they would come to

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<sup>68</sup> “satya-mat kā maṇḍan aur asatya kā khaṇḍan” (SP, 226).

understand the difference between the two.<sup>69</sup> As he wrote, it is not natural (*sahaj*) for knowledge (*vigyan*) to remain hidden (*gupt*).

### The Criticism of Religions

Dayanand defines the task of the *Satyārth Prakāsh*'s latter chapters as the “critical appraisal of Indian religions.”<sup>70</sup> He conceives of this critical appraisal (*samālocana*) as different in kind from the work of mere polemicists, who engage in the field of controversialist debate (*vādvivād*). His aim in this book is not to destroy or oppose anyone;<sup>71</sup> rather, he wants only to distinguish (*nirṇay karna*) between truth and untruth. As he writes, humans are born to determine truth, not to stir controversy.<sup>72</sup>

He comes down hard on what he calls “interreligious debate” (*matmatāntar vivād*), an activity that, he claims, can produce only falsehood (*mithyā*) and unwanted fruit (*aniṣṭi phal*). By condemning interreligious debate, Dayanand indicates that his task transcends the field of controversy. If the “*matmatāntar*” includes all that is immanent to religion, all that is “between” or “within” (both “*antar*”) the competing sects (*mats*), then Dayanand presents his position as that of transcendent critique. He gains his higher ground through the ultimate authority of the Vedas.

Dayanand concludes his history of Indian religions with a story that dramatizes his attempt to rise above the field of interreligious debate. Suppose a king gathered an

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<sup>69</sup> “*satya-asatya mat sab ko vidit ho jāegā*” (*SP*, 226).

<sup>70</sup> “*āryāvarttīya matpanthoṃ kī samālocanā*” (*SP*, 5).

<sup>71</sup> “*merā tātparyya kissī kī hāni vā virodh karne meṃ nahīm*” (*SP*, 226).

<sup>72</sup> “*na ki vādvivād, virodh karne-karāne ke liye*” (*SP*, 226).

assembly (sabhā) of representatives from all the religious traditions (sampradāya). Although all of the assembled could be classed in four categories (Purani, Jaini, Kirani, and Kurani), they would number about a thousand. Suppose then that some curious investigator (jigyāsū) interrogated each of the gathered representatives. He might begin with the Wam-Margi (representative of the left-handed path of Tantra):

Q: “Hey, Maharaj! Up to now, I have not chosen a guru or a religion. Tell me! Whose is the best of all the religions? Which one should I choose?”

A: “It is ours.”

Q: “How are the other nine hundred and ninety nine?”

A: “All are false and lead to hell.... There is no religion higher than ours” (SP, 317).

Having learned a little about this first false religion, the investigator moves on. The Wam Margi protests (“Yikes! What confusion you have fallen into. Don’t go near anyone. Become our disciple.”), but to no avail. The investigator circles the room, questioning a Shaiva, a Vedanti, a Jain, a Christian, a Maulvi, a Vaiṣṇava, plus sectarians of Kabir, Nānak, Dādu, Vallabha, Sahajānand, Mādhva, and others. Each claims the unparalleled superiority of his own religion. The form of the story, however, belies this claim: the thousand religions are nothing if not identical in their pretensions to singular truth. The investigator concludes his research more perplexed than when he began it. He overwhelmed by the dissension (viroddh) among the nine hundred ninety-nine teachers, and he concludes that none of them is worthy (yogya) of being his guru. They are merely shopkeepers, merchants, and pimps (bhaṛuā) who praise their own goods (vastu) while insulting those of others (316-318).

The befuddled investigator, however, does not give up. He finds a sage (an “āptvīgyān” individual) to whom he confesses his confusion: “If I become the disciple of any one of the sampradayas, I will make opponents (viroddhī) of the other nine hundred ninety-nine. Whoever has nine hundred ninety-nine enemies and one friend will never have peace. Please instruct me as to which religion I should follow.” The sage informs the seeker that all the sects are born of ignorance and run by tricksters. However, there is a solution. “In whatever matter the thousand sects are of one mind, that is to be taken as the Vedic religion. And in whatever matter there is dissension among them, that is to be taken as imaginary, false, irreligious, and unacceptable.”<sup>73</sup>

Having taken this advice, Dayanand avers that the “ekmat” (that in which all religions are in agreement) can only be the “vedmat” (the Vedic religion). In this scenario, the Vedic religion can only be the One Religion if everyone agrees on it. Within the bounds of this narrative, Dayanand is able to engineer a broad consensus. The investigator (his proxy), steps into the center of the circle (maṇḍalī), and from his transcendent vantage point, gets all of the teachers to agree to the tenets of the Vedic religion. Somewhat tautologically, the primary point of agreement is that religion is the stuff of truth, not falsehood.<sup>74</sup> Like a subcontinental Herbert of Cherbury, the Vedic critic locates his set of Common Notions. However, his effort quickly fails. Falsehood is very profitable, and the thousand teachers refuse to sacrifice their livelihoods to the

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<sup>73</sup> In whatever matter the thousand sects are of one mind (jis bāt meṃ yeh sahestra ekmat hoṃ), that is to be taken as the Vedic religion (voh vedmat grāhya hai). And in whatever matter there is dissension among them (jismeṃ paraspar virodh ho), that is to be taken as imaginary, false, irreligious, and unacceptable (voh kalpit, jhūṭhā, adharm, agrāhya hai) (318-319).

<sup>74</sup> Is religion in true speech or in illusion (satyabhāṣaṃ meṃ dharm vā mithyā meṃ)?”

truth. They admit their guilt (as Dayanand puts it, their inner “lila” comes out [tumhārī bhītar kī līlā bāhar ā gāī], but they do not convert (320).

Moreover, they mount a cogent argument: there can never be one religion (ekmat) in the world because human virtues, deeds, and natures (guṇ-karm-svabhāv) will always be diverse (bhinn-bhinn). This classic formulation enables a certain kind of tolerance. There are many paths to God and Truth, and because individuals differ, each will find a different path appropriate. Dayanand has a ready (and somewhat menacing) answer to this objection. A program of Vedic education will unite these diverse natures and so create a nation wherein it would be possible to impose a single religion (SP, 319-20). In other words, the disciplines laid out in the first half of the *Satyārth Prakāsh* will remake everyone’s corrupted minds, such that their universal application will produce universal agreement (ekmat). Dayanand seeks to exercise a pastoral power over the Indian population, managing both the bodies and the souls of the nation.

I think it is significant, however, that he cannot or will not imagine a triumphant Vedic truth. Even in his fantasy assembly of all religions, the popes continue to resist him. In the opening prologue to the tale, Dayanand ponders the problem of whether religion (dharm) is one or many (ek vā anek), and, if it is many, whether its different sects are opposed to one another. “If they are opposed,” he writes, “then without the first, the second religion cannot exist.”<sup>75</sup> That is, in the oppositional arena of the polemic public, the true religion always comes second. It defines itself in relation to the lie and is therefore always the other, the supplement to that lie. With this maxim in mind (ek ke binā, dusrā nahīṃ ho saktā), the singularity of the single

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<sup>75</sup> viruddh hote haiṃ, to ek ke vinā dusrā dharm nahīṃ ho saktā (316).

religion (the “ek” in “ekmat”) starts to look a little strange. If truth can only exist in the secondness of the lie, then the “ekmat” cannot be the true religion. Rather, the lie is the first religion, and it serves a productive function. The lie allows truths to proliferate; it is the zero that begins the ordinal chain of nine hundred and ninety nine religions. And if the lie is the first religion (the ekmat), then it is the lie that stands at the center of the encircled assembly (the zero of the religious mandala) to call all the religions to order.

### **Xenopopery**

In this chapter, I have described how Swami Dayananda Saraswati’s *Satyārth Prakāsh* uses the figure of the pope to explain the historical fall of Vedic Hinduism into Puranic heterodoxy. Dayanand wants to purge Hindu practice of sacerdotalism, image worship, caste bias, and hazily mystical ontologies—all of which, as he tells it, arose in the debased Kali Yug. It is not surprising then that he has been so often hailed as the “Luther of Modern India.” I want to close my discussion by suggesting how Dayanand’s neologism “pope-lila” both supports this appellation and calls it into question. On the one hand, of course, a neo-Vedic Hinduism pitched against the popes is by its very constitution Protestant. On the other hand, however, Dayanand, was quite careful to use a foreign term to traduce his opponents: heterodox Hindus, once dubbed “popes,” were forced into semantic exile. Their truth-seeking critics, meanwhile (the *sattpurūṣ*) remained firmly associated with India. To claim both sides of this conflict for Europe by hailing Dayanand as a “Luther” is to undo an important piece of his polemic project. As far as Dayanand was concerned, truth and the criticism of religion were innately

Indian; it was the charlatanic parody of true religion that came from abroad to institute a regime of cultural hybridity.

Of course, I too have tried to deny Dayanand his desired purity. I have suggested that his “pope-lila” is, in the sense meant by Dilip Gaonkar, a “creative adaptation” of priestcraft. Dayanand used “pope-lila” to articulate an alternative anticlerical modernity and locate a distinctively Indian pre-history for the modern criticism of religion. He identifies Shankara as an indispensable forbearer to his neo-Vedic reforms, even while using the figure of the priestly imposter to reduce the scope of Vedantic maya: rather than producing the material world, and thus serving in a sense as the horizon of the real, illusion for Dayanand is simply deceit. It is a priestly ruse that must be dispelled before humanity can reclaim the true religion of the lost Vedic age. This is, to be sure, an Enlightenment Hinduism that forecasts a future brimming with right knowledge. But it is also, and I think more importantly, a critically hybrid Hinduism. The conjunctive hyphen in “pope-lila” allows Dayanand critical purchase on two imaginaries of illusion, allowing him to play the one off the other.

Dayanand was not the only theorist of priestly illusion and colonial encounter to visit Bombay in the 1870s. In 1878, the neo-Vedic reformer received a letter from a Russian noblewoman and an American colonel. In 1875, the same year that he had published the *Satyārth Prakāsh* and founded the Arya Samaj, this eccentric duo had founded a group that they called the Theosophical Society. Its New York membership delighted in the occult, in spiritualistic experimentation, in comparative religion, and (increasingly) in the mystic East. It would be another year until H. P. Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott relocated to Bombay, but when Dayanand replied to their letter, two

of the decade's most important religious movements formed an uneasy alliance. If the two groups had less in common than their founders had originally thought, at least they shared a single enemy: Olcott's invectives against India's "crafty and selfish priesthood" proved just as caustic as Dayanand's diatribes against "popelila."<sup>76</sup>

Blavastky, however, proved to be a problem. Within four years of that first letter, Dayanand decided that her interest in illusionism was very different from his own. And in a March 1882 speech entitled "The Humbuggery of the Theosophists," the Swami went public with his suspicions. The speech accuses the Theosophists of embezzlement, religious fickleness, and intentional deceit. They were, Dayanand announced, no better than jugglers and magicians.<sup>77</sup> In other words, the Theosophists were to be classed with the popes. The next chapter turns from Dayanand to the alleged "lila" of his Theosophical acquaintances. In 1884, two years after his denunciatory speech, they found themselves embroiled in a momentous scandal that, as I will demonstrate, brought the question of religious imposture to vivid life.

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<sup>76</sup> Henry Steel Olcott, "An Address by Col. Henry S. Olcott, President of the Theosophical Society, to the Arya Samaj of Meerut, Delivered May 5<sup>th</sup> 1879, on the Occasion of a Public Welcome to a Committee of the Theosophical Society, by the Revered Swamee Daya Nand Saraswati, and the Meerut Samaj" (Roorkee, India: Thomason Civil Engineering College Press, 1879), 2-4.

<sup>77</sup> A translation of the speech is to be found in Sarda, *Life of Dayanand Saraswati*. For additional description of the short-lived alliance between the Arya Samaj and the Theosophical Society, see Chhajju Singh, *Life and Teachings*, 476-532; Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements*, 110, 226; Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, vol 1., 135, 394-40

## 5: A SKEPTIC'S MEDIUM

“Wherefore if they shall say unto you, ‘Behold! He is in the secret chambers,’ believe it not.”  
Matthew 24: 26 <sup>1</sup>

“I believe, O Lord; help thou my unbelief.”  
H. P. Blavatsky <sup>2</sup>

Whether celebrated as the “mouthpiece of hidden seers” or saluted as “one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting imposters in history,” it is clear that Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky has earned a title to permanent remembrance in the annals of religious illusion.<sup>3</sup> Blavatsky distilled the core elements of the imposture narrative like few others, using imposture not only to question the epistemological procedures of the secular modern, but also to cast occult connections between colony and metropole. She was, in short, a skeptic’s medium, whose career troubled the hoary conflict between doubt and belief by reimagining the associative possibilities of both.

More than a century of writing has sought to define Blavatsky once and for all as either a conniving huckster or a martyred divine. My analysis will bypass this debate by interrogating the discursive conjuncture that made the question of fraud a resonant one in the 1880s (and afterwards). Rather than asking whether Blavatsky was an imposter, I will ask how multiple intersecting discourses produced “imposture” as a stock narrative for traducing religion. I will consider both how the imposture narrative overdetermined efforts to adjudicate the truth of Theosophical miracle and how it

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in A. R. Fausset, *Spiritualism Tested by Scripture* (London: Church of England Book Society, 1885), 13.

<sup>2</sup> H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett, March 17, 1885 (ML-138), in *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, eds. A. T. Barker and Vincente Hao Chin, Jr. (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1998), 443-448.

<sup>3</sup> “Statement and Conclusions of the Committee,” *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 3 (1885): 207. Henceforth cited as *SPR Proceedings*.

proved productive for Theosophists and their critics alike. If the perennial debate over Blavatsky's alleged fraud has proved anything, it is not her innocence nor her guilt, but rather the persistent appeal of the charlatan as a metonym for modernity and its anxieties about religion.

In order to trace the specific effects of the allegations of fraud against Blavatsky, I will analyze documents from the Coulomb Affair of 1884-85, the biggest scandal to shake the young Theosophical Society. Like the Maharaj Libel Affair, the Coulomb scandal assumed the proportions that it did precisely because of its ability to distill and dramatize the fundamental elements of the imposture narrative. The scandal centered not on the adjudication of truth, but rather on the spectacle of a potent modern mythology played out in print. The major parts (charlatan, dupe, critic) were known already; what remained to be seen was who would be cast in which role and how exactly the plot would unfold.

The Coulomb Affair was at its most interesting in the moments when the players either resisted their parts or attempted to negotiate the terms of the narrative. While the following discussion will highlight several such moments, none are more significant than Blavatsky's own experiments with the standard plotline of divine exposure. Where many critics have sought to explain Blavatsky by positing "hidden motives" behind her alleged impostures ("pecuniary gain," "religious mania," the "morbid yearning for notoriety," a secret life as a Russian spy),<sup>4</sup> I look to the surface of her apparent charlatanic performance to ask how she understood the role of imposter

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Hodgson, "Account of Personal Investigations in India and Discussion of the Authorship of the 'Koot Hoomi' Lettes," *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 3 (1885): 313-317.

so often assigned to her. Blavatsky sought to explore the limits of credulity, opening religious imaginaries foreclosed by the usual binary of “self-deceived idiots” and “fraudulent imposters.”<sup>5</sup>

The analysis in this chapter contributes to what I see as a third wave in the literature on Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society. The first response to Theosophy has typically been to weigh its truth claims, both supernatural and philological, either alleging or denying fraudulence. A second wave of research distanced itself from the question of fraud in order to show how the Society served as an important nexus for the articulation of major cultural, political, and intellectual movements of its period, including feminism, anti-colonialism, Hindu reformism, Western Buddhism, Sri Lankan “Protestant” Buddhism, and post-Enlightenment esotericism.<sup>6</sup> Particular attention has been paid to the Society’s staggeringly transnational reach, which extended to the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Germany, Russia, India, Ceylon, Indonesia, and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> This was a truly global religion fueled by cosmopolitan

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<sup>5</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 October 1884, as quoted in *The Theosophist*, December 1884, 70.

<sup>6</sup> Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England* (London: Virago, 1989); Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Joy Dixon, *Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2001); Gauri Viswanathan, “Conversion, Theosophy, and Race Theory,” in *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 177-208; Stephen R. Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon: Theosophy and the Emergence of the Western Guru* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1993); Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Maria Carlson, “No Religion Higher Than Truth”: *A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875-1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Herman A. O. de Tollenaere, *The Politics of Divine Wisdom: Theosophy and labour, national, and women’s movements in Indonesia and South Asia, 1875-1947* (Leiden: Uitgeverij Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1996); Carla Risseuw “Thinking culture through counter-culture: the case of theosophists in India and Ceylon and their ideas on race and hierarchy (1875-1947),” in *Gurus and their followers*, ed. Antony Copley (New York: Oxford 2000); Laurie J. Sears, “Intellectuals, theosophy, and failed narratives of the nation in late colonial Java,” in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwartz and Sangeeta Ray (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000); Edward C.

ideals, and, as such, it warrants inclusion in histories of globalization and global cultural forms.

More recently, a handful of literary scholars have returned to the more hotly contested aspects of Theosophy, but in doing so have resisted the hackneyed debate about fraud.<sup>8</sup> Rather, their work has begun to develop a more sophisticated hermeneutic for interpreting Blavatskyian occultism, whether by replacing “the notion of fraudulence” with notions of “prosthesis, simulation, and plagiarism”; by reconsidering the political valence of conversion and belief; or by revisiting the loquacious Mahatmas and the modes of literary subjectivity modeled in their letters.<sup>9</sup> My analysis will expand on what I take to be a major implication of this work: that it is high time we revisited questions of fraud and false belief. I do so by delineating the precise notions of fraudulence that were available to participants in the Coulomb Affair, particularly in India.<sup>10</sup>

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Moulton, “The Beginnings of the Theosophical Movement in India, 1879-1885: Conversion and Non-Conversion Experiences,” in *Religious Conversion Movements in South Asia: Continuities and Change, 1800-1900*, ed. Geoffrey A. Oddie (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), 109-172.

<sup>8</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, “The Ordinary Business of Occultism,” *Critical Inquiry* 27 (Autumn 2000): 1-20; Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Aravamudan, *Guru English*, 106

<sup>10</sup> While the Coulomb Affair should also be understood as part of a larger history of occultism in colonial India, that history has not (to my knowledge) been written, and doing so is well beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that the same sorts of experiments in mesmerism, séances, ghosts, and spirits that proved popular in the North Atlantic countries also enjoyed some cachet among Anglo-Indians. Some examples: In 1847, a Bombay dentist (one Dr. H. Miller) successfully mesmerized his patient before removing twelve of her teeth (*Bombay Times and Courier*, June 9, 1847). A Calcutta debating society concluded that the dead do in fact sometimes visit the living (*Poona Observer*, June 18, 1861). The *Bombay Gazette* reported on the “table rapping humbug,” Mr. Foster, currently the rage in London (*Bombay Gazette*, April 11, 1862). A small séance in Poona drew forth the spirit of Cagliostro (“Séance in Poona,” *Bombay Gazette*, May 12, 1862). And in the same month, a Sindhi newspaper compared a sayyid’s intervention with Pir Ghazi to the fashionable London séances of Mr. Foster, “the Yankee imposter” (“Spiritualism in Sind,” *The Sindian*, May 21, 1862; reproduced in *Bombay Gazette* June 2, 1862).

Imposture implies exposure, the unveiling of the charlatan's fraud; and the trope of exposure was, in turn, predicated on ideas about publicity and the public sphere. As I will suggest, just as Blavatsky experimented with the standard narrative of false belief, she also experimented with the limits of publicity and public knowledge. Theosophy demonstrates that public spheres, rather than being natural or inevitable, emerge as imagined and idiosyncratic fields, wherein "social space" is not only always "curved,"<sup>11</sup> but also in constant flux. Ghostlike, they materialize at a properly voiced incantation, but they also dissipate just as quickly. There is perhaps no pithier expression of this paradigm than Theosophical co-founder Henry Steel Olcott's quip about the global brotherhood of man: "Theosophy is the enchantress who alone can conjure it up."<sup>12</sup> Publics are phantom entities, conjured by sorcerer institutions.

Publics have also been said to rely on an "open" spirit, and it is the presumption of public openness that will occupy the bulk of my attention here. The Coulomb Affair was nothing if not a contestation over the proprieties of exposing religion to public scrutiny. The following discussion will demonstrate how participants in the Affair invoked an ethic of openness, wielding it against the "fake" religion of their rivals and inflecting it with their own devotional idioms, always anchoring the public imaginary in that which exceeds and eludes it—Truth, God, miracle.

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<sup>11</sup> See Hent de Vries' invocation of Levinas in "In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies," in *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Steel Olcott, "Theosophy: Its Friends and Enemies," Address delivered at Framji Cowasji Institute, Bombay, 27 February 1881 (Bombay: Industrial Press, 1881), 16.

The first part of the chapter is largely descriptive. Its three short sections narrate the Coulomb Affair (“Isis Very Much Unveiled”); note the short-lived possibility that Blavatsky, like Jadunathji Maharaj before her, would file a libel suit against her journalistic attacker (“Courting Libel”); and chart the basic contours of the colonial public within which the affair unfolded (“Curvatures of the Colonial Public”). Readers already familiar with the Coulomb Affair, or otherwise impatient with expository detail, may want to skip the first two sections in particular.

The principle analysis comes in the second part of the chapter. There, five sections develop a series of interlinked arguments. First (in “Confessing the Faith”), I suggest that Indian Theosophists were doubly bound by imperial ideologies that pushed Indian politics to the “private” domain of religion, while simultaneously constraining religious belief with the stereotype of the “credulous Hindu.” The section concludes with an analysis of how one Bengali Theosophist (Mohini Chatterjee) tried to intervene in the discursive constitution of “belief” by placing renewed emphasis on “trust” in the guru. Second (“Dialectics of Enlightenment”), I track how the Theosophists appropriated the “conflict narrative” of Science and Religion, as articulated by John William Draper, by positing Theosophy as the synthesis of the two. I further suggest that, particularly during the Coulomb Affair, this dialectic was intertwined with the related interplay of concealment and openness.

Third (“Epistemologies of Exposure”), I describe how scientists, missionaries, and Theosophists all espoused an ethic of openness. That is, they all repeatedly invoked the idea that religion must lay itself bare to the scrutinizing attention of the critical public if it is to avoid the moral ills of priestcraft. Fourth (“Epistemology of the Veil”), I

argue that Blavatsky tried to articulate an alternative to the epistemology of exposure in her occult meditations on the hidden life of spirits. Her epistemology of the veil promised both closure and openness simultaneously, an experiment in occult knowledge that sought to interrupt the public certainties promised by the exposure narrative. For Blavatsky, the cloaked lie was subsumed, not displaced, by the naked truth. Finally, by way of conclusion (“Signs Taken for Wonders”), I use a period book review to theorize miracle as that which refuses to unveil itself fully to the knowing subject.

### **Isis Very Much Unveiled**

Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky had been in a “dreadful state all day,”<sup>13</sup> her corpulent, gout-stricken frame rattled by bad news from India. A prodding telegram, a “lugubrious letter,”<sup>14</sup> a friend fresh from Suez: the fast-moving missives of nineteenth-century modernity had overtaken her on her European tour, and they brought ill tidings. Madame Blavatsky had been betrayed.

Emma Coulomb, her trusted secretary and an old friend from back in her Cairo days, had violated the trust not only of Blavatsky, but of the entire Theosophical Society. Since her appearance in Bombay over four years previously (March 1880), with her husband Pierre in tow, Emma had proved an unruly and often unorthodox Theosophist. The mounting antagonism between her and the other members of the Society had come to a head that May (1884), when an emergency meeting voted to eject

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<sup>13</sup> Henry Steel Olcott diary, September 27, 1884, Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, September 10, 1884.

her from campus for slandering Blavatsky. Now, in September, those slanders had exploded into a scandal that would shake the status of the Theosophical Society as a preeminent peddler of the global occult.

An angry Emma had delivered to the *Madras Christian College Magazine* a set of letters, ostensibly sent to her by Blavatsky. They offered a basic course in divine theatrics; dating back several years, the letters explicitly instructed Coulomb in how to stage “phenomena” for Theosophists and possible converts to the cause (particularly those with deep pockets, like Jacob Sassoon, the Bombay tycoon), telling her where and when Koot Hoomi and the other “Mahatmas” should manifest their “astral” forms (their physical bodies remaining in Tibet) and where and when they should “precipitate” letters. According to Coulomb, the extraordinary events that had followed in Blavatsky’s wake— roses raining from palace ceilings, heads wafting through tropical evenings, letters careening into railway windows, teacups surfacing from virgin ground—had never been anything but the basest hokum. Even Blavatsky’s revered Shrine Room, centered on the Cabinet of Wonders, had been specially engineered by Pierre to enable imposture.

In its September issue, the *Madras Christian College Magazine*, edited by the Reverend George Patterson, published Coulomb’s letters under the salacious title “The Collapse of Koot Hoomi.” Patterson’s purported exposure of Blavatsky, with its frequent appeals to “public duty,” prodded readers’ curiosity into a sustained scandal— an avalanche of prose would weigh the plausibility of miracle and the culpability of miracle-makers. A few newspapers defended Theosophy, maintaining of the Coulomb

allegation that “*prima facie* it is worthless.”<sup>15</sup> Most, however, gleefully dissected Blavatsky’s modern miracles. London’s *Graphic* reported that Koot Hoomi’s astral body had been nothing more than “a crafty arrangement of bladders, muslin, and a mask, while the wonder-working shrine at Madras was no more than an ordinary conjuror’s cabinet.”<sup>16</sup> Other papers went still further in denouncing “miracle-mongering” by predicting that “[s]o complete is the exposure of Madame Blavatsky and her miracles... that the Theosophical Society is now done for;”<sup>17</sup> by celebrating Patterson’s “good and courageous service in thus unmasking what seems to be no other than a gigantic fraud, and so emancipating the country from what was fast becoming a cruel superstition;”<sup>18</sup> or, more pruriently, reporting that “Isis has again been unveiled. The goddess has been exposed in all her nakedness, and the great Koot Hoomi has fallen upon his face.”<sup>19</sup>

In November 1884, young Australian researcher Richard Hodgson, emissary of Cambridge’s Society for Psychical Research (S.P.R.), arrived at the Society’s Madras headquarters to conduct a “scientific” investigation of the phenomena, as part of a broader inquiry into the supernatural claims of religion per se.<sup>20</sup> Before Hodgson’s visit,

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<sup>15</sup> *Preston Guardian*, September 27, 1884.

<sup>16</sup> *Graphic* (London), September 27, 1884.

<sup>17</sup> *Liverpool Mercury*, October 13, 1884.

<sup>18</sup> *Post* (Bangalore), as quoted in *Madras Times*, September 17, 1884.

<sup>19</sup> *Deccan Times* (Madras), as quoted in *Madras Times*, September 22, 1884.

<sup>20</sup> *SPR Proceedings*, 203. The S.P.R. had been founded in 1882 to apply scientific methods to the study of psychical phenomena. From the first, it had many high-profile members, such as Cambridge professor of moral philosophy Henry Sidgwick; later associates would include figures as diverse as Lewis Carroll and Henri Bergson. The investigation of the Theosophical Society was one of the S.P.R.’s earliest and most controversial undertakings. For a thorough account of the S.P.R. and its historical context, see Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research In England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). For additional discussion of the S.P.R.’s aims and the place of the Theosophical

the Theosophists had been very friendly with the S.P.R., praising it in print and even volunteering to be interviewed at its London office.<sup>21</sup> This period of amity, however, drew to an emphatic close in spring 1885, when the S.P.R. published Hodgson's report on the Theosophical Society. The *Report's* conclusion has generally been taken as the resounding final word on Blavatsky and the Coulomb Affair: "For our own part, we regard her neither as the mouthpiece of hidden seers, nor as a mere vulgar adventuress; we think that she has achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting imposters in history."<sup>22</sup>

Miracle had clearly gotten lost in the mail, and, with it, Blavatsky's role as divine postwoman. Despite Theosophists' frequent protests to the contrary, the lure of the phenomena, in all their ambiguity, had anchored the Society's occult intervention into the discursive field of "world religions." Theosophy had promised unique access to a single truth underlying all religious systems, and it had vowed that, under its watch, no religion would climb higher than this truth. If its occult spaces harbored not divine verities, but rather all-too-human deceptions, this core Theosophical contract would be rendered null and void.

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investigation within its larger project, see Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living*, vol.1 (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Fascimiles and Reprints, 1970 [1886]), xlvi-lvii.

<sup>21</sup> As late as October 1884, *The Theosophist* had looked forward to the day when, thanks to the S.P.R., scientific authority would finally concede "the so long pooh-pooed phenomena of mind"; *The Theosophist* 1.10 (October 1884): 21. In May and June 1884, Henry Steel Olcott, Alfred Percy Sinnett, and Mohini Chatterjee had been interviewed by the S.P.R. during their sojourn in England. See SPR.MS.4/1/1-4/1/4

<sup>22</sup> *SPR Proceedings*, 207.

## Courting Libel

The great religious scandal of the 1860s (the Maharaj Libel Affair) assumed the proportions that it did because it was played out in the Bombay High Court. Karsandas Mulji defamed Vallabhacārya Maharaj Jadunathji Brizratanji in his newspaper, the *Satya Prakash*, and Jadunath sued him for libel. The court then had to decide whether the libel was justified—that is, whether the Maharaj had done the terrible things that Mulji had alleged. In the process, it found itself adjudicating the authenticity of an entire religious sect.

The Coulomb Affair could well have developed along parallel lines. Patterson defamed Blavatsky, and she in turn could have sued him for libel. Indeed, when she arrived in India in December 1884, she seemed determined to do just that. While still in London, she had resolved to prosecute Patterson and the Coulombs, and so on her way to India she stopped off in Cairo, the city where she had first met Emma. She telegraphed Olcott from Cairo to tell him that she had successfully gathered “legal proofs” that the Coulombs had fled Egypt “to escape arrest for fraudulent bankruptcy.” But once she finally arrived in Madras, Olcott was dismayed at the quality of her proofs. “Acting without legal advice,” he wrote, “she had made a mess of the affair.” Although Blavatsky kept badgering Olcott “to take her to a judge, or solicitor, or barrister, no matter which,” he demurred, insisting that before she file an affidavit, she wait for the Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society. There, a special committee could decide the best course of action.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Henry Steel Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves: The History of the Theosophical Society*, vol. 3 (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 2002), 195-197.

On December 27, 1884, Olcott opened the Convention with his inaugural address. Before referring the problem to the special committee, he noted that the “vast majority of our members throughout the world have expressed a decided objection” to filing suit against Coulomb and Patterson. Like them, he thinks “it will be impossible to avoid having the trial of Madame Blavatsky’s reputation turned into a trial of the truth of the Esoteric Philosophy and the existence of the Mahatmas.” Such “sacred” subjects should not be surrendered to the courts. Moreover, Anglo-Indian attorneys would be given the “utmost latitude” to “goad to desperation our witnesses, especially Madame Blavatsky, whose extreme nervousness and excitability all know.” A trial would be disastrous for Theosophy’s public image, and this, Olcott thinks, is exactly why a trial is what Theosophy’s enemies want most. At all costs, Blavatsky must be kept out of the witness box.<sup>24</sup>

The special committee came to more or less the same conclusion.<sup>25</sup> They chewed on Madras gossip, repeating an overheard conversation in which an influential citizen said he hoped Blavatsky would bring an action “so that this d---d fraud may be shown up, and it is not at all impossible that she may be sent to the Andaman Islands.” They weighed legal precedent, notably a libel case brought by Bengali reformer Keshab

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 198-200

<sup>25</sup> The committee was chaired by Norendro Nath Sen, editor of the *Indian Mirror* and Honorary Magistrate, Calcutta. Its members were as follows: A. J. Cooper-Oakley, Registrar, Madras University; Franz Hartmann, M.D.; S. Ramaswamier, District Registrar, Madura; Naoroji Dorabji Khandalavala, Judge; H. R. Morgan, Major- General; Gyanendranath Chakrabarty, M.A., Inspector of Schools and formerly Professor of Mathematics, Allahabad; Nobin K. Bannerji, Deputy Collector and Magistrate; T. Subba Row, Pleader, High Court, Madras; P. Sreenivasrow, Judge; P. Iyaloo Naidu, Deputy Collector (Ret.); Rudolph Gebhard; R. Raghoonath Row, Deputy Collector, Madras and former Prime Minister, Indore; and S. Subramania Iyer, since knighted by H.M. Government and now Justice of the High Court, Madras. All information given in Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, vol. 3, 200-201.

Chander Sen (cousin to the committee chair) and concluded that, at least in India, the position of plaintiff in a libel case is a dangerous one. They unanimously recommended that Blavatsky not prosecute, and their recommendation was adopted (again unanimously) by the Convention's assembled delegates.<sup>26</sup> Thus—and despite a short-lived attempt by Coulomb to bring her own libel suit against the Theosophist General Morgan, intending to subpoena Blavatsky in the process—the Society managed to keep Theosophy out of court.

Instead, it would be tried by the court of public opinion. Indeed, one notable feature of the Coulomb Affair is the pervasiveness of legalistic language in the public debate. Court or no court, juridical procedures were the order of the day. The S.P.R. canvassed Theosophical “witnesses” for “testimonies” about Blavatsky’s alleged miracles, while the likewise newspapers presented “proofs” to the court of public opinion. Theosophist Subramania Iyer argued that this dissemination of the juridical function from the state to the citizens would further the formation of autonomous liberal subjects. As he wrote, “every reasonable man is at liberty to form an opinion on the evidence placed before him” and should not “surrender” this capacity of “judgment to the verdict of a Court of Justice.”<sup>27</sup> Iyer’s claim secured the privacy of “belief” and argued for its invulnerability to interference from the colonial government or other institutions.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 200-203

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 202

## The Curvatures of the Colonial Public

The court of public opinion hailed by the Coulomb Affair was defined by a very particular medium (print) and a very particular historical condition (colonialism). The Affair raged primarily within the Anglophone print sphere, testing that sphere's global reach; but its debates also entered publics defined by other languages, including the colonized "vernacular" tongues against which English defined itself as cosmopolitan.

The scandal, of course, borrowed its basic contours from the occult counter-public forged by Theosophy itself.<sup>28</sup> The Theosophical Society had mapped its occult world through an epic endeavor in publicity, laboring for what A. P. Sinnett termed the "propagation of occult truths."<sup>29</sup> The dual commitment to secrecy and publicity was often an uneasy one for the Theosophists. There were those who worried that the very existence of the Theosophical Society was a transgression of sorts; that the Adepts, in authorizing Blavatsky to bring their teachings to the masses, had violated the esoteric code. The ambiguities of occult publicity also befuddled the S.P.R. As J. Herbert Stack wrote to Henry Sidgwick, "why all these publications and lectures and private efforts at propaganda? Why try to convert the West at all if they are resolved to remain wrapped in Oriental dignity?"<sup>30</sup>

Such contradictions, however, seem only to have incited more speech: from Blavatsky forward, the Theosophists have been a prolix bunch, producing thousands of

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<sup>28</sup> For the term "counter-public," see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> A. P. Sinnett, *The Occult World*, 9th ed. (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1984 [1881]), 29.

<sup>30</sup> Stack to Sidgwick, 17 October 1884, Papers Relating to the Investigation of Madame Blavatsky, Archives of the Society for Psychical Research, Cambridge University Library (4/1/8/i/2-3).

printed pages in several genres—not only Blavatskyian tomes, but also pamphlets, magazines, biographies, letters, speeches, and even novels. Although it was always accompanied by other modes of publicity (lectures, conventions, “phenomena”), print publishing was surely *the* quintessential Theosophical task, with no publication more central to the Society’s mission than its flagship journal, *The Theosophist*, launched from Bombay in September 1879.<sup>31</sup>

From the first, the polyglot Theosophical public found itself occupying—and occupied by—a language that was, for many voices, never quite comfortable. Even Blavatsky herself confessed that, when writing *Isis Unveiled* (1877), English was still very much “a language foreign to me—in which I had not been accustomed to write.”<sup>32</sup>

Throughout her life, she seems to have remained more at ease in Russian and French. If Koot Hoomi appeared in her dreams to mock her “Funny English” as “only a little

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<sup>31</sup> In order to get a better sense of the sort of publishing activity that the Coulomb Affair disrupted, one might note the contents of *The Theosophist*’s September 1884 issue, fated to be eclipsed by the *Madras Christian Magazine*’s exposé. There are articles by prominent Theosophists like Mohini Chatterjee (“Qualifications for Chelaship,” previously a talk given to the London Lodge) and Henry Steel Olcott (“The Dangers of Black Magic”), as well as extracts from non-Theosophical publications. There are extracts from the Buddhist *Dhammapada*; an essay on “Ancient Occultism in Caledonia”; and a piece on “The Buddhist Heaven,” reprinted from *The Statesman*. Additional articles treat topics as diverse as the Count de St. German (an alleged occultist), posthumous visitations, European Theosophy, and the history of magic. There are extensive extracts from European papers, as well as series of letters to the editor—one of which describes a “thelemometer,” or “will measurer.” One article (about an “epidemic” of thought-reading in Paris) was translated from a Swedish magazine. Two previous challenges to Theosophical truth are disputed in this issue of the magazine: the Kiddle Incident (in which Master Koot Hoomi inadvertently plagiarized a speech given by an American, Mr. Kiddle, in upstate New York) and Arthur Lillie’s pamphlet “Koot Hoomi Unveiled.” The latter picked apart the scholarship of Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* and Sinnett’s *Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism*; it argued that “Esoteric Buddhism” was hardly Buddhist at all. [See Arthur Lillie, “Koot Hoomi Unveiled; or Tibetan ‘Buddhists’ versus the Buddhists of Tibet (London: Psychological Press Association, c.1884)]. See *The Theosophist* 1.9 (September 1884).

<sup>32</sup> *The Theosophist*, January 1886, 279, as quoted by Boris de Zirkoff, “How ‘Isis Unveiled’ was Written,” in *Isis Unveiled*, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, ed. Boris de Zirkoff, 2 vols. (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 2006), 45.

worse” than his own, it was to emphasize her pidgin kinship with the astral babu.<sup>33</sup>

Theosophy’s “guru English,” unevenly inflected with (to name only the languages that impinge directly on this scandal) Russian, French, German, Tamil, Telugu, Gujarati, and Marathi, clearly allowed for the articulation of “discrepant” cosmopolitan identities not entirely assimilable to imperial projects.<sup>34</sup> But a Theosophy voiced in English could never hail a neutral public. The language of which it was born determined its peculiar colonial resonances, the knowledges that were legible to it, and those that must forever remain veiled.

Accordingly, coverage of the Coulomb Affair was most intensive in the English-language press. The scandal took shape in Anglophone ink in Madras, Bombay, Calcutta, London, Liverpool, Pittsburgh, Melbourne, and elsewhere. In addition to inciting spirited debate in Theosophical and missionary periodicals and pamphlets, the scandal saw regular coverage in major Anglo-Indian dailies like Madras’s *Times* and *Mail*; Bombay’s *Times of India*, *Guardian*, and *Mahratta*; Bangalore’s *Post* and *Spectator*; Allahabad’s *Pioneer*; and Calcutta’s *Statesman*, *Friend of India*, *Englishman*, and *Indian Daily News*. While some papers vigorously attacked Theosophy (e.g. the *Times of India*), others withheld judgment until the authenticity of the letters could be proved (e.g. the *Mahratta*) or worried about the precedent set by this incautious publication of private

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<sup>33</sup> The striking similarity of Blavatsky’s and Koot Hoomi’s English would be highlighted during the Coulomb Affair and S.P.R. investigation, proving useful fodder for those intent on collapsing the Mahatma into his amanuensis. Their shared “Gallicisms,” for instance, such as spelling “skeptic” with a “c,” seemed incontrovertible proof of their identity. Blavatsky’s defense: “I have learned my English from Him!” H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett, January 6, 1886 (ML-140), *Mahatma Letters*, 453-457

<sup>34</sup> Aravamudan, *Guru English*, 3.

letters (the *Madras Mail*).<sup>35</sup> Papers during the period reprinted each other's work routinely, and the resultant rapid recycling of journalistic prose was a necessary precondition of this and other scandals. Indeed, *The Theosophist*, in October 1884, accused the *Madras Christian College Magazine* of having manipulated this system to engineer the scandal; Patterson, it seems had distributed "advance proof sheets" to newspapers throughout India in order to create a "general and simultaneous howl against the Society."<sup>36</sup>

The geographic scope of the scandal indicates the extent of global interconnections among Anglophone reading publics of the period. It also suggests the importance of religious institutions in establishing such connections and incorporating local publics into global communities. Pittsburgh's *Presbyterian Banner*, for instance, energetically derided the distant Theosophists and proclaimed that "the Christian world is indebted for the complete investigation" that resulted in the "entire demolition" of Theosophy's truth claims.<sup>37</sup> Over the next few years, other papers in cities as far-flung as Melbourne and Boston would join the debate about Blavatsky.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> For summaries of contemporary newspaper coverage, see the *Madras Times*, September 17, 20, and 22, 1884.

<sup>36</sup> *The Theosophist*, October 1884, 1-2.

<sup>37</sup> "Esoteric Buddhism II," *Presbyterian Banner* (Pittsburgh), April 28, 1886. The official list for the Cambridge University Library special collection of materials pertaining to the S.P.R., where I found this newspaper clipping, dates it to April 28, 1884. This, of course, is more than a year before Hodgson published his report; a companion article is signed with the date April 7, 1886, and this article surely dates to the same year.

<sup>38</sup> *South Australian Register*, December 29, 1886; *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 8, 1887

The Indian vernacular press seems to have shown less interest in the Coulomb Affair.<sup>39</sup> At least one dual language paper—the *Dnyanodaya*— positioned the scandal as appealing only to readers of English. Despite commonly providing double coverage of stories in both Marathi and English, this missionary journal discussed Theosophy only in its English columns.<sup>40</sup> The article reporting the Coulomb letters laments that although this “revelation” should “explode the faith of all in this imposture,” the “infatuated” Theosophists will likely persist in their faith; the missionaries’ only hope is that Indians will in future be more suspicious of those who would flatter Indian religions at the expense of Christianity.<sup>41</sup> If the linguistic medium is part of the message, then the *Dyanodaya* implies that Anglophone Indians were most at risk of succumbing to such flattery.

Some vernacular papers did clearly assume that their readers would follow the Affair. Bombay’s Parsi-run, Gujarati-language *Satiya Mitra* (*Friend of Truth*), for instance, reported on the Coulomb letters, although not as extensively as did its English-language contemporaries. Two short articles reported the bare facts of the case, apparently assuming some background knowledge on the part of readers.<sup>42</sup> This assumption would surely have been warranted, as the Theosophical Society had

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<sup>39</sup> This claim is a tentative one. Indian-language papers tend not to have been preserved as meticulously as English papers; moreover, tracing the path of a scandal across vernacular India would require a range of linguistic competencies beyond the capacity of this, or surely any single, researcher.

<sup>40</sup> Here one might compare the coverage the Maharaj Libel Affair that the *Dyanodaya*, aspiring to lure Indians away from Hinduism, discussed in both languages.

<sup>41</sup> “The Collapse of Koot Hoomi,” *Dnyanodaya*, September 18, 1884. (I have retained the original transliteration of the bilingual journal’s Marathi title, which served in English as well. It was accompanied by the translation “Rise of Knowledge.”)

<sup>42</sup> *Satiya Mitra tatha Hakha Mazdayasannam* (Bombay), October 5 and 12, 1884.

broadcast its support for Zoroastrianism since 1879, even translating one of Olcott's speeches on Zarathustra into Gujarati.<sup>43</sup> It is also likely that the Affair's anti-clerical subtext (see below) would have resonated with Bombay's Parsis. A letter published in the *Satiya Mitra* on November 1884 (two months into the Affair) censured the onslaught of Christian priests ("krīṣṭian pāḍrio") intent on planting in the minds of Parsi youth the poison of infidelity ("pārśionī chokrionāṃ manmāṃ beimānīnu jehar dākhal karī").<sup>44</sup>

Conditions of colonialism shaped not only the form of the scandal—which public venues it entered, and which it did not—but also its content. From the start, Emma Coulomb paired her accusations of fraud with accusations that Blavatsky had agitated against British rule.<sup>45</sup> As the Affair progressed, this charge played itself out in a series of gossipy anecdotes about both women—while Blavatsky was famed for her surliness toward the British, Coulomb was said to keep a pack of mangy dogs to worry the brahmans. Blavatsky's renowned support for all things Indian won her both friends and foes. Perhaps most dramatically, when she returned at last to Madras on 21 December 1884, she disembarked to a cheering "delegation" of students who welcomed her "return from the intellectual campaigns... waged in the West" and proclaimed India's "immense debt of endless gratitude" to her. A written statement of these sentiments

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<sup>43</sup>Karnal Henrī Es Ālkāṭ, *Jarathoshti dharmni mul matlab vishe bhāṣaṇ* (Mumbai: Mumbai Samācār, 1882).

<sup>44</sup> *Satiya Mitra*, November 23, 1884.

<sup>45</sup> There may well have been something to these claims, as the Theosophists had for years opposed imperial rule. Consider, for instance, a letter to "a Hindu" that Olcott wrote from New York in 1878, in which he informed his correspondent that "[w]hile we have no political designs, you will need no hint to understand that our sympathies are with all those who are deprived of the right of governing their own lands for themselves. I need say no more." Quoted in Hodgson, "Account of Personal Investigations," 316.

was signed by more than three hundred “students of the colleges of Madras,” including Madras Christian College—although at least one newspaper account claims that such signatures could be acquired under false pretenses.<sup>46</sup>

Alongside colonialism, gender too shaped the public sphere conjured by the Coulomb Affair. While women and men both participated in the discussions about Coulomb and Blavastky, gender often coded the scandalous trajectories of their public careers. Gendered rhetoric determined the debate over the authenticity of the Coulomb letters in very concrete ways: handwriting expert J. D. B. Gribble attested that Emma Coulomb, with her “essentially feminine” hand could never have mimicked the “bold, free running masculine hand” of Blavatsky.<sup>47</sup> In more general terms, several participants imbued the entire public arena with a masculine ethos. Theosophist H. R. Morgan, for example, invested the public sphere with a martial masculinity: Gribble becomes the “chivalrous knight” of the missionaries, taking up the “gauge” of the opposition despite the risk of being “struck on the helmet, and hurled to the ground.”<sup>48</sup> Morgan further compares the entire missionary party to “the gladiators of old,” who would “exclaim in the arena of public opinion, *Ave Caesar morituri te salutant*, and forthwith perform the act of *Hari-kari*.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> A. P. Sinnett, *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky, Compiled from Information Supplied by her Relatives and Friends* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1913 [1886]), 228-229; “Christian College Students and Theosophy,” *Madras Times*, September 27, 1884; “Arrival of Theosophists,” *Madras Mail*, December 23, 1884; “Madame Blavatsky and the Students of the Madras Colleges,” *The Theosophist*, March 1885.

<sup>47</sup> J. D. B. Gribble, *A Report of an Examination into the Blavatsky Correspondence, Published in the Christian College Magazine* (Madras: Higginbotham and Co, 1884), 23-24.

<sup>48</sup> H. R. Morgan, *Reply to a Report of an Examination into the Blavatsky Correspondence by J.D.B. Gribble*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ootacamud: “Observer” Press, 1884), i.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Class also played a role. The most visible participants in the Affair occupied fairly elite social positions and, not coincidentally, were disproportionately employed in the Anglophone service professions that abutted the British imperial government (lawyers loom large here). The major exception to this rule seems to have been Babula, Blavatsky's personal servant, rumored to have once worked for a "French conjuror."<sup>50</sup> Hodgson once remarked that, as a servant, he would have been in the perfect position to perpetrate frauds. Servants, like Mahatmas, spend much of their lives cloaked in partial invisibility.

It was to this public, demarcated and defined by gender, language, class, and coloniality, that Patterson appealed in his exposé of Blavatsky. Its specific curvatures determined not only the shape of his call for truth and scrutiny, but also the discursive positions available to his would-be opponents.

### **Confessing the Faith**

At a fundamental level, the Coulomb Affair centered on the pertinence of belief as social fact, its scandal resisting the secularizing logic that would relegate religion to private liberties. Patterson urged the public to discipline religion, implying that false faiths endanger the social body and therefore must be eradicated.

Not everyone readily conceded the right of public institutions to regulate faith, however, and some of the most impassioned resistance came from Indian Theosophists. Judge Sreenevasa Row, for instance, argued that Patterson "has no right to make

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<sup>50</sup> Hodgson observes that "[i]t is curious how much Babula has been kept in the background of Mr. Sennett's account; careless, no doubt, and not carefully." *SPR Proceedings*, 265-267

allusions in public prints to my faith in spiritual matters, much less to find fault with it, and much less still to suggest that the so called exposure ought to effect a change in my views.” Row derided Patterson’s “very peculiar notion of public duty,” demanding, “What does the public care which faith an individual in the world belongs to?”<sup>51</sup>

One might, following Partha Chatterjee, read Row’s resistance to rendering religion public as tied to broader attempts on the part of Indian elites to demarcate a “domain of sovereignty” free from British influence.<sup>52</sup> In this reconstituted private arena, bourgeois Indian men could assert their dominance, despite public political venues having been usurped by the colonizers (a move with decidedly ambivalent effects on Indian women). The publishing interests of many of the older recruits, already classically educated before entering the Theosophical fold, bear out this suggestion. The Society and its journal provided an important institutional space for the translation, rejuvenation, and consolidation of Hinduism, often with little or no reference to Blavatsky’s teachings. Patterson’s effort to claim belief as a matter of public concern would have compromised the emergent political formation that had taken shelter in Theosophy’s occult spaces.

The ideologies of empire were, however, treacherously plural, such that public professions of belief by “Hindu” Theosophists, no matter how savvy or politicized, inevitably corroborated a colonial stereotype central to the unfolding of the Affair: that of the credulous “native.” Propounded by missionaries throughout the earlier part of

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<sup>51</sup> Morgan, *Reply to a Report*, viii.

<sup>52</sup> See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 6.

the nineteenth century, this racist discourse maintained that Indians were more prone toward religious gullibility than were Westerners.

This discourse entered the Coulomb Affair in all kinds of ways. It colored the S.P.R.'s purportedly "neutral" investigation of Theosophy, as is evidenced by Herbert Stack's suggestion, in a letter to Henry Sidgwick, that Theosophy's "rapid progress amongst uneducated, superstitious, and credulous natives is prima facie against it"<sup>53</sup>; and by Richard Hodgson's claim, based on a comparison of hypnosis research in London and Calcutta, that whenever possible psychological researchers should "experiment on Orientals" because they are more "susceptible" to mental manipulation.<sup>54</sup> It disrupted the solidarity between foreign and Indian Theosophists, as when Franz Hartmann complained to Hodgson of the "superstitious awe" with which Damodar Mavalankar regarded Blavatsky's occult shrine, or when St. George Lane-Fox dismissed all testimony about the Shrine by "native witnesses" due to the "exceeding reverence" in which they "universally" hold it.<sup>55</sup>

It certainly informed the opinions of the British press. Especially egregious was an article in London's *Graphic* that, comparing Theosophists' reverence for the "altar"

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<sup>53</sup> Stack to Sidgwick, 17 October 1884, SPR.MSS.4/1/8/ii/4-5.

<sup>54</sup> The two psychological experiments are Dr. Elliotson's hypnosis research at the University College of London and Mr. Esdaile's at a Calcutta hospital. Elliotson, despite extensive training in hypnosis, found his "human material was too intractable" for his experiment to succeed. "Esdaile, on the other hand, set to work at mesmerism almost by accident, and without any special knowledge whatever. But he found the Hindu subjects so susceptible that a conspicuous triumph was, so to speak, forced on him unawares." The "unknown blind Bengalee" succumbs, while the "too wide-awake British eye" resists the enchantments of magical authority. Hodgson writes that the S.P.R. "have always desired—and still desire—to establish a psychological laboratory at Calcutta or Madras." See Richard Hodgson, *First Report of the Committee of the Society for Psychological Research, Appointed to Investigate the Evidence for Marvellous Phenomena Offered by Certain Members of the Theosophical Society* (London: National Press Agency, 1884), 10.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Hodgson, "Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society," proof for *Contemporary Review* (not published), 20 June 1885; see SPR.MSS.4/3/8/19.

at Madras to the “adoration of the natives” prostrate before a “peepul tree,” faulted educated Indians for their regression back to “the absurdities of their ancient superstitions” via Theosophical “fraud” and “imposture.”<sup>56</sup> Indian fanaticism is the constant foil for a sober Euro-American rationality, and the anxious repetition of this stereotyped difference implies its innate instability—particularly evident in the case of Theosophy, which had fascinated British and Indian alike.<sup>57</sup>

The stereotypes of “native credulity” circumscribed the range of public actions available to the elite Indian men involved in the Theosophical Society and ensured that their public confessions of faith were overdetermined by multiple, competing imperial discourses. But just as their espousal of Theosophy indicated a canny awareness of how the transcendent sphere intersected with worldly politics, so too did their public avowal of “belief” allow them to reshape that volatile, ideological term.

All of this was especially relevant to the public personas of the enthusiastic younger converts to Theosophy like Damodar Mavalankar and Mohini Chatterjee.<sup>58</sup> Chatterjee was particularly keen on playing languages against each other both to redefine belief and to disrupt efforts to document it (as when he used his “defective” English to frustrate Richard Hodgson’s investigations).<sup>59</sup> In a September 1884 lecture,

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<sup>56</sup> “An Indian Scandal,” *The Graphic*, May 2, 1885.

<sup>57</sup> See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism*, in *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 66.

<sup>58</sup> In making a distinction between older Hindu elites who did little to modify their beliefs upon joining the Theosophical Society and the young recruits who cleaved more ardently to Blavatsky, I follow Moulton, “The Beginnings of the Theosophical Movement in India,” *ibid.*, 109.

<sup>59</sup> Hodgson was exasperated by Chatterjee’s testimonies, which often flatly contradicted those of other Theosophists. Once, when recanting his earlier account of a Mahatma miracle, Chatterjee faulted his

Chatterjee explicated the Sanskrit word “śraddhā” in order to demonstrate that “unswerving confidence in the master is not required as a means to build up a system of priestcraft.” Properly understood, “śraddhā” places equal emphasis on the “master’s power to teach” and the pupil’s “power to learn” and perform “independent investigation.” To “accept any authority as final, and to dispense with the necessity of independent investigation is destructive of progress. Nothing, in fact, should be taken upon blind, unquestioning faith.”<sup>60</sup>

A letter that Chatterjee later submitted to London’s *Pall Mall Gazette* indicates something of both the recalcitrance and the limited pliability of the discourse of “belief.” Chatterjee claimed that to “a Brahman, like myself, it is repugnant to speak of the sacredly confidential relationship existing between a spiritual teacher and his pupil.” The faith that happily renders an account of itself via profane speech is no faith at all. In the current case, however, “duty compels” Chatterjee to compromise his sacred bond by averring in public print that “I have personal and absolute knowledge of the existence of the Mahatma... ‘Koot Hoomi.’ I had knowledge of the Mahatma in question before I knew Madame Blavatsky.”<sup>61</sup>

Chatterjee appeals to the inviolability of “tradition” by describing his reluctance to speak his faith as a “brahman” peccadillo. He thereby bolsters the boundaries of the

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English: when he said he had been sitting on a rock when he saw the Mahatma, he had meant that he was sitting on the verandah. *SPR Proceedings*, 240-41.

<sup>60</sup> Mohini Chatterjee, “Qualifications of Chelaship,” *The Theosophist*, September 1884, 281-283. Ibid, 282. This speech was reprinted in *Man: Fragments of a Forgotten History by Two Chelas in the Theosophical Society* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1885). Alongside his evident Sanskritic erudition, Chatterjee quotes approvingly from Lord Byron’s poem “The Giaour”: “Yes, self abasement leads the way/ To villain bonds and despot’s sway.”

<sup>61</sup> Hodgson, *First Report*, 100.

privatized, ostensibly uncolonized spiritual sphere through an appeal to the colonial logic of non-interference in Indian custom. But for Chatterjee, this appeal to caste and tradition is also very personal: he surely invokes his caste status to recoup some of what was lost when he joined the Theosophical movement. He admits to having “lost all my worldly prospects” in Calcutta as a result of his unorthodox chelaship. Disowned at home for hitching himself to a *firangi* guru, he manages to repatriate his religion while residing in England. His true guru is not Blavatsky, but Koot Hoomi, and his astral discipleship predates his relations with that irascible Russian. Theosophy retreats into a realm inaccessible to the Anglophone public—figured by the imagined landscapes of Tibet—but well-known to the bilingual, high-caste Bengali.

Chatterjee’s insistence on the primacy of the guru-chela relationship also subtly shifts the focus of the Affair. Here, the faith that matters is not faith in theological propositions or miraculous events but rather faith in persons— not *belief* in dogma, but *trust* in the guru.<sup>62</sup> I would tentatively suggest that Chatterjee speaks between idioms, engaging both the dominant propositional mode of the scandal and his personal twist on it, when he swears to Koot Hoomi’s reality. On the one hand is a concern with the possibility of the Mahatmas per se, and on the other a chela’s love for his guru—the gap between a factual “knowledge” of the Master’s “existence” and a personal “knowledge of the Mahatma” himself. Whereas the propositional mode enjoins the public avowal of belief, the personal mode not only shuns publicity, it finds that it cannot speak itself adequately; it can only love and be silent.

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<sup>62</sup> Chatterjee likewise deemphasizes the importance of the phenomena in *S.P.R. Proceedings*, 239

## Dialectics of Disenchantment

By the 1880s, prominent voices in the Anglophone world had set out to refuse religion its silence and to reinforce the notion that faith is no more than the propositional tenets of belief. At the inception of the Theosophical Society, in New York in 1875, one such voice dominated discussions of the future of religion. New York University chemist John William Draper's polemic *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874) pitted scientific underdogs (Copernicus, Galileo) against a corrupt Church that spurns truth in favor of fallacious dogma. His book provided ample rhetorical fodder for Theosophists frustrated both with the Church and with the brash scientific confidence displayed by Draper himself; early Theosophical writings frequently quoted Draper while articulating their own "offmodern" slant on this most modern of narratives.<sup>63</sup>

In his *History's* culminating pages, Draper offers some very suggestive thoughts on the certain "outcome" of the conflict between science and religion: "Whatever is resting on fiction and fraud will be overthrown. Institutions that organize impostures and spread delusions must show what right they have to exist. Faith must render an account of herself to Reason. Mysteries must give place to facts."<sup>64</sup> According to Draper, mystery, fiction, fraud, and imposture—all of a piece with faith—must compulsorily surrender themselves to "fact," and they must do so through an act of confession. Religion must, in Draper's words, "render an account of herself"; *she* must "show"

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<sup>63</sup> For the term "offmodern," see Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2004), 16-18.

<sup>64</sup> John William Draper, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878 [1874]), 367.

herself to an avowedly rational public. It is this exposure and this verbal representation of religion that, in Draper's narrative, secure the inevitable "overthrow" of a perfidious and fraudulent Faith. The injustices of institutional religion can only be undone by subordinating the faculty of faith to that of scientific reason, and this reordering of the faculties occurs via the personal exposure entailed by public speech. This exposure, of course, tended to reinforce other lines of injustice, as a feminized, colonized religion was forced to render an account of itself to a masculinized, Western rationality.

The Theosophical Society had set out to remake this dialectic of disenchantment. As Olcott once put it, if the "laboratory-men" were daily "exposing the falsehood" of "theological dogma" and so gaining power over the "church-men," Theosophy would arrest the consequent ascent of "atheism and materialism" by articulating a new breed of faith. It would serve "at once" as "the equilibrating opponent of materialistic science" and "the unmasker and natural foe of Christian theology."<sup>65</sup> Blavatsky likewise sought to synthesize Science and Religion; she aimed not only to broker a truce between the two foes, but also to uncover truths foreseen by neither. The importance of this dialectic to her thought is nowhere more evident than in the structure of *Isis Unveiled*. She tellingly split the tome into two volumes, "Science" and "Theology," the warring halves of which are subsumed by the Theosophical whole. This dialectic logic emerges again in the Coulomb Affair, which hinged on the competition of three institutions: one proudly religious (the *Magazine*), one avowedly

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<sup>65</sup> Henry Steel Olcott, "An Address by Col. Henry S. Olcott, President of the Theosophical Society, to the Arya Samaj of Meerut, Delivered May 5<sup>th</sup> 1879, on the Occasion of a Public Welcome to a Committee of the Theosophical Society, by the Revered Swamee Daya Nand Saraswati, and the Meerut Samaj" (Roorkee, India: Thomason Civil Engineering College Press, 1879), 8-9.

scientific (the S.P.R.), and one an ostensible synthesis of the two (the T.S.). And, crucially, publicity—the willingness to render a public account of oneself— serves as a litmus test for differentiating the three.

Draper would surely have appreciated that the S.P.R. espoused a rigorous ethic of openness, linking its scientific credentials to its fervor for public speech. A preliminary S.P.R. report, for instance, deployed this ethic to distinguish science from the occult. While the Theosophical Society advocates the “concealment” of knowledge from even “friendly inquirers,” the S.P.R. seeks to “to scrutinize all that is revealed.” Unlike its esoteric cousin, it is first and foremost “a machinery for investigation, every step of which is open to the public.” In this crucial respect, despite their overlap of interests, the two societies are “almost diametrical.”<sup>66</sup>

One might interpret the Coulomb Affair as an exemplary episode in the much-lauded epochal shift from Religion to Science, from Concealment to Openness. In the scandal, fiction and fraud gave way to fact, and the mysterious and miraculous to the merely mundane. But so facile a reading flattens the complexities of the Affair—and the ambiguous trajectories of modern religion more broadly. The Coulomb Affair complicates Draper’s conflict narrative in a variety of ways. First, it suggests how the narrative was appropriable by religious actors themselves, and how such actors could refashion its binary logic, as with the three-termed Theosophical dialectic (Christianity-Science-Theosophy, itself quickly unmoored). Second, it suggests that scientific and Christian institutions could work in tandem to secure their paired hegemonies against intruders, both Theosophical and Hindu.

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<sup>66</sup> Hodgson, *First Report*, 7. (emphasis in original)

Third, the Affair demonstrates how the conflict between Religion and Science was articulated across the subtler binary of Concealment and Openness. In the Coulomb Affair, the dialectic of disenchantment was structured by dueling ethics of veiling and exposure, or competing “modes of publicness,”<sup>67</sup> as promoted by a range of religious and secular institutions. Foremost among these modes of publicness were what I will term *epistemologies of exposure* and *epistemologies of the veil*.

### Epistemologies of Exposure

Rev. Patterson framed his journalistic exposé as an act of *public* duty. By his own account, he “resolved in the interests of public morality to publish” Emma Coulomb’s letters, while prudently omitting “purely private” passages. To “speak out” was to disabuse a public “which both in its Native and in its European contingents, has been so completely hoodwinked.” Patterson positions his paper as a pedagogic instrument, guiding the credulous Indian masses, prone to falsehood, toward the light of Christian truth—as propounded by the Christian skeptic.<sup>68</sup>

Patterson textures his appeal to the reading public by invoking older spectacular modalities of belief and disillusionment. He facetiously asserts that “the oracle at Delphi has been dumb for many a century, by Urim and Thurim there is no

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<sup>67</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> *The Collapse of Koot Hoomi An Incident in the Early History of Theosophy in India*. (London, Madras, and Colombo: Christian Literature Society, 1904), 2. This volume reprinted the entire series of articles originally published in the *Madras Christian College Magazine* in the autumn of 1884. The journal had been established in 1883 by Patterson and others as the *Madras Missionary Magazine*, and its express goal was “to awaken or keep awake an interest in higher things, and in every social, moral, and literary question affecting India’s present and future.” It went on to become one of the best-known English-language journals intended primarily for a non-Christian readership. See G. A. Oddie, *Social Protest in India: British Protestant Missionaries and Social Reforms, 1850-1900* (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1978), 43

response, but the shrine of Koot Hoomi still exists and the oracle of Adyar is not dumb” (i.e., it, or she, is neither mute nor stupid). Patterson plays his double entendre well, asking: “what if these signs and wonders are proof of something very different.... Instead of a message from beings of supernal wisdom and power, we shall have only the private thoughts of a clever but not over scrupulous woman.”<sup>69</sup> Patterson here inserts Blavatsky into a grand narrative of divine silence.

The muting of God had, since at least the late seventeenth century, provided a popular secularizing mythology for believers and materialists alike. It lent itself well to spectacular, pedagogic entertainments, such as reconstructions of classical oracles that were designed to reveal the priestly trickery that had, presumably, propped up paganism. It had also become an indispensable tool for colonial missionaries out to extinguish idolatrous “heathenism.”<sup>70</sup> This narrative of divine silence clearly lent itself better to missionary endeavor than did, say, Draper’s conflict narrative; it provided clear justification for both the debunking of strangers’ worldly gods and the supremacy of Christianity’s own transcendent divine. Moreover, by invoking muted oracles, Patterson firmly rooted his print epistemology in the visual metaphors (e.g. “hoodwinking”) and theatrical sensibilities so central to the Blavatskyian enterprise. Scandalous exposé bleeds into the theatrics of exposure, and print enhances its reality effects through its appeal to the epistemologies of the eye. (Hodgson would later take up this interest in theatre, reporting on how Pierre Coulomb disguised himself as a

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<sup>69</sup> *Collapse of Koot Hoomi*, 1-2.

<sup>70</sup> See Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), especially Chapter 3, “Oracles of Reason,” 78-134.

Mahatma by donning a flowing muslin robe and an oversized prosthetic head with a turban, or “fehta,” on top).<sup>71</sup>

Patterson’s exposé drew on its wider colonial context to articulate its critique of Theosophy. For the better part of the nineteenth century, epistemologies of exposure similar to Patterson’s had structured missionary attacks on Hinduism and Indian religions as a whole. Its guiding principle (analyzed at length in Chapter 2) bears repeating here: missionary writing about Hinduism proceeded from the belief that public speech about “false” religion undermines that religion, that to make Hinduism public—to *expose* it—is to undo Hinduism. The missionaries had sought to harness the press to curb “superstition” and other forms of false belief; they were, accordingly, aghast at the rise of Theosophy’s offmodern heresy. As Anglican polemicist A. R. Fausset complained in 1885, Theosophy was not only “preparing the way for bringing back the Oriental philosophies, metempsychosis, nature worship, [and] divination”; it was even a harbinger of the Antichrist.<sup>72</sup>

If Theosophy’s occult sensibility alarmed theorists of modernity committed to an ethic of openness, it also allowed those theorists to amplify the alleged divide between modern and anti-modern, between East and West. For instance, amateur philologist and British Buddhist Arthur Lillie insisted that “secrecy” and its “twin sister” cunning were “Oriental,” “childish and effeminate” traits. If the “Occult

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<sup>71</sup> Still more comically, Emma reported having donned her Mahatma garb in the bathroom and wafted out onto the terrace. She poised herself below the window of the sitting room, where a party was assembled, and rose up dramatically, a prosthetic head amplifying her height. The reverent Theosophists saluted her, and she flitted back inside, stubbing her bare toe in the process. *SPR Proceedings*, 241-43.

<sup>72</sup> Fausset, *Spiritualism Tested*, 12.

Brothers came out of their caves and mixed with mankind we should find them merely attenuated ascetics, inferior in matters of science, wisdom, and knowledge to the higher minds of our Western civilization.”<sup>73</sup> Lillie leaves little doubt as to how the public sphere was rhetorically coded: the “attenuated” frames of ill-clad “Orientals,” once dragged into public, could not withstand the searing light of the scientific sun.

The Theosophists sought to rethink this paradigm. Although both Theosophical and anti-Theosophical polemics tended to align Theosophy with belief, sincerity, and spirituality, and its opponents with skepticism, cynicism, and materialism, Theosophy too wielded the freethinking liberationist values of the Enlightenment, and its skeptical ethic shaped its agenda from the start. As Blavatsky put it, the Theosophical Society was “a pioneer of free thought and an uncompromising enemy of priestly and monkish fraud and despotism.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, in Olcott’s November 1875 inaugural address, he proclaimed the nascent organization a force for critique. “If I rightly apprehend our work, it is to aid in freeing the public mind of theological superstition and a tame subservience to the arrogance of science.”<sup>75</sup> At war with “ecclesiastical despots”, the Theosophists would, like so many freethinkers before them, liberate the “multitude of people of many different creeds worshipping, through sheer ignorance, shams and

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<sup>73</sup> Arthur Lillie, *Koot Hoomi Unveiled; or Tiberen ‘Buddhists’ versus the Buddhists of Tibet* (London: Psychological Press Association, c.1884).

<sup>74</sup> Josephine Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1938), 118.

<sup>75</sup> Henry Steel Olcott, “Inaugural Address of the President-Founder of the Theosophical Society, Delivered at Mott Memorial Hall, New York City, at the First Regular Meeting of the Society, Nov. 17, 1875.” Adyar Pamphlet Series, No. 5 (Benares and London: Theosophical Publishing Society, n.d.), 10.

effete superstitions, and who are only waiting to be shown the audacity and dishonesty of their spiritual guides to call them to account and begin to think for themselves.”<sup>76</sup>

Olcott’s is a liberationist rhetoric that calls for the exposure of conniving and crafty priests so that the gullible multitude can be remade as a critical public. The cardinal difference between Olcott and (for example) Draper is that Olcott couples institutional science with institutional Christianity—both deaden the critical capacities of the public, lulling their followers into a tame obedience. The Theosophical agenda was to free science of its dogmatic institutionalism so that, with a renewed empirical ethos, it could discover the palpability of the spiritual world. (Theosophy never contested the priority of the empirical in determining truth. Its occult worlds were built upon the primacy of experience as guarantor of correct knowledge).

Theosophists’ rancor towards “ecclesiastical despots,” however, consistently proved the more pungent, and its acridity only mounted on the mission field of India. Olcott’s diary records several acrimonious encounters with Christian missionaries, such as the morning a few months after the Theosophists’ arrival in Bombay when a “Methodist gray-bearded fanatic dropped in to convert us before breakfast. HPB squeezed him dry between the covers of her Josephus and Philo the Jew.”<sup>77</sup> The Society’s anti-missionary rhetoric turned especially sour in the aftermath of the Coulomb Affair. From the start, cries of “missionary conspiracy” marked the Theosophical response to the Coulomb-Patterson letters, allegedly fabricated by what

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 4-5

<sup>77</sup> Olcott diary, April 22, 1880.

Damodar Mavalankar termed “the clerical party.”<sup>78</sup> Eventually the entire episode would simply be known as “the notorious Madras Missionary Plot.”<sup>79</sup> The Theosophists tapped into the anti-clerical imaginary that had lent shape to Patterson’s exposé in order to undercut the legitimacy of missionaries themselves. It was the “missionary fable,” and not the Theosophical one, that had been designed to “hoodwink” the public.<sup>80</sup>

General H. R. Morgan’s *Reply to A Report of an Examination into the Blavatsky Correspondence* by J.D.B. Gribble offers the richest elaboration of this motif. Morgan adopts the rhetoric of priestcraft and exposure and turns it on the missionaries— here the Scottish Protestants become the quintessential crafty and self-serving clerics. Morgan repeatedly compares these Protestant missionaries to their Catholic nemeses, suggesting that they claim a near-papal infallibility<sup>81</sup> and comparing their “impudent attempt to hoodwink the public” to the machinations of the Jesuits. He goes so far as to draw a parallel between their “moral stabbing” of Madame Blavatsky and Inquisitorial modes of securing religious orthodoxy, such as “torture with the rack.” Morgan invokes Draper, emphatically situating the Madras missionaries within the long history of Christian suppression of scientific truth, and assures his readers that Draper’s

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<sup>78</sup> Morgan, *Reply to a Report*, xv.

<sup>79</sup> K. J. B. Wadia, *Fifty Years of Theosophy in Bombay* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1931), 86. Blavatsky made use of the rhetoric of conspiracy in her own correspondence, as in a letter of March 1885, wherein she claimed that the “30,000 padris in India are all leagued against us.” See H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett, March 17, 1885 (ML-138), *Mahatma Letters*, 447. According to Koot Hoomi, the conspiracy extended all the way to the Vatican and to the Tibetan plateau, where the “Dugpas” were aligned with the Madras missionaries. This Great Game of occult subterfuge was, it seems, pan-Eurasian in scope. See Koot Hoomi to A. P. Sinnett, October 1884 (ML-55), *Mahatma Letters*, 431

<sup>80</sup> *The Theosophist*, October 1884, 48-49.

<sup>81</sup> “In fact, no amount of evidence is sufficient to confute them; they are more infallible than the Pope of Rome, and their evidence alone is to be received, and all else relegated to the limbo of the false” (Morgan, *Reply to a Report*, 7).

narrative provides “the key to all the plots of the Padres,” including the present one. Even the Theosophical practice of terming all missionaries “padres”—following the usage common in Indian languages— equates these Protestant Scots with their Latinate Catholic opponents.<sup>82</sup>

Non-Christian religions were, however, typically spared the lash of the Theosophical tongue. Theosophy justified its dual position—mocking Christianity, while defending Hinduism and other religions—with an appeal to the occult laws of science. This strategy is articulated memorably by Morgan. Sardonicly stacking miracle on miracle to delimit the bounds of the reasonably real, he insists that “if these Padres can ask the Hindoo to believe that Jonah was swallowed by a whale, and remained in his belly for three days and three nights, surely the Hindoo can ask the Padre to believe that he has received a letter from a living Mahatma through the air!” In this argument, the Mahatmas recede—this discourse is more concerned with the itineraries of their precipitated letters. Morgan hitches his politics of the possible to the ultimate authority of science, asserting that the Mahatmas’ Theosophical-cum-Hindu wonders adhere to still-unknown natural laws, which, although seemingly wondrous to the modern mind, are nonetheless fully calculable and chastely scientific; biblical miracles, on the other hand, are, by any measure, patently absurd.<sup>83</sup> In a single polemic swoop, he dismisses the missionaries and reclaims scientific empiricism for a resurgent, rationalist Hinduism more modern than modern science itself.

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

In the end, what was most galling about the Theosophists to their opponents was perhaps not so much their apparent starry-eyed credulity, but their presumption to play Galileo and cast the rest of the callous Anglophone world as the medieval Church. No wonder that Olcott, aboard a Rangoon-bound ship at the height of the Coulomb Affair, wrote in his diary that the weather was lovely, but that the American Missionaries on board “have the air of cads and bigots. There is something extremely petty and malicious about Missionaries when in our presence.”<sup>84</sup>

### Epistemologies of the Veil

If the epistemology of exposure, in its scientific, missionary, and Theosophical formations, promised absolute openness, the unlimited legibility of all phenomena to the reading public, it could never quite deliver. Reality consistently receded behind the veil of the page, and the public “fact” of the exposé slipped into the irresolvable murk of scandal. I would argue that Blavatsky’s writings explore an alternate model for the public sphere based on occluded, fragmentary knowledge. Her occult epistemology of the veil offers a more capacious frame for interpreting religious publics and public religions, and, in this, retains its appeal long after the controversies of the Coulomb Affair. In what follows, I sketch the curvatures of the public conjured by Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled*.

Blavatsky never seems entirely at ease with the public that she courts. Despite her occasional sympathetic appeal to “public judgment”<sup>85</sup> or the “bewildered public”

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<sup>84</sup> Olcott diary, January 15, 1885.

<sup>85</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, ed. Boris de Zirkoff. 2 vols. (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 2006 [1877]), vol. 1, page v. (Hereafter cited in text as *IU*).

(*IU*, 1:x), Blavatsky generally refers to reading audiences with considerable ire, terming them “the multitude” (*IU*, 1:xliv) and “the rabble” (*IU*, 1:12) or dismissing the public as “a docile and pious child” that ever “turns round with a timid look of adulation to see whether the nurse, old Mrs. Public Opinion, is satisfied” (*IU*, 1:167). From the book’s opening pages, Blavatsky garrisons herself against too free a public eye, disqualifying prominent public voices before they even have the chance to lambaste her work. For instance, at the end of the preface, she enumerates and derides the numerous “classes” likely to “array themselves against us,” including not only Christians and Scientists, but also Pseudo-Scientists, Broad Churchmen, Freethinkers, Men of Letters, and the “mercenaries and parasites of the Press” (*IU*, 1:vii-viii).

Where the epistemology of exposure held that skeptical public speech—faith’s rendering an account of itself to reason—deflates public fictions to produce public truths, Blavatsky’s occult epistemology resists this logic. In fact, she goes so far as to suggest the opposite: skepticism can itself become a dogma that stymies the truths of the spirit, especially when co-opted by men of a materialist mindset. Tracing a genealogy from Kapila to Doubting Thomas to Voltaire, she aligns the forces of doubt with the dogmatism of the medieval Church—the skeptics can no more “succeed in checking the progress of truth... than the ignorant bigots who sat in judgment over Galileo checked the progress of the earth’s rotation” (*IU*, 1:121). Blavatsky waxes especially wroth when chastising the “[p]ositivists—the mental sucklings of Auguste Comte, whose bosoms swell at the thought of plucking deluded humanity from the dark abyss of superstition and rebuilding the cosmos on improved principles” (*IU*, 1:75). It is

spiritualist skepticism alone that inherits the torch of truth, and it is spiritualist skepticism that will rebuild the cosmos; its materialist cousin can only deepen the abyss of superstitious delusion.

As Blavatsky sought to reclaim skepticism from the materialists, she also sought to reshape the contours of the public arena. Even she, with her esoteric sensibilities, could not entirely resist the imperatives of publicity; but she adapted the trope of exposure, with its skeptical ethos and liberationist rhetoric, so that it would inculcate desire for occult, never-quite-open knowledge. Blavatsky plies a richly layered striptease epistemology that, among other things, calls for the disrobing of crafty priests. For Blavatsky, the only real religion is religion in the nude: “we must show our false theologies in their naked deformity, and distinguish between divine religion and human dogmas. Our voice is raised for spiritual freedom, and our plea made for enfranchisement from all tyranny, whether of SCIENCE or THEOLOGY” (*IU*, 1:xliv). Her plea is for readers to scrutinize her theological and scientific opponents, stripping their truth claims of all human deformities to reveal the naked truth that will set the public free.

But Blavatsky enjoins a doubled ethic of openness and concealment, locating the promise of divine knowledge in the movement between the two. The primary trope here is that of unveiling. The term implies a double movement: just as the veil seems to solicit its own removal, the unveiled always refers back to the veil that preceded and produced it. The naked truth, in the epistemology of the veil, is always posterior to the cloaked lie and dependent on it for its very being; public openness conceals the

closures from which it derives existence and meaning. All publics, occult and otherwise, stem from a process of *un/veiling*.<sup>86</sup>

Blavatsky deploys the veil in a variety of ways, beginning with her book's title.<sup>87</sup> Often *Isis*'s veils are tangible and literal—garments and curtains occluding bodies and spaces. At other times, they are more metaphorical. Of the latter, the most revealing veil in *Isis* is the veil of language—it is “jargon” that occludes the truths of the secret doctrine (*IU*, 1:xliv). “The greatest teachers of divinity agree that nearly all ancient books were written symbolically and in a language intelligible only to the initiated” (*IU*, 1:19). Too many modern readers forget this. “The phrases of the mediaeval alchemist they read literally; and even the veiled symbolology of Plato is commonly misunderstood by the modern scholar” (*IU*, 1:37). Blavatsky's promise is to pull aside the veil of discourse that obscures the spiritual penumbra of the Real. She will do this, first, by decoding the “symbolology” that cloaks ancient wisdom, so that the divine light can shine again in the modern age. Second, she will ensure that modern jargons do not replace the old: she vows to rescue “*real science and true religion*” from both the Bible of the clergy and scientists' “self-made *Codex* of possibilities in nature” (*IU*, 1:xi). The divine and the natural converge for Blavatsky, both finding their proper domain in the sphere beyond language—what Blavatsky calls “the Unutterable” (*IU*, 1:15).

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<sup>86</sup> Here one might compare Michael Taussig: Blavatsky, in a sense, seeks “to penetrate the veil while retaining its hallucinatory quality” and “to see the myth in the natural and the real in magic, to demythologize history and to reenact its reified representation.” See *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 286, 473.

<sup>87</sup> Notably, the title was not quite Blavatsky's. Her publisher suggested an adjustment to her original title, *The Veil of Isis*, when he discovered that it was already in use. See de Zirkoff, “How ‘Isis Unveiled’ was Written,” 43. One might suggest that the ready interchangeability of the two titles underscores the doubleness of the Blavatskyian veil: whether the veil is on or off, it implies more or less the same thing.

Blavatsky's epistemology of the veil further entails a distinctly spatial imaginary. A veil divides one space into two, turning the "here" into the "there." This trait is most apparent in *Isis's* myriad references to sanctuaries and temples in exotic locales, secreted away by "impenetrable veils." I would suggest that the spatiality of the veil also structures Blavatsky's more mundane epistemological claims. For instance, when she claims that plants, stones, and other objects, in addition to their unremarkable outer being, possess a veiled but potent "inner nature" which has yet to be discovered, Blavatsky renders these ordinary objects exotic and inaccessible (*IU*, 1:466). The veil, perhaps above all else, ensures that the truth of the world is always just beyond our reach.

It is this tendency of the veil to postpone revelation, to push the divine to the outer limits of human geography, which lends to Blavatsky's topography of truth its emphatically Eastern orientation. Hers is an unabashed Orientalism, repopulating Asia with the West's every mystic fantasy, and it is India that anchors her occult Orient. While a few of the Masters (Cagliostro, le Comte de Saint-Germain) may have made their home in Europe, the majority of the planet's spiritual virtuosi reside in the colonies, not the metropole.

In key ways, Theosophy's phantom Mahatmas conflate the subaltern consciousness of the colonized with all that is occluded by the language of colonial modernity.<sup>88</sup> The allure of the Asiatic in some of Blavatsky's most important writings is that he cannot speak—or at least that he resides on the margins of speech, opening the

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<sup>88</sup> For further discussion of how Theosophy both bolstered and undermined British imperial ideologies, see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the 'Mystic East'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), especially Chapter 6, "Mystic Hinduism"; and Viswanathan, "Conversion, Theosophy, and Race Theory."

portal to the Unutterable. When Koot Hoomi and Morya do speak, it is through Blavatsky as amanuensis. She credited large parts of *Isis Unveiled* to their astral hands, and attributed to them the many “precipitated” letters that miraculously descended on the Society over the years. There is perhaps no figure more characteristic of the Theosophical imaginary than the astral Asian, the only trace of whom is a fragmentary writing that derives its aura from his absence.<sup>89</sup>

These “naked sons of the East” (*IU*, 1:74) also orient Blavatsky’s distinctive erotics. *Isis Unveiled* cultivates a longing for these men, but never on a blandly heterosexual model. Blavatsky’s own dealings with gender were far too intricate for this—this is a woman said to have spurned her Russian husband, fought in men’s clothes alongside Garibaldi at Mentana, and otherwise flouted femininity. Even in her work as amanuensis for the Masters, she donned a masculine persona, rendering her public self a strange astral fusion of male and female—perhaps this explains her authorial preference for the neuter “HPB” over the feminine “Helena.”

In any case, Blavatsky’s epistemology of the veil appeals to a gendered imaginary to articulate desire for occluded knowledge. In one especially redolent passage from *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky describes first “exploring the penetralia of [the East’s] deserted sanctuaries”:

Reverently we stepped in spirit within the temple of Isis; to lift aside the veil of ‘the one that is and was and shall be’ at Sais; to look through the rent curtain of

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<sup>89</sup> Consider, for example, the account of Blavatsky’s aunt Madame Nadjeda Fadéeff: “je reçus une lettre de celui que vous appelez, je crois, Kouth-humi, --qui me fut apportée de la manière la plus incompréhensible et mystérieuse, dans ma maison, par un messenger à figure asiatique, qui disparut sous mes yeux mêmes” (*First Report of the S.P.R.*, 113). The letter handed to Madame Fadéeff was later taken to be the first Mahatma letter, predecessor to those sent to Sinnett. See C. Jinarajadas, *The Story of the Mahatma Letters*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 2000 [1946]). For additional discussion of the ambivalences of the Mahatma letters, see Viswanathan, “The Ordinary Business of Occultism”

the Sanctum Sanctorum at Jerusalem; and even to interrogate within the crypts which once existed beneath the sacred edifice, the mysterious Bath-Kôl. The *Filia Vocis*—the daughter of the divine voice—responded from the mercy seat within the veil, and science, theology, every human hypothesis and conception born of imperfect knowledge, lost forever their authoritative character in our sight. (*IU*, 1:vi-vii)

What lies beyond human knowledge, in the Blavatskian imaginary, is the divine voice. It speaks from “within the veil” of sacred spaces located in the colonized East, and these spaces are typically feminized (“temple of Isis,” “daughter of the divine”). The epistemology of the veil implies the coquetry of the striptease, in which woman appears as the object of a Theosophical knowledge hungry for “penetralia.” Blavatsky inevitably unsettles gender binaries, but an aggressive erotics with a distinctly patriarchal tone does color her quest for occult knowledge. And her striptease epistemology often took on a still more menacing timbre in the hands of others, including, and perhaps especially, her critics. Edmund Garrett’s 1894 pamphlet *Isis Very Much Unveiled: The Story of the Great Mahatma Hoax*, for instance, promises to strip Blavatsky herself down before the peering public.<sup>90</sup> The sexual undertone to such criticisms was not lost on the Madame herself. As she quipped in a letter, “[p]amphlets by Reverends, books and articles *exposing* me from top to foot appear every day.”<sup>91</sup>

But an Isis very much unveiled can, perhaps, never quite compete with the allure of an Isis who delivers both concealment and exposure simultaneously. The success of Blavatsky’s occult knowledge is in its realization that sometimes *not* knowing

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<sup>90</sup> Edmund Garrett, *Isis Very Much Unveiled: The Story of the Great Mahatma Hoax*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Westminster Gazette Office, 1894).

<sup>91</sup> H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett, March 18, 1885 (ML-138), *Mahatma Letters*, 447. The titles mentioned are “Theosophy Unveiled,” “Madame Blavatsky Exposed,” “The Theosophical Humbug Before the World,” and “Christ against Mahatmas.”

the truth is what the public craves most—indeed, that it is the collective craving for elusive truth that causes people to cohere as a public.

### Signs Taken for Wonders

I would argue that the veil's coquettish occlusion of public knowledge is as important a feature of the Theosophical effort to “re-enchant” the world as the phenomena themselves. Magical thinking can include not only concrete claims about the possibilities in nature, but also more general maxims about the limits of the knowable. Max Weber defined disenchantment as an “Occidental” historical process that, over the course of millennia, produced a modern condition wherein “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.”<sup>92</sup> Blavatsky, by contrast, repeatedly thwarted calculability via occlusive veils thrown over the knowing eye.

To insist, however, that the appeal of Theosophy had nothing to do with its miracles is, surely, disingenuous. The Coulomb controversy erupted around the fabulous phenomena, and any responsible account of the scandal must make sense of these hotly contested miracles. In order to interpret the phenomena, I turn to a review of Theosophist A. P. Sinnett's 1881 *The Occult World*, written by Hargrave Jennings, the author of noted occult works like *The Indian Religions, or Results of the Mysterious Buddhism*

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<sup>92</sup> Max Weber, “Science as Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 139. See Viswanathan, “Ordinary Business,” for a discussion of the term “disenthrallment,” which appears in the Mahatma letters to A. P. Sinnett and would seem to prefigure Weber's term “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*).

(1858); *The Rosicrucians, Their Rites and Mysteries* (1870); and *Phallic Miscellanies: Facts and Phases of Ancient and Modern Sex Worship, as Illustrated Chiefly in the Religions of India* (1891).

Jennings' account of the modern public prefigures some aspects of Weber's disenchantment narrative: "The now comfortable world has succeeded in a very difficult enterprise. It has got 'miracle' out of the world—after all the wriggling and twistings of miracle to keep here." Jennings claims that "common-sense has got the better of delusion and superstition"; it has caused "sensible" men to "exhale" miracle, "that uncomfortable thing," and replace it with a "robust sense of self-satisfied self-possession."<sup>93</sup> In the modern world, "everything is natural. Man is so very natural. Nature is so very natural. Everything is so *really real*. We only think strange thoughts when we are 'not right'" (OWR, 15). The comfort of this calculable world is secured by the bourgeois tastemakers of the day. Jennings reviles reviewers for publications like the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review*, who, with "grand-motherly" care, guard the "pabulum" of "the great reading public" so that it can "have its quiet nights," untroubled by the eruption of realities beyond its borders (OWR, 18).

Jennings lauds Sinnett's "very uncomfortable book" for dislodging the public from its pabulum. It opens a rift in the fabric of the real, a crinkle in the conservative status quo. Despite Jennings' own apparent faith that empirical investigation will confirm Sinnett's claims, he too stumbles over the gap between miracle and report, between event and representation. Although he wants to affirm the reality of Sinnett's occult miracles, he can only do so with words that enjoy no more priority in the public

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<sup>93</sup> Hargrave Jennings, "Review of *The Occult World* by A. P. Sinnett" (Bombay: Gazette Steam Press, 1882), 13. (Hereafter cited in text as OWR).

mind that anyone else's. And so, Jennings introduces a key incalculability into the realm of the spirit: "These questions [of the authenticity of miracle] are by no means settled by *persiflage*. They are rather intensified—except in the minds of fools—by such a process. Ridicule will never kill this difficulty in supernaturalism. It only makes us melancholy" (*OWR*, 20). The profusion of skeptical claims cannot banish miracle; it can only incite more speech. One might suggest that, for Jennings, "miracle" is that which lies beyond discourse; the Real that eludes the symbolic order founded on the absence of signified objects; Blavatsky's "Unutterable." "Persiflage," in Jennings' theory, is excitable speech that chases miracle, trying to fix it in language—a hopeless task.

This is surely why Franz Hartmann's complaint about Gribble's handwriting analysis seems to sum up so much of the Coulomb Affair: "I cannot follow him through all his dexterous and intricate vermiculations."<sup>94</sup> The profusion of discourse about the phenomena misses the point—wonders always exceed the capacity of linguistic signs to represent them, and the allure of the "phenomena" stemmed in part from this constitutive gap between spectacle (tingling bells, plummeting roses, surfacing teacups, floating heads) and scandal (the stuff of language, gossip and print media). The alleged contest between belief and doubt at play in the Coulomb Affair took its shape from the jump-cut between the bounded public that can witness a spectacular miracle and the potentially unbounded public that can discuss it, from the transmutation of momentary magic into the black "fact" of ink.

The Society for Psychical Research ran afoul of a parallel problem. Science, in the Coulomb Affair, found itself wallowing in very unscientific gossip. Herbert Stack

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<sup>94</sup> Morgan, *Reply to a Report*, x.

complained that the committee’s investigation of Blavatsky looked something like evaluating the miracles at Lourdes by asking a Roman Catholic for a “second-hand account” of them.<sup>95</sup> He differentiated between “two methods of investigation—the judicial and the experimental,” and complained that the Blavatsky investigations relied almost exclusively on the former.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, Stack suggests that republishing these tall tales will only give “the stamp of our silent approval to them.”<sup>97</sup> Persiflage—the circulation of discourse— confirms miracle as social fact. Only the palpability of the experimental method can quash miracle.

According to Jennings, however, not even sensible “contact” with miracle, “face to face” experience of “the thing” itself, can convince the “realist” and “the doubter”:  
“a miracle to stay is impossible. The reason is that everything preternatural must, in the nature of things, be only interjectionary. It comes and it goes” (*OWR*, 20). The promised plenitude of the occultists is a ruse. It can never be attained, as “the nature of things” dictates that the “preternatural” must pass: miracle is inherently evanescent. A miracle that stays would become mundane, routinized.<sup>98</sup> Jennings’ is a melancholy philosophy—the ultimate object of public desire will always, by its very nature, remain beyond

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<sup>95</sup> Stack to Sidgwick, SPR.MSS.4/1/8/ii/1.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., SPR.MSS.4/1/8/ii/9.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., SPR.MSS.4/1/8/ii/13.

<sup>98</sup> Indeed, one might take this as the point of Viswanathan’s analysis of Theosophy’s bureaucratic obsessions in “The Ordinary Business of Occultism.”

public reach, and persiflage can only inflame the public's occult longings—but, I would venture, he means it as a critical melancholia.<sup>99</sup>

Miracle, even— and perhaps especially— in absentia, rouses the public from its pabulum. Its insistent wriggling along the limit of the real can, perhaps, press upon the comfortable world at its point of maximum contradiction, rending new openings in the politics of the possible.<sup>100</sup> If we follow Weber's formula, by disrupting the British public's ability to calculate the world, miracle would also have disrupted the British ability to “master” that world.

Damodar Mavalankar offered what seems the best articulation of Theosophy's wistful promise: “Happy would be that day indeed when the *noumenal* will supersede the phenomenal.”<sup>101</sup> Numinous miracle recedes behind the veil of Blavatsky's notoriously dubious “phenomena,” refusing to stay in the public arena. The miracle public, conjured by event and gossip aftermath, coheres around this wondrous absence and the blandishments of the veil. No matter how ardent the exposé, the miracle will never quite open. It just wriggles.

As Koot Hoomi once observed, for a “fact” to be received as such, it must “first have become [a person's] own property, have proved amenable to their own modes of investigation.” The fact is a domesticated event. A miracle is something both more resistant and more productive. As the Mahatma reminds us, for “nearly two thousand

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<sup>99</sup> I borrow the phrase “critical melancholia” from Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>100</sup> Here I paraphrase Kumkum Sangari, “The Politics of the Possible,” in “The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II,” special issue, *Cultural Critique* 7 (Autumn 1987), 163.

<sup>101</sup> Damodar Mavalankar, *Damodar: The Writings of a Hindu Chela*, ed. Sven Eek (Point Loma, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1940), 164. (emphasis in original)

years countless millions have pinned their faith upon the testimony” of “one hysterical woman” regarding Jesus’ ascension into heaven—and, according to Koot Hoomi, this woman was “not overly trustworthy.”<sup>102</sup> It is, it would seem, precisely the ambiguity of her testimony, its “performativity,” that secured its universal appeal. If we are to understand Blavatsky as a skeptic’s medium, her ultimate lesson is this: more powerful than the fact or the lie is the tale that confounds the two.

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<sup>102</sup> Koot Hoomi Lal Singh to A. P. Sinnett, October 17, 1880 (ML-1), *Mahatma Letters*, 5.

## CONCLUSION: ANTICLERICAL MODERNITY

Credulity is not faith. Credulity is an obstacle which prevents true faith to take root in the hearts of men; the world must pass through a stage of unbelief to arrive at a place where belief can be united with reason.

Eliphas Levi, *The Theosophist* (1885)<sup>1</sup>

Thus have we traced the history of “priestcraft” to colonial India. The imposture theory of religion may have received its most influential articulation during the Enlightenment, at the hands of polemical writers like Charles Blount and Bernard le Boivier de Fontenelle. But insofar as “priestcraft” and “imposture” provided the conceptual apparatus for a truly secularist skepticism, they came to do so at a later date, and under the shadow of empire. As William Howitt discovered when writing his *Popular History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations* in the winter of 1832, “priestcraft” led ineluctably to India, where (as he put it) the powers of the priest were “at once in full flower and full fruit.” After completing his *History*, Howitt began to protest the imperial excesses of British rule in India, but not the fact of empire itself; he hoped for a more ethical empire, an empire that would cultivate the moral constitution of its subjects by promoting what I have termed “anticlerical modernity.” That is to say that during the nineteenth century, imperial power came to promulgate doubt, centering its effort to reform India on the criticism of religion.

By suggesting that modernity should be understood as “anticlerical” rather than strictly “secular,” I have tried to rethink the relation of modernity to religion. In

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<sup>1</sup> “The Religion of the Future,” from *Unpublished Writings of Eliphas Levi*, quoted in *The Theosophist*, January 1885, 77.

anticlerical modernity, religious and secular critics of sacerdotal authority enter into a tactical alliance, such that the doctrinal difference between the two is often obscured by their shared rhetoric of priestly fraud. Classical narratives of secularization obscure the complexities of these strategic alliances by granting priority to the irreligious critics. One of the objectives of this dissertation has been simple historical corrective: Karl Marx and William Howitt intervened in the imposture theory of religion at roughly the same time, and despite its disproportionate influence, Marx's materialist theory of false belief did not supersede Howitt's Quaker theory of priestcraft. Rather, the continued interplay of these two coeval modes of traducing religion is what produced the characteristic cultural forms of anticlerical modernity. In making this argument, I have followed the lead of historians like Justin Champion and Mark Goldie who have tried to abide by on John Toland's noted early modern maxim: "religion's safe, with priestcraft is the war."

My foray into the history of "priestcraft" has been distinctive, however, in its attention to the cultural crosscurrents of the colonial encounter. I have tried to demonstrate that the concept "anticlerical modernity" lends itself well to what Edward Said termed "contrapuntal analysis": sidelining secularism allows nineteenth-century Indian critics of religion to lay claim to the making of a modernity that might otherwise exclude them on the basis of belief. As I have argued, the intimate enmities of colonialism pushed anticlerical modernity into the interstitial spaces of empire, forcing its paranoid fantasies of priestly deception into culturally hybrid zones and so allowing for its critical re-inscription from within the Hindu fold.

It was within this expanded colonial field that “priestcraft” came to be resituated, reconfigured, and even remade. The chapters of this dissertation have noted, in turn, the complicity of the imposture theory of religion with the diffuse field of imperial power (Chapter 2); the critical positions opened up within Hindu devotion by the juridical “application” of this theory (Chapter 3); how a tendentious Hindi translation of “priestcraft” intervened into philosophical debates about the ontology of illusion (Chapter 4); and how colonial occultism tried to thwart the epistemology of exposure and its promise of public certainty (Chapter 5). In its colonial redeployment “priestcraft” came to abut Indic imaginaries of religious illusion, ranging from folkloric spoofs of gurus’ authority to bhakti poetics to Vedantic philosophy. While it may have seemed that the colonial context had distorted anticlerical modernity, this was not the case. Rather, colonialism revealed constitutive contradictions that had structured modernity even in its metropolitan locations. Colonial India thus provides an ideal setting for considering the ambiguities of modernity at large. While the chapters of this dissertation detail many such ambiguities, four in particular bear repeating here.

First, as Howitt’s hope for an “ethical” empire suggests, by the 1830s the problem of priestcraft had become entangled with a form of governmentality that ruled populations by managing the moral constitution of individual subjects. Doubly fueled by Evangelical fire and Utilitarian reason, this pastoral power generally went by the name of “reform,” and it rose to prominence more or less simultaneously in both Britain and India. Especially in the latter, a central plank of the reformist platform was the annihilation of corrupt priestly authority. In the colony, however, the critical demolition of traditional authority figures often did less to establish the bourgeois

egalitarianism enjoined by liberal political theory than to enhance the quasi-magical authority of the imperial state itself. Critics of religion thus found themselves in a double bind, wherein both doubt and belief had immediate political implications, as the contest between “religion” and “modernity” came to replicate the conflict between colonized and colonizer. The realm of culture did not, however, simply serve as a neutral site for the enactment of a displaced politics. In its displacement, the political assumed new shape. The polemic pliability of “priestcraft” thus allowed a range of public actors to re-imagine the contours of anticlerical modernity.

Second, the colonial context highlights the degree to which belief is by its very nature oriented to the outside, to the social, legal, and cultural networks that situate the believing subject. Two modalities of belief were predominant during the period: “propositional belief” (i.e. cognitive assent) and “relational belief” (i.e. loving trust). The former mode was more prevalent in the official Anglophone arenas of court and press and was more readily assimilated to the “bureaucratic” Hinduism that emerged under colonial rule. The affective intensities of the latter, meanwhile, instantiated social bonds, founded the devotional *askesis* of bhakti, and ultimately proved resistant to the drama of priestly “exposure” often enacted by critics of religion. If colonial governmentality had rendered belief political by attempting to regulate its alleged excesses, India’s “credulous natives” made good use of this shift in the field of power; believing cannily and critically, they used religion to intervene in the micropolitics of colonial rule.

Third, the material culture of print was of central importance to the rhetoric of “priestcraft” in India, as elsewhere. While critics of “false” religion promised the full

exposure of priestly charlatans, all they could deliver were exposés. Especially in matters of miracle, these only further submerged public knowledge in the ambiguities of belief—in rumor, gossip, hearsay, faith, trust, and the fiduciary. Priestly rule was often contrasted with the social order instituted by the free press. This classically liberal narrative was undergirded by a jubilant technological determinism: the press was the juggernaut of liberal modernity, crushing despotic priests under the unstoppable wheel of deliberative democracy. If apologists of print tended to overlook the medium’s ability to re-enchant the world with new forms of mystery and devotion, they also tended to downplay the degree to which the freedoms of the print public were guaranteed and overseen by the colonial state. Libel law was particularly pertinent for critics of religious imposture, who were always at risk of allowing their denunciations of universal priestcraft to descend into the personal defamation of actual priests. To write the history of colonial priestcraft is thus to write the history of the colonial public—or rather, of the labyrinthine, dynamic formations of public and private, the confusion of which proved so culturally and politically productive in colonial India.

Fourth, the cultural contiguities produced by “priestcraft” in its polemic circulation highlight conceptual problems endemic to the imposture theory of religion. Mark Goldie has shown how the imposture theory promises that the unmasking of nefarious charlatans will produce a disenchanted world ridded forever of illusion. This redemptive narrative was, as he suggests, at the heart of Karl Marx’s theory of ideology: the overthrow of priestcraft would allow the duped to abandon delusory flowers and see their real chains. Likewise, I have discussed how Swami Dayanand Saraswati sought

to deliver Hinduism from the frauds of Indian “popes,” paving the way for a confidently empiricist Hindu science by staving off all worldly illusion. In the process, however, Dayanand had to reckon with the philosophical legacy of Shankara, who theorized illusion (*maya*) as that which constitutes the material world and the human subjects within it. Despite his best efforts, Dayanand’s disenchanted Hinduism remained haunted by the Vedantic possibility that fake flowers are all we have, that illusion is the horizon of the real. One might suggest that this position anticipates the more sophisticated theory of ideology to emerge in later Marxist thought. Rather than promising deliverance from illusion, this “Māyāvādī Marxism” takes illusion to be constitutive of human subjectivity *per se*. If these two very different bodies of thought seem to share a set of conceptual *topoi*, this is no coincidence. Both respond to the same foundational rhetoric of priestly imposture and intervene in the same anticlerical modernity.

Extending the history of colonial “priestcraft” past 1885 would surely prove fruitful. Indeed, as the anti-colonial movement emerged, it became apparent that colonialism had amplified the political potential and political risks of charismatic religious authority. M. K. Gandhi’s career could be analyzed as a performative exploration of the place of the “priest” in Indian politics. As Ashis Nandy has noted, Gandhi’s iconicity derives from his skillful inversion of colonial ideology’s most beloved binaries. Where the half-clad fakir had been relegated by the British to the dustbin of the apolitically religious past, Gandhi thrust the fakir to the forefront of history.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, however, he ran afoul of the secularist refusal of charismatic authority. Bipin

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<sup>2</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford, 1983).

Chandra Pal, for instance, decried Gandhi's "great hold" on the "masses." By reviving "medieval religious sentiments," he had endangered the Indian democracy to come by smothering the "people's freedom of thought" with "the dead weight of unreasoning reverence."<sup>3</sup> Gandhi, with his "pontifical authority," had led "the people in faith blindfolded."<sup>4</sup> Thus was "priestcraft" reinstated as the very condition of mass politics.

Pal and Gandhi came to inhabit the narrative of priestly imposture, transporting the hoary conflict among skeptic, charlatan, and multitude into a novel political milieu. In many ways, Pal's criticism of Gandhi prefigures the postcolonial debate about the constitutive contradictions of Indian secularism. Pal, the Anglophone skeptic, foresees the danger of a vernacular politics forged through the "medieval" bond of religious belief. Gandhi, well aware of the charge of charlatanism, sought to retrieve charisma as a political form—and indeed to amplify it by means of the mass media, his iconic authority constituted as much through the circulation of images as through his own embodied practice. Gandhi's "pontifical authority" primed the constitutive contradictions of the political concept of "the people," hemmed in by liberal autonomy, religious electorates, and societal "influence."<sup>5</sup>

Alongside its imbrication with the political forms of nationalism, the problematic of "priestcraft" has also inflected an important Indian contribution to

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<sup>3</sup> *Report of the Thirty-Fifth Session of the Indian National Congress (1920)*, as cited in Amalendu Prasad Mookerjee, *Social and Political Ideas of Bipin Chandra Pal* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates Publications, 1974), 110.

<sup>4</sup> *The Statesman*, March 19, 1921, as cited in Mookerjee, *ibid.*, 112-113.

<sup>5</sup> David Gilmartin, "Election Law and the 'People' in Colonial and Postcolonial India," in *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 55-84.

global public culture: cosmopolitan “guru English.”<sup>6</sup> Take, for instance, the case of Osho (a.k.a. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh). Born in 1931 in what is now Madhya Pradesh, Osho rose to international notoriety due less to his spiritual sagacity than to his worldly élan. He was famous for his mammoth collection of Rolls Royces and Rolexes; his intoxicating blend of sex and power; and his facility in Indian and Western philosophy (“Osho,” for example, is a contraction of William James’ “oceanic experience”).<sup>7</sup> Less noted is Osho’s expertise in the imposture theory of religion.

In his provocatively titled *Priests and Politicians: The Mafia of the Soul*, Osho recounts an “ancient story” in which one devil assures another that humanity will never see through their demonic delusions. As the devil explains,

The priests are my people. They have already surrounded the man who found the truth. Now they will become the mediators between the man of truth and the masses. They will raise temples, they will write scriptures, they will interpret and distort everything. They will ask people to worship, to pray. And in all this hubbub, the truth will be lost. This is my old method which has always succeeded.

According to Osho, “religion needs no mediators.” Priests fabricated their otherworldly “fiction” to propagate a life-denying asceticism. Osho, a guru in the tradition of Marx and Nietzsche, vows to deliver man to himself by repealing the decrees of the world-hating clerics.<sup>8</sup> Osho rails against “organized religions,” plying a hedonistic creed tailored to the consumer desires of spiritual individuals. Priestly institutions, he avers, mix the religious and the political: priests “are simply politicians, wolves hiding

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<sup>6</sup> Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> See Anthony Storr, *Feet of Clay: Saints, Sinners, and Madmen: A Study of Gurus* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Osho, *Priests and Politicians: The Mafia of the Soul* (Delhi: Full Circle, 1999 [1987]), 77-79. The essay is entitled “Zarathustra.”

themselves in the skin of sheep.” They should, Osho tells us, “drop this mask of being religious” and “disappear from the world.”<sup>9</sup> Pure religion renounces political life entirely for solitary spirituality and the personal quest for pleasure. Although Osho is generally interpreted as an exemplar of guru autocracy, of priestcraft in full fruit and full flower, his teachings take up priestcraft theory and bring it to its logical conclusion: his radically privatized religion is fully consonant with the libidinal economy of consumer capitalism.<sup>10</sup> As Osho presents himself, he and Rajiv Gandhi (to whom this essay is addressed) want the same thing: Gandhi wants to get religion out of politics, and Osho wants politics out of religion.

Rather than the utter atrophy of religion, secular modernity demands that religion be *reformed*—that it permit the emergence of a bourgeois social order by excising its sacred hierarchies and policing the boundary between the transcendent divine and the material world. It has often accomplished this by identifying and unmasking of priestly enchanter. As I have suggested, the suspicion of religion has been paradigmatic for modernity’s hermeneutics of suspicion more broadly. The pervasive mistrust of wily priests institutes a *habitus* of paranoia, an all-consuming skepticism that can only end by returning to the powers of belief. This return can take many forms. In closing this dissertation, I would like to consider how skepticism has become conflated in some circles with one such structure of belief: the fiduciary web of the secular.

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<sup>9</sup> Osho, *Priests and Politicians*, 23

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy R. Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

## Critical Secularism

By some accounts, Edward Said organized his career around the notion “secular criticism.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in William D. Hart’s estimation, he reinstates the Marxist maxim that the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism.<sup>12</sup> As Said defined it, secular criticism is inherently “oppositional” and thus irreducible to any doctrine or political position. What it opposes is the religious, which Said defines as “an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the otherworldly.”<sup>13</sup> The quintessential example of a religious discourse on this model is Orientalism, as analyzed in Said’s influential monograph of that name.<sup>14</sup> The task of criticism is to pit the secular against the religious so as to erode the latter’s totalities. As Said explains, in “its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organized dogma.”

The paradox of Said’s secular criticism is that it is founded in a dogmatic maxim: always oppose the religious. Doubt in its pure form is a negative capacity, an absolute refusal. Ever coy, it declines to join causes, delighting instead in the vagrant mobility of perpetual dissent. But this last commitment, insofar as it is a commitment, is an

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<sup>11</sup> Aamir Mufti, “Critical Secularism: A Reintroduction for Perilous Times,” *boundary 2* 31:2 (2004): 1-9.

<sup>12</sup> William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ix.

<sup>13</sup> Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 290.

<sup>14</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

intimation of something else; this is the trace of faith that skepticism can never dispense with. Secular criticism thus betrays itself in the very moment of its inception.

Jacques Derrida has termed this trace “the fiduciary” (see Introduction). As he explains, “Enlightenment of tele-technoscientific critique and reason can only suppose trustworthiness.” For Derrida, the fundamental human activity is the testimonial address of the other; this address relies on a fundamental communicative trust and on inter-subjective dependence. In order for the techno-scientific order to establish itself, it must appeal to this “irreducible faith,” which cements the social bond. In Derrida’s words, the secular order always “brings into play and confirms the fiduciary credit of an elementary faith which is, at least in its essence or calling, religious.” The religious thus represents the internal limit to secular reason.<sup>15</sup> It follows that the skeptic must always, in order to remain a coherent subject sustained by a social order, rejoin the realm of the fiduciary: the moment of mistrust cannot last forever. If it did, the result would be paranoid psychosis.<sup>16</sup> The close kinship between faith and sociality is most evident in what I have been calling relational belief, the loving trust binding guru and devotee. As Terry Eagleton put it recently, faith is “not primarily a belief that something or someone exists” but rather “a commitment and allegiance”; because it is constitutively social, orienting the subject in the world, faith is what animates political commitments.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” trans. Sam Weber, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anijdar, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 80-82.

<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “How the Non-Duped Err,” *Qui Parle* 4.1 (1990): 9.

<sup>17</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 37.

In other words, it is faith that drives Said's anti-colonial project. That insight, however, does not quite get at the function of the "secular" in Saidian criticism. If that word simply denotes a critical attitude, why attach it to "criticism" at all? By Said's account, isn't the phrase "secular criticism" redundant? What is the function of this strangely superfluous modifier, and why does it attach itself so insistently to the capacity for critical skeptical thought? I would suggest that, in laying claim to skepticism, secularism renders itself what Said would call a religious discourse. It settles into an orthodox habit of mind, an agent of closure, a reified conceptual object. This is demonstrated by the way that secularism constitutes its "shadows": skepticism, tolerance, progress, liberty, democracy, the public sphere, etc.<sup>18</sup> When skepticism toward religion is entered onto this ledger, it comes to imply faith in its fellow terms; the secular modern social order becomes doubt's secret stowaway. That such secularist faith can become fully fundamentalist, one need look no farther than the "New Atheism." This breed of best-selling screed decries religion as "delusion," using hoary tropes of imposture to structure a skepticism with firm faith in the secular status quo.<sup>19</sup> But even in the hands of much more agreeable writers, secularism has a way of

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<sup>18</sup> See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 16; Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 14.

<sup>19</sup> Representative titles include the following: Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great The Case Against Religion* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); and Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006). For a vivacious response, see Eagleton, *Reason*.

subsuming rambunctious heterodoxies and restless skepticisms into its own dogmatic agenda.<sup>20</sup>

In this dissertation, I have tried to use religion to look askance at modernity. Sumathi Ramasway has distilled this mode of criticism with the term “off-modern.”<sup>21</sup> One might follow her lead and advocate for an “off-secular” criticism of religion that, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s formula, takes the secular to be both indispensable and inadequate for critical thought. While the secular remains indispensable in conceiving the critical capacity, it is also inadequate in canvassing the critical possibilities of religion. Aamir Mufti has tried to reformulate Said’s “secular criticism” so that it does just this. As Mufti explains, secular criticism is first and foremost a “practice of unbelief.” Although it does target religion, it is aimed “at secular ‘beliefs’ as well, and, at its most ambitious, at all those moments at which thought and culture become frozen, congealed, thing-like, and self-enclosed—hence the significance for [Said] of Lukàcs’s notion of reification.”<sup>22</sup> Mufti proposes the term “critical secularism” to suggest the “critical engagement with secularism itself.”<sup>23</sup> Gauri Viswanathan has likewise intervened in Saidian “secular criticism” with her recommendation that

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<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, in the introduction to this dissertation my discussion of Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture, and Identity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 16. Ramaswamy, in elaborating the notion of the “off-modern,” is herself paraphrasing both Dipesh Chakrabarty and Svetlana Boym. In Boym’s formulation, the off-modern veers from the “straight road of progress” to explore the “back alleys” of modernity. See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Mufti, “Critical Secularism,” 2-3

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

scholars rethink secularism through the framework of heterodoxy. After all, religion as an “oppositional” knowledge system has excelled at criticism throughout history.<sup>24</sup> One of the virtues of Viswanathan’s notion of heterodoxy is the way in which it resists secularist prolepsis; if Amartya Sen reads pre-modern heterodoxies as prefiguring deliberative democracy, Viswanathan attempts to subordinate the latter to the more capacious and surprising history of religious dissent.

It is this latter approach that has guided this dissertation’s inquiry into anticlerical modernity. From William Howitt to Karsandas Mulji to Dayanand Saraswati to Helena Blavatsky, I have tried to chart the off-secular criticism of religion and its relation to British colonialism. Indeed, I have meant the notion of “anticlerical modernity” to be off-secular in just this sense. It engages the history of secularism by foregrounding religious critics of religion (Howitt alongside Marx); and it insists that anticlericalism be located at the interstices of empire, as the full sway of sacerdotalism can only be understood in global perspective (Dayanand alongside Luther).

To conclude, the history of anticlericalism relocates doubt to the fiduciary arena of interpersonal faith. It allows skeptics to refuse not only propositions, but also relationships. What it does not do, or at least not well enough, is to account for the critical powers of assent. Many theorists, from Saba Mahmood to Alain Badiou, have tried to recuperate the critical potential of religion. Faith and piety are, we have come to learn, the stuff of politics. But what fewer theorists have stopped to consider is the enduring appeal of the ersatz sacred, of religious phenomena that command belief

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<sup>24</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, “Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy,” *PMLA* 123.2 (2008): 466-476.

precisely because they sit uneasily at the margins of plausibility and modernity. As Marcel Gauchet has suggested, religious belief is at bottom not only about assent but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, about refusal. The religious, he writes, “is the principle of mobility placed in the service of inertia, it is the principle of transformation mobilized to protect the inviolability of things, it is the power of negation wholly redirected toward accepting and renewing the established law.”<sup>25</sup>

In other words, religion serves up a heady mix of belief and doubt, trust and suspicion, acceptance and refusal. This is what makes “faith” different from “knowledge.” This is also what makes the ambiguous figure of the charlatan so compelling: he or she invites all of these things simultaneously by promising to deliver both truth and falsehood, each embedded in the other. If belief owes its force to the structural possibility that it will be betrayed by some perverse parody of the sacred, just as doubt owes its force to the possibility that it will be belied by faith, then it is no wonder that the charlatan has emerged as the major mediator between the two.

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<sup>25</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 22. Gauchet attributes the rise of religion to humans’ inability to accept things for what they are. If Feuerbach and Marx tried to right illusion, helping the deluded to collapse the gods back into the themselves, Gauchet revisits the Hegelian dialectic to locate in religion the animating principle of history itself: religion represents the productive powers of negativity, splitting self-identical objects from within through the powers of the “spirit.”

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