Conceptualising Hinduism

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INTRODUCTION

There is not a homogenous religion that can be referred to as Hinduism. Instead, 'Hinduism' encompasses a diverse range of practices, beliefs, and groups that can be subsumed under the term 'Hindu' (see e.g. Burghart 1987; Flood 1995; Jackson 1996; Vertovec 1997: 265).[1] Despite this, Hinduism is often used in both popular and academic works to refer to a religion that is comparable to, for example, Christianity or Islam. This is clearly highly problematic. In this paper I show that although there is certainly not a homogenous religion that can be referred to as Hinduism, the use of the term is still acceptable. However, use of the term demands that it is adequately conceptualised. With such a conceptualisation, the term can be used with confidence.

After I have shown that the term 'Hinduism' should be retained, I want to briefly consider aspects of Hinduism in the light of key ideas in the work of Jean Baudrillard. The reason for this is that Baudrillard has interesting things to say regarding the nature of images and the image is of extreme importance within Hinduism. Furthermore, it is worthwhile considering Baudrillard's ideas in the light of Hindu images because in his work 'Simulacra and Simulations' (1983a) he makes specific reference to religious images. I will argue that his conclusions regarding religious images are not universal and are highly questionable when applied to Hinduism. Finally, despite my reservations concerning the applicability of Baudrillardian ideas to Hinduism, I consider online images of Hindu deities in the light of the theory of simulacra. This is because there does appear to be a strong link between the medium of the Internet and Baudrillard's notion of hyper-real simulacra. However, I conclude that replicated images of Hindu deities on the WWW are no more hyper-real than their original counterparts.

RELIGION

Any attempt to conceptualise Hinduism is a difficult undertaking from the outset because the term 'religion' itself is contested. For example, I have claimed that Hinduism is not a homogenous religion but 'religion' itself does not have a universally accepted definition. As Bryan Turner points out, 'although the question of the nature of religion has been endlessly discussed by philosophers, sociologists and theologians, the conceptual cows have yet to come home' (Turner 1991: 242). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines 'religion' as: 'the belief in a superhuman controlling power, esp. in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship' (Allen 1990: 1015). While this is far from perfect, such a common-sense dictionary definition is sufficient because in my discussion of Hinduism, the term does not necessitate or invite further definition or explanation. There is therefore no need to debate the merits of the various definitions of and approaches to religion offered by, for example, Tylor, Engels, Pareto, Freud, Durkheim, Horton, Spiro, Goode, Otto, Wach, Berger, Weber, Geertz, Bell, Turner, Robertson, Goody, Babb and Yinger (see e.g. Turner 1991; Hamilton 1993; Beckerlegge 2001a).

It is worth noting though that both the category of religion and various religious traditions are (regardless of whether or not religious experiences are supernatural) social phenomena which are socially constructed (Beckford 2003: 2-8). That is, the meanings attributed to both the

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[1] The word 'Hindu' can be traced back into 'ancient antiquity' where it 'referred to the natives of northern India' (Frykenberg 1997: 83-84).

category of religion and to various religions are not fixed, and instead are constantly negotiated. For example, a group that previously was not considered to be religious could, after a long complex process of argument and counterargument, achieve recognition as being a bona fide religion. Within traditions, opposing groups may denounce the philosophy and practices of other groups as not being valid expressions of the religion or even religious at all. It is particularly worth mentioning this here because the constant renegotiation of meanings is especially the case within Hinduism because of its diversity that has been briefly mentioned above and will be discussed in detail below.

While it is not necessary to consider in detail what exactly 'religion' is in an attempt to conceptualise Hinduism, it is worthwhile briefly mentioning some specific difficulties surrounding the term 'religion' in relation to Hinduism. This provides some details as to the nature of Hinduism prior to my discussion below which addresses Hinduism directly.

The Indian law courts have faced difficulties regarding the nature of religion (which provides a clear example that religion is socially constructed). It was reported in May 2004 that it was necessary for The Supreme Court to examine 'what constitutes an essential part of a religion with reference to a particular doctrine or religious practice followed by a particular community' (*IANS* May 8, 2004: online). Because of the problems regarding the terms 'religion' and 'religious', such a question would be difficult for any law court. However, regarding Hinduism this problem is exacerbated. This is for two main reasons.

Firstly, as David Pocock points out in his anthropological account of an Indian village, in the West the word religion refers to 'an area of the *special*, a mode of reasoning about the universe governed by rules which are not those of day-to-day thought' and that therefore '*the religious remains … a separate area of life in the West*' (Pocock 1973: xiii). However, in Hinduism there is not this separation between the secular and the religious, and the religious should not be seen as constituting a separate sphere from that of daily life. James Preston alludes to this when he points out that 'Hinduism is one of the world's most complex religions … [and] … is composed of tightly-knit myths, rites and customs' (Preston 1980: 1). James Beckford makes the same point as Pocock and argues that 'only in modern times and predominantly western societies has religion been categorically separated from the rest of culture' (Beckford 2000: 167). Although the argument that religion only constituted a category when it became separated from the secular in the course of Western modernity is valid, I am not convinced that a lack of a distinction between the sacred and everyday life in Hinduism is as a result of non-exposure to modernity. For example, Indians were subject to modernizing tendencies during the colonial era, and in modern India even amongst highly educated individuals who embrace modernity it is still common for their lives to be inextricably bound up with religion. This is the case even in the diaspora (see e.g. Carey 1983; Carman 1996; Williams 1996; Sekhar 1999). Therefore, when Hinduism is referred to as a religion there must at least be the understanding that, as Hinduism is inextricably bound up with everyday life, the term 'religion' as used here is somewhat different from how the term is conventionally understood in the West.

The second reason why Hinduism is problematic in relation to the term 'religion' is more serious. I have asserted that the term is sufficient in this paper as there is some commonsense understanding of what is being referred to when it is used. I have argued that religion is not a separate category in the life of a Hindu. I have also argued that when this is explicitly recognised and appreciated, the term 'religion' can remain in use and it is thus acceptable to refer to Hinduism as a religion. However, this argument is dependent upon an understanding

of what Hinduism is, and this in itself is far from straightforward. I will explain fully why this is the case and then proceed, drawing upon the work of Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1997), to back up my initial claim in this paper. That is, that an understanding of what constitutes Hinduism *can* be achieved and this results in a conceptualisation of Hinduism which makes clear what is being referred to when this term is used. Therefore, the term 'Hinduism' can certainly be used without any threat to academic rigour and this does not imply a lack of awareness of diversity within Hinduism.

HINDUISM

I opened this paper with the claim that Hinduism is incredibly diverse. Importantly, it lacks a central church-like institution (Srinivas 1962: 60; Kanitkar and Cole 1995: 206; Smith 2003: 6). It is true that the 8th Century AD Saint Adi Shankara, the founder of the philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta* (see below), created four monastic Orders which still have their *maths* (monastic institutions) today (see Gupta 2002: 15; Bhatt 2001: 184). However, while Adi Shankara contributed to the revival of Hinduism, these *maths* have certainly not given rise to a central authority within Hinduism. It is important to emphasise though that the heterogeneity inherent within Hinduism is far more extreme than the lack of a central church-like authority alone indicates. For example, some traditions that are referred to as being Hindu are actually vehemently opposed to one another in terms of beliefs and practices. Indeed, it has been said that to put all the groups that are generally thought to belong to Hinduism in this all-encompassing category is comparable to lumping together religions such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity and calling them something like 'The Semitic religion' (see Svarūpa-dāsa 1996: 101).

Robert Jackson (1996) argues convincingly that the reason for the confusion over what Hinduism actually is largely stems from the British in Bengal during the second half of the eighteenth century. The plethora of diverse beliefs and practices of the Indian sub-continent could not be seen as constituting a religion as such. However, because of their Western cultural paradigm, the British assumed that there was 'a coherent system of beliefs and practices that could be compared with other religious systems' (Jackson 1996: 88) such as Christianity which did constitute a coherent system. The diverse beliefs and practices were lumped together, and by the early nineteenth century were collectively referred to as 'Hinduism'. Within a short period of time, Hindus themselves started to use the term (Jackson 1996: 88-89). Hinduism subsequently came to be known as a 'world religion' along with other religions such as Islam which, unlike Hinduism, *did* have a single holy book upon which authority was based. For example, Hinduism was one of the 'world religions' at the 'World's Parliament of Religions' held in Chicago in 1893. Hinduism is still commonly referred to as a 'world religion' today (e.g. in Hamilton 1998) and is placed alongside religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism in, for example, *The Usborne Internet-Linked Encyclopedia of World Religions* (Meredith, Hickman and Le Rolland 2005) and in academic books such as Coward's *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (1985). In his research which covered England and Wales, Jackson (1996: 95-97) also concluded that it is extremely common for Hinduism to be taught as a discrete religion in schools.

Even though the term 'Hinduism' is extremely problematic, it seems intuitively clear that there *is* such a thing as Hinduism (although there is disagreement amongst scholars as to what this might be). For example, even though academics may struggle with the term, many people would comfortably assert that they are a Hindu. Flood notes that 'Most Hindus will be certain

that their identity contrasts with that of Christian, Muslim or Buddhist' (Flood 1995: 5). To a large degree this reflexive thought arises only as a result of questions posed through living in an environment (such as in the diaspora) where Hindus practise self-consciously – unlike in India where this is not the case for the majority of the population (see Knott 1986: 233; Michaelson 1987: 46; Thomas 1993: 187). However, some reflexive thought *is* also occurring in India, largely as a result of an increase in Hindu nationalism which makes the question 'What is Hinduism?' a political one (see Bhatt 1997: 157).

Others reject the term Hinduism altogether, instead referring to their beliefs and practices as the *sanatana dharma*. This is not easily translatable but can be roughly translated as the 'eternal way of life' (see e.g. Weller 1997: 290). It is often translated as 'the eternal religion' but this is inadequate because those who advocate the use of the term are usually attempting to reject the Western term 'religion' which is seen as being unsuitable.

I will now briefly consider the views of four scholars (Madeleine Biardeau, Brian K. Smith, Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Heinrich von Stietencron) on the validity of the construct of 'Hinduism'. These approaches are summarised and commented upon by Aditya Malik (1997) in his aptly named chapter *Hinduism: Three-Thousand-Three-Hundred-and-Six Ways to Invoke a Construct* which I will draw upon. I will then go on to look in more detail at the approach of Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1997).

There is a similarity between the first four scholars in that they attempt to construct a 'unity within Hinduism' and define it. However, they do this differently even though they 'make reference to similar terms and materials'. The first three attempt to 'develop a holistic version of Hinduism', while von Stietencron 'asserts the coherent nature of individual traditions' (Malik 1997: 13). Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, on the other hand, argues that Hinduism displays unity within diversity.

Madeleine Biardeau presents a structuralist approach. She believes that a whole society desires 'to present itself as a well-ordered whole ... [and that] … Unity is sought at a deeper level … on the basis of the explicit or implicit norms which every Hindu carries in his head' (Biardeau 1981/1994: 2/16 cited in Malik 1997: 13). Therefore the *Veda*[2] is seen '… not as a corpus of very ancient texts, but above all as a universal reference' (Biardeau 1981/1994: 14/16 cited in Malik 1997: 14).

As Malik notes, this does not allow for the possibility of individual agency. Furthermore, there is an absence of any intention whatsoever to engage in dialogue with Hindus themselves and, in Malik's opinion; dialogue could undermine the theory's claim of unity. Nevertheless, I do not think it wise to completely reject Biardeau's theory. After all, as mentioned, many Hindus do seem to know intuitively that they belong to a unified group.

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[2] The *Veda* literally means 'knowledge' and is seen by many to be an essential component in any definition of Hinduism. The *Veda* comprises four texts (often collectively known as the *Vedas*) that were written down around 5000 years ago. Previously, the knowledge was transmitted orally. They are the most sacred ancient texts in Hinduism and are believed to be eternal (see Weller 1997: 291). The *Vedas* are often seen as 'the "canon" of Hindu Scripture' (see Zaehner 1966: v-vi) although such a description is perhaps evidence of the problematic afore-mentioned attempt to understand Hinduism through a Western frame of reference.

Brian K. Smith's view is quite similar. Smith asserts that in Hinduism, tradition is transformed with 'legitimizing reference to the authority of the *Veda*' (Smith 1989: 13f. cited in Malik 1997: 14). The *Veda* is referenced in a number of ways. For example, people may claim that something *is* the *Veda*, that it is *based* on the *Veda*, is a *simplified version* of the *Veda* or that it is an enlargement of the *Veda* (see Smith 1989: 29 cited in Malik 1997: 14). There are some groups who actually *reject* the *Veda* (Flood 1995: 9). Therefore it may be prudent to add such groups to Smith's list. Even if they reject it, such groups are still technically referring to the *Veda*.

Malik points out that the approach is top-heavy as it does not take into account those groups which make no reference whatsoever to the *Veda* (Malik 1997: 14). Such groups predominantly engage in rituals and make no reference to the scriptures. Malik argues that although the rituals practised by such groups are certain to have antecedents in the *Veda*, the practitioners themselves do not consciously attempt to legitimise them through reference to the *Veda* – it is only the scholar that does this (Malik 1997: 15). Furthermore, this 'popular' or 'folk' Hinduism is the most common manifestation of Hinduism in India (see Fuller 1992) and this emphasises that Smith's approach is insufficient.

Günther-Dietz Sontheimer argues that Hinduism is made up of five constituent components that together make up Hinduism (Malik 1997: 16). These components are: The work and teachings of *Brahmans* (members of the priestly caste), Asceticism and Renunciation, Tribal religion, Folk religion and *Bhakti* (devotional worship) (Malik 1997: 28). The components have a 'dynamic and fluid' interrelationship and Folk religion is the most important of these (Malik 1997: 16).

Malik notes that there are a number of problems with this. Firstly, the approach is, like Biardeau's, ahistorical because it advocates that the five components have existed since Hinduism began (Malik 1997: 17). It is clear that this is highly unlikely. Although some Hindus refer to their tradition as eternal, it is continually evolving. Furthermore, even if the tradition is not eternal, although the historical date of the inception of Hinduism cannot be ascertained, it seems impossible that all of the components would have arisen simultaneously. Furthermore, argues Malik, Sontheimer's approach is flawed because it is highly unlikely that the different groups engage in discourse at the same level (see Malik 1997: 17). This seems like a valid criticism. For example, urban *Brahmans* who study the scriptures are likely to be far removed from illiterate villagers who worship local deities at village shrines.

Heinrich von Stietencron argues that it is wrong to see Hinduism as one religion. Therefore he departs from the previous approaches outlined. However, he does regard Hinduism as a single socio-cultural unit. In his opinion, this unit contains many distinct religions which are coherent and can thus be compared with other 'world religions'. These religions cannot be placed together under the term 'Hinduism' (here 'Hindu religion') because there are so many contradictions between them. Malik identifies two major problems with this approach. Firstly, it attempts to judge others using the Western system of reference as it uses Christian concepts such as 'religion [and] culture'. Furthermore, because of this, different groups within Hinduism are compartmentalised even though (as will be demonstrated) it is clear that there are overlaps (see Malik 1997: 15-16).

GABRIELLA EICHINGER FERRO-LUZZI

In her (1997) chapter *The Polythetic-prototype Approach to Hinduism*, Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi puts forward an approach to understanding Hinduism which appears to overcome the problems inherent within the previous approaches to Hinduism. She maintains that we should not get rid of the term 'Hinduism' or deny Hinduism the status of a religion. She argues that it is not Hinduism *per se* which causes problems but the false belief that all concepts can be defined because they must possess common attributes and clear-cut boundaries (see Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 294). This can be rectified if we utilise 'Wittgenstein's discovery that concepts need not have common attributes and clear-cut boundaries but may be held together by a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 295). In other words there may be a 'family resemblance'. Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi emphasises that such ('polythetic') concepts should not be defined but exemplified, and Srinivas's claim that 'While it is not possible to define a Hindu, it is not difficult to identify a person as a Hindu' (Srinivas 1960: 575 cited in Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 295) backs up this assertion. It would be difficult to disagree with Srinivas. Indeed, any study concerning Hinduism rests on the supposition that there are individuals and groups than can be clearly identified as being Hindu.

Before going on to show how her approach can be applied to Hinduism, Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi mentions some of the previously inadequate approaches such as those by, for example, Weber, and Radhakrishnan, who both look for a 'core' within Hinduism. Weber saw this as the belief in *karma* (the theory that every action has a consequence), while Radhakrishnan saw it as Adi Shankara's philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta* (see Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 295-296). However, any such approach is flawed because there will always be some concepts that do not apply to all groups. For example, Cohn (1959) points out that some Hindus are unaware of the notion of *karma* (cited in Hamilton 1998: 68), while some concepts are shared by followers of Buddhism and Jainism (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 296).

Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi goes on to give examples of how different traditions in Hinduism can be held together by overlapping similarities. I present here the best of her examples which clearly shows the application of the approach:

> Village Hinduism with its worship of mostly bloodthirsty goddesses who have to be placated and Sanskritic rites addressed to gentle Gods like Krishna have nothing in common as long as we remain on this general level of description … [However,] … the fact that one deity is female and the other male creates no problem because a village goddess often has male servants who participate in her offerings and Krishna may be worshipped together with … [his female consort] Rādhā. Another overlapping similarity consists in the fact that non-Brahmin *pūjāris* [performers of devotional rituals] just like Brahman temple priests approach their respective deities in a state of ritual purity … Furthermore, the blood demanded by the goddess and the milk pudding relished by Krishna may either be subsumed under the heading of food or it may be pointed out that, while Krishna never accepts any blood offering, village goddesses enjoy both blood and sweet dishes.
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> (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 298)

It would at first appear that there could be the objection that if this approach is used then it automatically means that Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs are Hindu because they are linked to groups which would conventionally be regarded as being Hindu by virtue of their overlapping similarities. However, Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi points out that it is exactly her purpose to show that polythetic concepts have no clear boundaries and that such groups remain separate from Hindus only 'because of their members' wish to be separate and not because of an intrinsic criteria justifying their separate status' (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 300). A problematic aspect of this is that Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi does not take into account the fact that the desire for certain groups to remain distinct from Hindus could be ignored and the approach could be used for political ends. For example, it is common for Hindu nationalists to assert that Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs are Hindus (see McKean 1996: 118; Williams 1996: 236; Mannur 2003: 287; Smith 2003: 5) and the approach could be used to back up this assertion.

A completely polythetic approach to Hinduism would be very vague. However, Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi also stresses the importance of a number of features within Hinduism which she refers to as 'prototypes'. All of the criteria that previously 'have been pointed out by scholars as characteristic of Hinduism and useful to identify a Hindu remain valid as prototypical features' (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 301). However, the key features that make up the prototypes are, according to Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, those features that are frequent and highly prestigious. Such features include the worship of the gods *Shiva*, *Krishna* and *Ganesh*, the visiting of temples and going on pilgrimage, and belief in the concepts of *dharma* (religious duty, law and custom), *karma*, *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth) and *Brahman* (the supreme Reality [see below]) (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 301). Because these prototypical practices and concepts are not essential though, what results is an aid to help scholars employ the overall polythetic-prototype approach which accepts both that 'Hinduism' exists and that there is real unity in extreme diversity.

This amounts to a kind of common-sense approach. As mentioned above, it is usually possible to tell who is a Hindu; and there is usually the intuitive realisation that there are common links between what might appear to be very diverse groups. In the quote presented above concerning goddesses and *Krishna*, Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi gives quite an extreme example, but there are more extreme ones. For instance, even before learning of the polythetic-prototype approach it appeared intuitively clear to me that there was a common thread of overlapping similarities inherent within Hinduism. For example, I could see a near-naked ascetic who lived in a cremation ground and who practised various austerities, and a businessman with a family who conducted a daily *puja* (devotional ritual) in his home – and have no qualms about regarding them both as being Hindu. It thus appears necessary that when considering Hinduism we 'accept vagueness and disorder' (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1997: 303) instead of insisting on boundaries where, it appears, they do not exist.

DARSHAN

One of the most important prototypes of Hinduism is the practice of *darshan*. *Darshan* involves a devotee gazing into the eyes of an image of a deity. Through this process a devotee is able to receive the divine glance of the deity (Eck 1985; Beckerlegge 2001b). Beckerlegge emphasises that the practice of *darshan* is so persuasive that it manages to cut across sectarian boundaries and that even Hindus who tend to think in abstract philosophical terms usually still regard the image as being of some use and an acceptable focus of devotion for

those Hindus who are not philosophically minded. He further concludes that in Hinduism 'what unites worshippers from the most ardent to the most pragmatic is the belief in the need to stand in the presence of the deity or deities [and] to have the *darshan* of the deity' (Beckerlegge 2001b: 60-62). Therefore, it is clear that the religious image is of paramount importance within Hinduism.

As indicated in the introduction to this paper, Jean Baudrillard considers the nature of images in general and then further discusses religious images (see Baudrillard 1983a). Because the use of images of Hindu deities is an essential prototypical feature of Hinduism, it is worthwhile investigating the extent to which Baudrillard's important theoretical observations can inform our understanding of the nature of such images.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD AND HINDUISM

Mark Poster claims that, according to Baudrillard, 'Culture is now dominated by simulations [and that] objects and discourse … have no firm origin, no referent, no ground or foundation' (Poster 1988: 1). By a simulation, Baudrillard means that there is no distinction between the object and its representation. He calls these simulations 'simulacra', and he asserts that the world is made up of these simulacra which 'have no referent or ground in any "reality" except their own' (Poster 1988: 5).

Baudrillard's comments concerning religious images appear in his 'Simulacra and Simulations' (1983a). In this work Baudrillard applies his idea of the simulacrum to religious images, and this leads him to interesting conclusions which invite theoretical analysis in the light of Hinduism. Baudrillard's opinion is that the simulacrum does not represent the real; it becomes the real. Because of this, Baudrillard concludes that this is why iconoclasts wanted to destroy images of God. He asserts that iconoclasts sensed the 'omnipotence of simulacra' as they have the facility of 'erasing God from the consciousnesses of people'. This suggests that 'ultimately there has never been any God; that only simulacra exist; indeed that God himself has only been his own simulacrum' (Baudrillard 1983a: 169).

As for the iconolaters, Baudrillard claims that they were 'content to venerate God at one remove' (Baudrillard 1983a: 169). He also adds, however, that perhaps they were aware of the nature of simulacra but did not want to unmask images as this would reveal the fact that there was nothing behind them (Baudrillard 1983a: 169). Despite the fact that the scholar of Hinduism David Smith agrees with Baudrillard and asserts that images of Hindu gods are simulacra (Smith 1993: 162), this view is very problematic indeed when applied to Hinduism. Firstly, Baudrillard only makes a distinction between iconolaters and iconoclasts. He does not appreciate the diverse range of meanings that are placed upon the image in Hinduism by devotees. For example, an image (usually in the form of a *murti* – or religious statue for want of a better term) may be regarded as being the embodied deity, the location of a deity's power or merely representative of the deity (see Beckerlegge 2001b: 108). Use of the image should certainly not indicate iconolatry in the sense that it is the actual image that is being worshipped.

Furthermore, it appears that Baudrillard's view of religion is anchored in a Western understanding. For example, he is of the opinion that those who used images were content to venerate God 'at one remove'. However, the afore-mentioned philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta* puts forward the notion of *Brahman* which challenges this idea. *Vedantic* philosophy holds

that an individual must realise[3] that everything that is impermanent is unreal and that the only thing that is changeless and hence real is their pure consciousness (known as the *atman*). Before this is realised this consciousness is known as the *jiva* and is present in successive physical incarnations. However, realisation results in the merging[4] of the *atman* with the *formless Brahman*. By its very nature, *Brahman* cannot be sufficiently defined but it can be tentatively referred to as being 'undifferentiated existence, consciousness and bliss' (Krishnananda 1994: 102). In many cases the image is used as an aid in the quest to gain appreciation of this formless *Brahman*, which, 'though it is everywhere, it *cannot be seen*' (Krishnananda 1994: 102 [my emphasis]). In the case of Hinduism then, it appears that Baudrillard's view that those who use images are afraid to unmask them because this would reveal the fact that there was nothing behind them, is inappropriate. It is more apt to suggest that it would be a desirable goal for many Hindus to be able to unmask the image because behind the image is the "opposite" of "nothing". It is thus fair to say that it is necessary to be careful when considering Baudrillard's idea of simulacra in the light of Hindu religious images. Baudrillard does not entertain the notion that, owing to the unique way in which individuals may perceive Hindu religious images as distinct from other simulacra, it is possible that other variables might come into play.

Aside from his remarks regarding images, Baudrillard makes a further claim which calls into question the applicability of his ideas to Hinduism. In *Fatal Strategies* (1983b) Baudrillard asserts that 'gods can only live and hide in the inhuman … and not in the human realm … [and that] … a human-god is an absurdity' (Baudrillard 1983b: 200). In contrast to this claim, Hinduism has a long history of belief in the presence of *avatars* – manifestations of God on earth in physical form – and this belief is still very popular today (Smith 2003: 34-35). Ramakrishna (1836-1886) was a famous *avatar* (see Smith 2003: 173-174), and a good example of a contemporary *avatar* is Sathya Sai Baba who enjoys a huge worldwide following (see Sharma 1986: 228-231; Fuller 1992: 177-181; Smith 2003: 179). There are also countless others who enjoy lower levels of popularity. For example, Pocock writes that it is common that men are elevated to the 'status of godhead' (1973: 98-99). Furthermore, in addition to *avatars*, gurus in Hinduism are also seen as being God (see Hutchinson 1996: esp. 110; Juergensmeyer 1996; Smith 2003: 171-179) (there is thus an overlap between an *avatar* and a guru). It is also important to note that during the Hindu wedding ritual the bride and groom '*assume a divine form*' and are worshipped by their family and friends 'in much the same way as deities are worshipped before their images in temples' (Fuller 1992: 30-31 [my emphasis]). In addition to these examples which show that a 'human-god' is certainly not an absurdity in Hinduism, there is the example of priests in some South Indian temples who, on one level at least, actually become the god *Shiva* during worship (Fuller 1992: 61; see also Smith 1993: 163). It is clear, then, that a consideration of certain Baudrillardian ideas in the light of Hinduism suggests that these ideas are not universal.

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[3] This type of realisation differs from ordinary realisation and refers to perfect understanding on an experiential level.

[4] The use of the word 'merging' should not give the impression that there is actually a duality at any stage between the *atman* and *Brahman*.

ONLINE IMAGES OF HINDU DEITIES

Baudrillard's ideas regarding images have undergone renewed interest since the commercial introduction of the Internet. This is because with each successive communications technology it seems reasonable to suggest that the notion of the simulacrum becomes stronger as images drift further away from their original reference points. This would seem to be especially the case with the Internet because of the WWW which gives primacy to images (Wertheim 1999: 25; Brasher 2004: xii; Cowan 2005b: 259).

This idea has been put forward by the theorist Manuel Castells who draws directly upon the work of Baudrillard. Castells asserts that 'there is no separation between "reality" and symbolic representation' (Castells 2000: 403) but wishes to make it clear that this has always been the case and has not just arisen as a result of electronic communication. He claims that 'all realities are communicated through symbols [and] in human, interactive communication, regardless of the medium, all symbols are somewhat displaced in relation to their assigned semantic meaning'. Therefore, in Castells's view: 'In a sense, all reality is virtually perceived' (Castells 2000: 404). However, Castells believes that the difference with the Internet is that it not only induces virtual reality but actually constructs real virtuality (Castells 2000: 403). This is because:

> *It is a system in which reality itself (that is, people's material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience.* All messages of all kinds become enclosed in the medium because the medium has become so comprehensive, so diversified, so malleable that it absorbs in the same multimedia text the whole of human experience, past, present, and future. (Castells 2000: 404 [emphasis in original])

It is worth noting here that these assertions are hyperbolic – a charge also often levelled against the work of Baudrillard, who, in the opinion of Poster (1988: 7) tends to talk about media images 'as if nothing else in society mattered' (Poster 1988: 7). However, despite this and the other points that I have made which call into question the applicability of Baudrillardian ideas when Hinduism is taken into account, it is worthwhile looking at whether or not the Internet can exacerbate the extent to which Hindu images can be considered to be simulacra. This is because there are a large number of images of Hindu deities associated with physical sites that have been replicated on the WWW [5] and increasingly large numbers of people are spending time online. I say *exacerbate* because both Castells and Baudrillard would assert that an original image in a Hindu temple is already a simulacrum. However, it is possible that whereas the original image is securely bounded in a referential context, the image replicated on the WWW is far removed from this context and thus becomes more of a simulacrum. Thus, if the initial theory of simulacra is accepted, as a result of the Internet it might now be apt to speak of there being different degrees of simulacra.

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[5] There is no prohibition against the replication of deities in Hinduism (see Eck 1993)

In an investigation as to whether this is the case in the context of images of Hindu deities online, it is productive to take into account the meanings that devotees give to original images and to then compare the perceived status of these images with those on the WWW. In this way any differences in the status of the images can indicate whether or not the online Hindu image has become more of a hyper-real simulacrum than the original image. Ultimately, this can suggest possible consequences for Hinduism and the experiences of its practitioners as a result of images of Hindu deities being placed online.

As I have emphasised, the practice of *darshan* which necessitates images of deities is a prototypical feature of Hinduism. Therefore, when considering the nature of such images online it is prudent to assess the extent to which online images can allow for the practice of *darshan*. *Darshan can* be received from online images of Hindu deities (Scheifinger 2008; forthcoming). However, the fact that devotees have different views as to the nature of original images directly affects the perceived level of efficacy of online *darshan*. For example, for those to whom the original image is considered to be sacred in itself, the replicated online image cannot have an equal status and consequently the *darshan* that it can provide is not as powerful as that from the original image. Therefore, for such devotees, it is still necessary to gaze upon the original image in order to receive full *darshan* and so therefore the online image has not become more real than, or even as real as, the original image.

Some Hindu devotees do not assign any intrinsic sacredness to the physical image of a deity in a temple and instead may regard it as being a symbolic aid to their contemplation of the divine. For such individuals, a replicated online image can have the same status as the original image and can provide a *darshan* experience equal to that at the physical site (although visiting a sacred site can still be preferable for a number of other reasons [see Scheifinger forthcoming]). This might initially suggest that such an image does become hyper-real to a greater extent. This is because the online image appears to have become completely freed from its original referential context yet it is still providing a function for devotees. However, closer examination reveals that such an image is still related to the original image. It is the particular deity which gives meaning to the online image. For example, those who seek to receive online *darshan* from an image of the goddess *Kali* from the temple at Kalighat, Kolkata are entering into a relationship with this particular *Kali* – not a generic *Kali* disembedded from any referential locality. Therefore, even for those who believe that an online image has a status identical to that of the original image, replicated images on the WWW have not become more hyper-real. In this sense, the placing of images of Hindu deities online is unlikely to constitute a major development within Hinduism.

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