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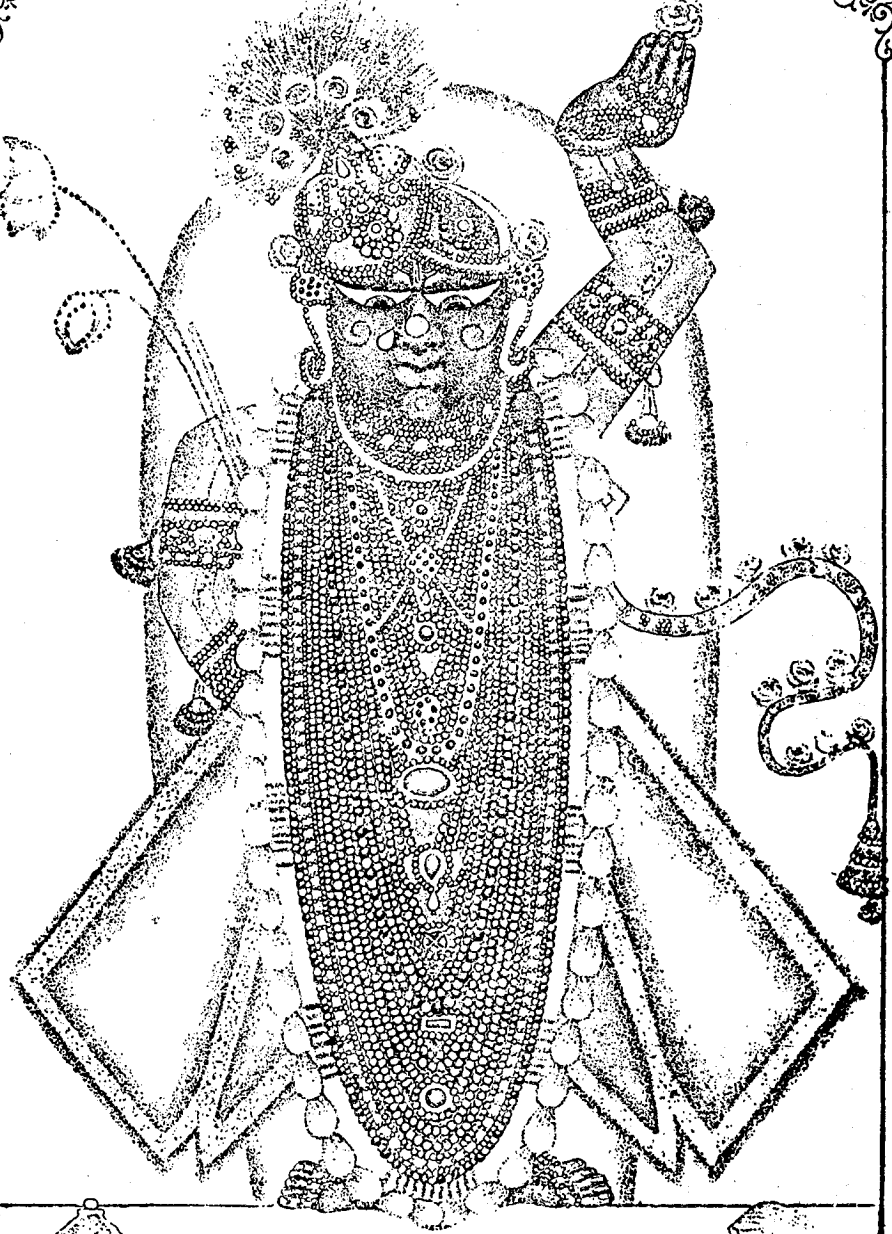
VALLABHA, VAISNAVISM AND THE WESTERN HEGEMONY OF INDIAN THOUGHT

Anyone who has spent time in Northern India – from Banaras to Delhi to Ahmedabad – has seen the image of Śrī Govardhana Nāthajī. Plumed headpiece set at a rakish angle, thickly garlanded with jeweled necklaces, Śrī Nāthajī peers through slit-like eyes, left arm raised to hold aloft the idea of Govardhana hillock, protecting his devotees. The pose captures the moment from Krishna's story found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* X. 25; a story beloved to the Vaiṣṇavas who count themselves members of the Vallabha community stretching beyond the Hindi-belt into Gujarat and Maharashtra. But who is this dark-faced deity?

Chances are good that the casual inquiry will produce an answer influenced by Śankara's *advaita vedānta* philosophy: this is one of Hinduism's great pantheon, all of which culminates in the absolute, the impersonal ultimate reality, beyond time and space. But this answer begins to ring hollow after at first hand the piety and vibrant devotionism of Śrī Nāthajī's devotees. Visit the Temple of Dvārakādhi's in Mathurā; where is non-dualistic vedānta in the midst of this poly-chromatic, iconic, *bhakti* which at every turn reveals a new expression and threatens to overwhelm the senses? After a deep, face to face encounter with this devotionism – holding the desire to understand it on its own terms – it becomes clear that the answer of *advaita vedānta* actually devalues the seriousness and joy marking the devotional sentiment.

Philosopher-theologian Vallabha (1479–1531 AD) made this charge against the *advaita*, who he called 'illusionists' (*māyāvādī*) in his voluminous writings. In brief, he accused them of a sort of spiritual arrogance which presumes to know the God beyond God without taking seriously the special grace of God's self-revelation in the world. Vallabha's view came to be known as either the path of grace (*pūstīmarga*) or the pure, nondualistic view of God (*śuddhādvaita brahmavāda*). The latter suggests the impurity of Śankara's position relying, as it does, on the concept of *māyā* which fits neither in the category of the world nor in the category of God. Vallabha, in his scripturally grounded solution to the problem of

॥ श्रीगोवर्धनधरोविजयतेतराम् ॥



श्रीगोवर्धनधरोविजयतेतराम्
Śrī Govardhana Nāthaji

relationship between God and the world, avoids positing any independent category. Everything is God, even the world if properly understood. Certainly, the world is no illusion.

Vallabha represents a different starting point for an understanding of Hinduism. And his view remains extremely influential, giving a positive valuation of Vaiṣṇava devotionalism, embraced by millions of people in North-central and Northwest India since the 16th century. In this regard alone his thought is more important than advaita vedānta for understanding popular religious expression. Furthermore, the poetry, literature, ritual, doctrine, and myth transmitted through the Vallabha sampradāya has made a significant contribution to the devotional sentiment of Hinduism in general.

In the West, at least, the theological foundation of Vallabha's distinct variety of vaiṣṇava devotionalism has not been well explored. What are the reasons for this lacuna? Seeking these reasons raises wider issues concerning how scholars, operating from within a modern Western world-view, understand the diverse collection of traditions conveniently labelled "Hinduism." What presuppositions have shaped the study of Hinduism in the past? Which values and orientations should guide the study today?

Keeping these method-questions in mind, this paper will first review the "Western" scholarship on Vallabha, that body of literature produced by scholars whose primary mode of discourse is English. At first glance it may appear that a good deal of work has been done; a closer look will show that much of it is seriously deficient.¹ Theistic vedānta has never received the level of attention accorded Śankara's school. But even comparing the schools within theistic vedānta, Vallabha has received short shrift. The second half of this paper considers wider methodological questions about the Western study of Hinduism and suggests several reasons why theistic vedānta, in general, and Vallabha, in particular, have been neglected.

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1. The Vallabha Sampradāya, beginning with its founder, has produced a rich and extensive collection of Sanskrit literature which has received little attention compared to the scholarly work done in other areas of vedānta. Only recently has some of the most important literature of the Sampradāya begun to receive the attention it deserves. Little of it has been translated into English; many of the major works of Vallabha remain unavailable to all but those who are familiar with Sanskrit. The actual dimensions of the theology of Vallabha remain, for the most part, unknown to those outside the tradition. For titles of these works see Telivāḷā (1980) and Dasgupta.

I

Very little was written on Vallabha in English during the 19th century; the first scholarly mention was made by H.H. Wilson in *Asiatic Researches* 16, in 1828. This material was later reprinted in Wilson's *Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus*. Around the mid-19th century the Sampradāya received a good deal of negative publicity through a celebrated trial in the Bombay High Court when a libel suit was brought against the author of a periodical devoted to exposing alleged immoral practices of the Sampradāya leadership. Most of the books and articles published during this period were written in order to cast aspersions on the morality of the group. A transcript of the court case, erroneously attributed to Yadunāthaji Vrajaratnaji (the plaintiff in the case), was subsequently published: *Report of the Maharaj Libel Case and of the Bhattia Conspiracy Case Connected with It*.² Shortly afterwards another book appeared, published anonymously, hostile to the Sampradāya. titled, *History of the Sect of the Mahārājas, or Vallabhāchāryas, in Western India*.³

Two other publications in the 19th century, which provided brief accounts of the history and literature of the Sampradāya, were affected by the negative bias generated by the trial. F.S. Growse's *Mathura: A District Memoir*, illustrates the sort of hostility in vogue at the time. In this book Growse discusses what he refers to as "the revolting character of their theological literature" (289). The analysis of the Vallabha movement in Monier-Williams' *Brahmanism and Hinduism* reflects a similar negative bias.

Early in the 20th century several books appeared which included sections containing a more balanced treatment of Vallabha's doctrines. R.G. Bhandarkar's historical analysis, "Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Minor Religious Systems," appeared in *Grundriss der Indo Arischen Philologie*

2. In his bibliographical essay on Hinduism in *A Reader's Guide to the Great Religions*, Norvin Hein attributes authorship of this work to Yadunatha Vrajanathji, the plaintiff in the 1852 Bombay libel case. This is a common bibliographical error due to the form of the title page. Actually this work is a transcript of that famous trial and not the work of Vrajanathji (1977 : 135).

3. This book was written by none other than Karsandas Mulji, the chief defendant in the case charged with slander and defamation of character. It is not the work of Yadunatha Vrajanathji as suggested by Norvin Hein (1972 : 8, n. 22).

und *Altertumskunde*; this work was later republished in India. Bhandarkar's analysis relies on two important Vallabhite texts, Giridhara's *Śuddhādvaita-mārtaṇḍa*, and Lālū Bhaṭṭa's *Prameya-ratnārṇava*. V.S. Ghate examined Vallabha's understanding of the *Brahma Sūtra* in his book, *Le Vedanta, Etude sur les Brahma-sutras et leurs Cinq Commentaires* which was subsequently republished in English as simply *The Vedanta*. Other scholarly contributions made during the first twenty years of the century include *Studies in the Vedanta Sutras* by S.C.V. Vidyarnava; an article written by R.D. Karmarkar, "Comparison of the Bhāṣyas of Śankara, Rāmānuja, Keśavakāśmirī and Vallabha on Some Crucial Sūtras," first published in parts in the *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, and later printed in booklet form; and J.N. Farquhar's *An Outline of Religious Literature in India* (312-317). A short book, insubstantial from the scholarly point of view, was also published during this period: *Vallabhācārya--A Sketch of His Life and Teachings*, anonymously written, for the "Saints of India" series (Madras: G.A. Nateson and Co., 1918).

During the next twenty years, from 1920 to 1940, some important scholarship appeared to deepen the Western understanding of Vallabha's theology. Unfortunately the period begins with the publication of *Hasting's Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* containing an article which was a completely unbridled attempt to denigrate the Sampradāya. This four and one half page entry, "Vallabha," relies on earlier diatribe as its evidence for a negative evaluation. The perspective of its author is utterly fantastic, and whatever truth lies behind its attack on the morality of the Sampradāya, the article completely transgressed the limits of responsible scholarship. Because this article illustrates the attitudes pervasive among Western scholars at the time, its content will be taken up shortly.

Fortunately, a more balanced scholarship was also published during this period. The most important contribution was a chapter in Dasgupta's *A History of Indian Philosophy*, (4: 320-383). This presentation of Vallabha's thought reflects Dasgupta's unmatched talent for substantive and unbiased descriptive analysis. Because it remains a standard introductory text for any serious study of Indian philosophy Dasgupta's work has had the added advantage of being more readily available than most of the material published on Vallabha. It was republished by Motilal Banarsidass in 1975. A brief discussion of Vallabha's thought was presented

by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in his compendium, *Indian Philosophy* (2:756-760).

Perhaps the foremost scholar of Vallabha's thought during this period was Mūlachandra Tulasīdāsa Telīvālā, (C.E. 1888-1927). His primary efforts focused on publishing critical editions of Vallabha's Sanskrit works. Thanks to Telīvālā many of the manuscripts owned by leaders in the Sampradāya were collected, compared, and published. An example of this work is his *Śrī Vallabhācārya and his Anubhāṣya*, published in 1926, which was based on his examination of twelve different manuscripts, as well as four printed editions. The text-critical work published by Telīvālā usually included introductory material written in English containing a wealth of information ranging from descriptions of manuscripts to history and doctrine of the Sampradāya. Recently all of his work in English has been collected together into one volume, *Suddhāvāita Brahmvāda : The Complete Works of M.T. Telivala*, edited by K.N. Mishra.

Another book, published shortly after Telīvālā's edition of the *Anubhāṣya* was Jethalal Shah's *A Primer of Anu-Bhāṣyam*; a revised edition was published in 1960. The usefulness of this book is limited for those unfamiliar with the Devanagari script because all Sanskrit terms (of which there are many) are printed in Devanagari.

The question of Viṭṭhalanātha's contribution to the *Anubhāṣya* is discussed in the article, "Double Authorship of Anubhāṣya" by Govindlal Hargovind Bhatt, published in the *Proceedings of the Fourth All-India Oriental Conference*. The same author provided good, short introductions to the thought of Vallabha in "The Puṣṭimārga of Vallabhācārya" and "The School of Vallabha." Bhatt also contributed to the scholarly debate regarding the connection between the doctrines of Vallabhācārya and Viṣṇusvāmi with his paper, "Viṣṇusvāmin and Vallabhācārya." He added some additional thoughts on the subject with his article, "A Further Note on Viṣṇusvāmin and Vallabhācārya." Another contribution to the Viṣṇusvāmi - Vallabha connection was "The Viṣṇusvāmin Riddle" by Raj Bahadur Amarnath Ray. At about the same time a sociological inquiry, N.A. Thoothi's *The Vaishnavas of Gujarat*, was published. This study begins by putting the infamous trial into proper perspective and includes sections on religious, social and economic organization, as well as considering intellectual and artistic creativity.

Two other contributions to the Western understanding of Vallabha were published in the 1930s. Written from a Christian point of view, *Vers le Christ par le Vedanta : Vallabha*, by Pierre Johannes, S.J. is an attempt to move through the vedānta of Śankara and Rāmānuja to Vallabha, and then supply necessary "correctives" in order to develop a "Christian vedānta." At about the same time it appeared in an English version, *A Synopsis of "To Christ through the Vedanta", Part III: Vallabha*. A careful reading of the first half of this work reveals a remarkable similarity in both content and form with a Sanskrit work of the 17th century Vallabhite, Lalū Bhaṭṭa, titled *Prameya-ratnāṇava*. Johannes cites no textual source for his presentation but it is probable that extensive "borrowing" has occurred. Of greater importance is the brief, but balanced treatment of Helmuth Von Glasenapp's article "Die Lehre Vallabhācāryas," published in *Zeitschrift fur Indologie und Iranistik*. It was subsequently translated into English by Ishverbhai S. Amin and republished as *Doctrines of Vallabhācārya*. This brief work discusses some of the most important writing of Vallabha as well as the central doctrines of his theological system, but like Shah's *A Primer of Anu-Bhāshyam*, it contains, at least in the English edition, numerous terms in the Devanagari script.

In the forty years beginning with 1943 scholarship on Vallabha increased, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Two partial English translations of the verse portion of Vallabha's *Tattvārthadīpanibandha* (TVD) were published in 1943. An introduction and notes in English by J.G. Shah is included in the Sanskrit edition of *The Tattvartha-deepa-nibandha*, a two volume edition edited by H.O. Shastri covering the first two books of the TVD. Another partial translation of the TVD including only the verse portion of the first book, the *Śastrārtha*, appeared in the appendix to M.C. Parekh's *Shri Vallabhacharya : Life, Teachings and Movement*. This presentation of the fundamental features of life, writings, and doctrines of Vallabha is written for a popular audience by an author sympathetic to the Sampradāya. In addition to a translation of the *Śastrārtha*, Parekh translates fourteen of the sixteen tracts in the *Śoḍaśagrantha*. Two other sectarian accounts of the doctrines of Vallabha are C.M. Vaidya's *Shri Vallabhacharya and His Teachings*, and J.G. Shah's *Shri Vallabhacharya: His Philosophy and Religion*.

Vallabha receives mention as one of the commentators on the *Brahma Sūtra* edited by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in the introductory essay to his translation of that work, *The Brahma Sūtra: The Philosophy*

of *Spiritual Life* (88-93). An extensive analysis of the major works of Vallabha, and of some of the authors in the subsequent tradition, is found in Mrudula I. Marfatia's *The Philosophy of Vallabhācārya*. Marfatia's work is strongly affected by her bias in favor of Śankara's advaita vedānta, and unfortunately her descriptive analysis is skewed by a negative evaluation of Vallabha's thought. With this limitation in mind, Marfatia's work provides at most a starting point for understanding the sorts of theological issues Vallabha is grappling with in his major writings.

Marfatia's book has elicited a strong response from a contemporary spokesman within the Sampradāya in the form of Gosvāmī Shyāma's *Śrīvallabhācārya ke Darśana kā Yathārtha Svarūpa*.⁴ Because it is written in Hindi, with only a few citations in English, it has value only for those with a working knowledge of that language. At first glance Gosvāmī Shyāma's decision to write his detailed rejoinder to Marfatia's work in a language other than English appears unfortunate, but at a more fundamental level this decision exhibits the demand among a growing segment of Indian scholars for the "Indianization" of Indian thought. Considered in this light, Gosvāmī Shyāma's rejoinder is more than an intellectual response to Marfatia's book. The medium is the message, so to speak.⁵

Another dimension of recent scholarship has emphasized the impact of Vallabha's theology on the development of Vaiṣṇava literature, and the aesthetics of Vaiṣṇava religious expression. In his book, *The Round Dance of Krishna and Uddhav's Message*, R.S. McGregor translates some of the Braj poetry of Nanddāss (16th century), one of *aṣṭachāp*, the eight original poets in the Vallabha Sampradāya. In first two chapters of his work McGregor discusses historical and theological developments—culminating with Vallabha—influencing vaiṣṇava poetic expression.

Approaching the popular literature of the Sampradāya from a slightly different angle is Richard Barz's *The Bhakti Sect of Vallabhācārya*.

4. *The Philosophy of Śrīvallabhācārya As It Is: A Critical Estimate of the Philosophy of Vallabhācārya* by Dr. (Mrs.) M.I. Marfatia.

5. In a private conversation with K.N. Mishra, who is a member of the faculty in Philosophy at Banaras Hindu University and who has devoted much of his energy to translating and publishing Vallabha's works in Hindi, I learned that Mishra's decision to work in Hindi rather than English stemmed from his desire to move the study of Indian thought away from a western medium of discourse. He attributed the same intent to Gosvāmī Shyāma.

This book, based on the author's Ph.D. dissertation, "Early Developments Within the Bhakti Sect of Vallabhācārya According to Sectarian Traditions," contains a partial translation of *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā*, or "Stories of the Eighty-four Vaiṣṇavas," written by Gokulanātha (16th century) and later edited by Harirāja (17th century). Barz selects the stories of four poets of the aṣṭachāp, including the famous blind poet Sūrdās, giving some insight into the lives of those who are considered among the greatest vaiṣṇava devotees. The text in translation speaks for itself as a rebuttal of Growse's denigration of the *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā* published nearly a century before. Barz's empathetic yet scholarly introduction to the history, doctrines, and practices of the Vallabha movement in the first part of his book can not be too highly praised. It is perhaps the finest and most insightful presentation of this material thus far. Barz is also responsible for a short article on Vallabha in the recently published *Encyclopedia of Religion*.

Another scholarly contribution making connections between Vallabha and Vaiṣṇava literary creativity is the Ph.D. dissertation of James Duggan Redington, "The Meaning of Kṛṣṇa's Dance of Love According to Vallabhācārya." In this work, recently published as *Vallabhācārya on the Love Games of Kṛṣṇa*, the author discusses the relationship between Sanskrit aesthetic theory and the motifs and symbols of Vaiṣṇava devotionalism. This discussion introduces a partial translation of Vallabha's *Subodhini*. The concept of devotion emerging from the various interpretations of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is the central theme of *The Bhāgavata Bhakti Cult and Three Advaita ācāryas: Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and Vallabha*, by Ramnarayan Vyas. Chapter six, "Vallabha's Approach to Devotion," is the shortest in the book offering only a superficial presentation of material requiring fuller treatment in light of the author's amazing claim that Vallabha's theology represents an attempt to synthesize the views of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja (Vyas: 166 and 171).

Vallabha's thought receives a brief mention in Jose Pereira's *Hindu Theology: A Reader*. This book, a compendium of theologically oriented primary source material in translation, includes among its pages a translation of the verse portion of the *Śastrārtha-prakarana*, as well as excerpts from two later Sanskrit authors in the Sampradāya. Also noteworthy for its historical perspective is a study of the Sampradāya's early connections with political forces in Northern India, Edwin Allen Richardson's Ph.D. dissertation, "Moghul and Rajput Patronage of the Bhakti Sect of the Maharajas, The Vallabha Sampradaya, 1640-1760

A.D." Of more theological interest is *The Vedanta of Pure Non-Dualism: The Heritage of the Philosophical Tradition of Shri Vallabhacharya*, a translation of a book written in Hindi by R. Kaladhar Bhatt. Despite its sectarian tone, this work is valuable for its insight into a contemporary Vallabhite's understanding of the theology of Vallabha, and how this theology relates to practical spiritual devotion. From a more scholarly perspective, Chinmayi Chatterjee provides an historical, conceptual context for Vallabha's thought in her *Studies in the Evolution of the Bhakti Cult with Special Reference to Vallabha School*.

Several other works published in the mid-1970's focused on the sociological and psychological dimensions of life in Vallabha communities of Western India. These include Rajendra Jindel's *Culture of a Sacred Town*, a careful 200 page study of Nathdvara as a pilgrimage center, and D.F. Pocock's *Mind, Body and Wealth* which provides a chapter on "the way of grace," but not without concluding with the infamous trial and comparing the Sampradāya unfavorably with the Swāminarāyan community. Somewhat idiosyncratic but extremely interesting. Renaldo Maduro's study, *Artistic Creativity in a Brahmin Painter Community*, presents yet another view of Nathdvara; this time from the perspective of "psychological anthropologist and clinical psychologist in the field."

In the past few years groups within the Sampradāya have begun the process of translating and publishing important devotional works. An American, who has become a member and taken the name, Shyamdas, is responsible for translating several books from Hindi or Braj into English. Among his recent works are: *Ocean of Jewels*, a translation of a Hindi translation of Lalū Bhaṭṭa's *Prameyaratnamava; Eighty-four Vaishnavas*, selected portions of the *Caurāsi Vaiṣṇavan ki Vārtā; Ashta Chhap*, stories of the eight original poets of the Sampradāya; and *Chaurasi Baithak, Eighty Four Seats of Shri Vallabhacharya*. All four of these works are devotional and sectarian in tone and style. A more scholarly concern with 17th century Braj may be found in A.W. Entwistle's translation, *The Rāsa Māna ke Pada of Kevalarāma*. This work, the author's Ph.D. thesis, provides an important translation of 17th century devotional poetry shedding some light on the "eighth house," an overlooked branch of the Vallabha community.

Another recent contribution to the scholarly literature focusing on the theology of Vallabha is an article by Bibhuti S. Yadav, "Vaiṣṇavism on Hans Küng: A Hindu Theology of Religious Pluralism," published

in the quarterly journal *Religion and Society* (1980). In this and in an unpublished article, "Between God and the Words of God," Yadav's creative hermeneutical probing into the very heart of Vallabha's thought draws out some of the important implications that Vallabha has for current issues in religion and theology. Yadav's work is praised by K. K. Klostermaier's "The Response of Modern Vaiṣṇavism" in *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*.

Also of interest is the work of Charlotte Vaudeville which appeared in the *Indo-Iranian Journal*: "Braj, Lost and Found" (1976) and "The Govardhan Myth in Northern India" (1980). Unfortunately her analysis conveys the impression that the early Vallabhites intentionally created a revisionist history with the view of self-aggrandisement, and resorted to dirty tricks and external political force to gain control of the Govardhana environs. Explanation emerges in terms of a "common sense" heavily influenced by social science categories, i.e. the reasons given for religious events are psychological, political, and economic. This is problematic in so far as myth (as sacred story) may be viewed as prescriptive or performative, rather than simply descriptive. Applying a similar hermeneutic, John Stratton Hawley in his book *Sūr Dās: Poet, Singer, Saint*, sets out to "debunk" the Vallabhite claim on Sūrdās by analyzing the story of Sūr found in the *Caurāsi Vaiṣṇavan ki Vārtā*.

The three most recent contributions to Vallabha scholarship take very different perspectives. Amit Ambalal's *Krishna as Shrinathji* is a visual delight as well as providing important background on the history of Vallabhite artistic expression. Equally impressive is the encyclopaedic analysis of Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage, A.W. Entwistle's *Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage*. Finally, on a more modest note, is my own "Prolegomenon to Vallabha's Theology of Revelation" which appeared in *Philosophy East and West* (April 1988).

II

Despite the limitations of even some of the most recent work on Vallabha, the preceding bibliographical evidence points to increasing sophistication and insight. Haven't we, after all, gotten well beyond the limited thinking of those who thought and wrote about Śankara's school as "The Vedanta" in the earlier part of this century? Surprisingly, the answer to this question is ambiguous. Consider the following.

Most famous of all commentators on these Sūtras is Sankara-charya, the Thomas Aquinas of Hinduism. Sankara's famous work is today more praised than read, by it remains as the one authoritative exposition of the dominant and most characteristic philosophy of India, the Vedānta, and with this it will be necessary to deal in detail. (Cave : 76-77)

Compare this assesment of Śankara's importance with a statement taken from a recently published religious studies text.

The Indian thinker who took the monistic impulse of the Upanishads to its greatest heights, thereby becoming the most revered Indian philosopher, was the sage Shankara. By briefly considering his metaphysics, we can glimpse how far India advanced toward the noetic differentiation that finally looked upon the world as the limited product of an unlimited transcendent Being. (Carmondy: 58)

The preeminance given Śankara in both these works does not even suggest the existence of theistic thinkers of merit and sophistication. In these two quotes it is style, more than substance, which helps us discern that the first is taken from a book published in 1919, and the second from a work published in 1987.

So, although it may be comforting to recognise that important scholarship on Hinduism has reached a new level of insight and balance, it would be erroneous to assume that this achievement has been universal, or even extensive. Scholars like Julius Lipner and Eric Lott, both of whom have recently published in the area of theistic vedānta, introduce their work with a word of caution.

Many Westerners also believe—alas, this is true for too many of the modern Indian intelligentsia as well—that the great Advaitin Śamkara is representative of Hindu religious thinkers. Now this belief too strikes me as manifestly indefensible. No doubt Śamkara is central for our appreciation of the religious teaching and theological development of Vedānta, and indeed for Hinduism's self-understanding today, but he is hardly representative of Hindu theologians or even of Vedāntins. (Lipner: x)

This seems not only appropriate, but an absolutely crucial recognition in light of the fact that textbooks designed for introductory courses in

religious studies continue to perpetuate the "myth" of Hinduism as advaita vedānta.

Consider the characterisation of devotional Hinduism as the "little tradition" resting over-against the "great tradition" of Śankara:

[The little tradition] . . . shaped the common people more than even the Upanishads, let alone the refinements of Advaita philosophy. Sometimes the word given to the theistic portion of this popular Indian religious complex is bhakti: devotional love. . . . For the little tradition, then, philosophy was at best a remote background. Up front stood devotional love. (Carmony: 64)

Such a characterisation belies the facts of the matter. How can a scholar writing about Hinduism choose to ignore profound theistic thinkers like Rāmānūja, Madhava, Vallabha, and Jīva Gosvāmī? This is, far too often, exactly what occurs. Similar sorts of misleading reductionism disguised as descriptive analysis are not hard to find. Even a casual examination of the widely used college text, *Exploring Religious Meaning*, now in its third edition, reveals passages like this.

Hinduism, Buddhism, philosophical Taoism, and Shinto illustrate the second type of understanding of time and eternity. These religions speak of the Divine in terms derived from natural process. Generally understood as an impersonal power, the essence of the Divine is characterised with words not associated with human personality. Being impersonal, it does not enter into personal relationships with individuals and groups. (Monk: 324)

Such a passage is presented as value-neutral, purely descriptive, an "objective" account of the facts. Yet it systematically collapses time and space making a neat package of everything non-western for the purpose of "comparative religion." In doing so it gives short shrift to the vigorously theistic forms of religious expression which occur outside the Judeo-Christian context.

It is perhaps not surprising when a religious apologist presents a purportedly descriptive analysis serving some sectarian motive. But haven't Christian scholars, generally speaking, made great progress in taking other religions seriously, accepting others as different without any agenda to transform them? Again, in the case of Hinduism, the answer is yes and no.

One litmus test of the sectarian agenda is the answer given to the question "what is Hinduism"? With few significant exceptions Christians who have wished to speak with Hinduism at all, have chosen to speak with advaita vedānta.⁶ In an article published in 1969, John Moffitt explains why.⁷

Despite a natural Christian desire to identify [Hinduism as] something that approaches Christianity, we are forced, I believe, to settle on the Advaita or nondualistic Vedanta as being what truly represents Hinduism—for the single reason that Shankaracharya's school is the only one that claims to have no quarrel with anyone, but rather to respect all phases of Hindu belief as different levels of understanding of the one indivisible Reality. (Moffitt: 211)

This explanation is fraught with difficulty and it says much more about its author, than it says about Hinduism. Consider the assertion that "respect for all stages of Hindu belief" act as the criteria for selecting a partner in dialogue. Proponents of "neo-vedānta" have, from time to time, claimed that their position has "no quarrel with anyone," but in fact such a claim almost inevitably leads to a quarrel with just about everyone. The suggestion that advaita vedānta somehow provides a unification of Hinduism's diversity must be approached with caution. This characterisation is not a descriptive, "value-neutral" view, but rather a full-blown theological position, as any serious consideration of theistic vedānta will show.

Advaita vedānta as a means of integrating different levels of understanding—in which the devotional level receives less than highest billing—exposes Moffitt's wish to collapse Hindu diversity into a convenient package. Ironically Christians like Moffitt are the first to protest if this sort of syncretic program is proposed to include Christianity: "we are not seeking through the dialogue for a new, 'universal' religion, an eclectic invention that will somehow satisfy everybody." (Moffitt : 209) Christians have consistently rejected the syncretic tendencies of modern neo-vedānta along with its ontological devaluation of the world; the same devaluation raised the ire of theistic Hinduism over four hundred years ago. Vallabha,

6. The significant exception is Rudolf Otto's *India's Religion of Grace* (London : 1930).

7. I wish to credit Śubhānanda dās' "The Catholic Church and the Hari Krishna Movement," in *Iskcon Review* 2 : 1-63 for bringing this citation to my attention.

in his *Tattvārthadīpanibandha*, analyzes the shortcomings of advaita vedānta. In the commentary to verse 100 he says:

According to advaita vedānta Lord Kṛṣṇa is not considered God because of his existence in the world. [According to advaita vedānta Kṛṣṇa is qualified, hence not absolute.] But advaita vedānta says that Brahman is being-consciousness-bliss. Because there is no proof for this view [as any sort of proof, being in the world, is qualified] they proclaim this state of affairs by following the path of devotion. They accept truth established by a logic opposed to their own position.⁸

The syncretic tendency of advaita vedānta, because it undermined the authority of incarnation and revelation, never received endorsement from the theistic schools. They were quick to protest and to bring out the philosophical chopping block whenever they felt the integrity of their position was threatened by erroneous understanding. The seriousness of this sort of conflict is typically trivialized, both historically and conceptually, by proponents of the neo-vedantic or perennial philosophy-style theology popular in the West.

Hinduism-in which there is conflict—is not the partner in dialogue Moffitt wants. But neither does he wish to entertain the notion that Christianity, like the theistic forms of Hinduism, represents only a level of understanding.

...as Christians we know we have been given the truth, for Christ Himself has told us so. And we have been told by Him to go and share that truth with the nations. How best to share it with the Orient we have obviously not yet learned. In all the hundreds of years of Christian missionary activity in India... we have converted less than two percent of the population. What has been wanting, I submit, is sufficient respect and love for Hinduism and the Hindu culture in general. (Moffitt : 220)

The form of this love and respect is, I suppose, the crucial question. If it means to support a kind of cultural awareness of the "Other", to adopt

8. Translation mine.

the external customs and habits of the Other like the Christian “sannyasin” Father Bede Griffiths, to persuade the Other he is taken seriously without even taking seriously the possibility that one may change radically by the encounter, then this is a form of love and respect most Hindus would be better off without. It is, of course, not a question of Christian sincerity. The personal, self-conscious motives of Christians like Father Griffiths are doubtlessly beyond reproach. The problem lies not with personal motives, but with theological/conceptual underpinnings of those motives.

If Moffitt and Griffiths are allowed to arrange the conceptual preconditions of the encounter then the remainder of the program will logically follow. The fundamental shortcoming, it seems to me, is the insistence that it is advaita vedānta which speaks most clearly for Hinduism. But once this is allowed Christianity can pronounce the solution to the problem facing Hinduism.

We have to show the Hindu in the light of our faith, that in (the) ultimate experience of God, the absolute being, the world and the soul are not lost, nor is the personal being of God absorbed in the impersonal Godhead.... In Christian experience there is a mystery of personal relationship even in the ultimate depth of the Godhead. (Griffiths: 173)

It might be argued that theistic vedānta (speaking in its own language of course) says something remarkably similar to this. Unfortunately, according to Father Griffiths, Hinduism is unable, in the final analysis, to look within and find the resources to solve its own problems.

Christ alone is capable of reconciling the ancient traditions of religion in India with the demands of the modern mind. He is the fulfillment of all that the imagination of the Indian soul sought to find in its gods and heros, in its temples and sacrifices. But he is also a human being, who enters into history, who remains in his Church, as a living power capable of transforming its economic and political and social life. (Griffiths: 110-111)

Here is the rub. If India wishes to get with it, to get up to date, to enter the 20th century economically, politically, and socially it needs to rethink advaita vedānta and develop a theology “along the lines of the Vedanta and the production of what may be called a christian Vedanta which would show how the doctrine of the Vedanta finds its proper

fulfillment in Christ" (Griffiths:61). This sort of theological program has contributed to a definition of Hinduism which has preferred advaita vedānta over the theistic schools.

The agenda forcing Hinduism to conform to Christian categories, had a secular counterpart no less damaging to a balanced understanding of Hinduism beginning with the 19th century development of Indology and the related social sciences. At a time when anthropology was beginning to reveal the cultural relativism of human values and social mores, social evolutionary models were coming into vogue. Counteracting the most disturbing conclusions of relativism social theorists, like Frazer and Levy-Bruhl, and Indologists like Max Müller, developed "scientific," hierarchical explanations for cultural pluralism; it is not surprising that in these theories the modern scientific world view represented the pinnacle in the development of human knowledge, and when religion was invoked Christianity represented its most fully developed expression.

The tendency to reduce other cultures to one's own categories is not surprising, nor is it a problem only from within a Western context. However, the claim to know something about the "Other" that the "Other," by its very constitution, could not know about itself becomes particularly pugnacious when it is employed to rationalize, promote and support a position of political and economic dominance. Even for the discipline of Indology, knowledge about the "Other" is translated into power over the "Other."⁹

One of the most recent considerations of this issue bears directly on the topic at hand. In his article "Orientalist Constructions of India," Ronald Inden brilliantly explores the methodology behind a programmatic distortion of Indian culture and thought. According to Inden, beginning in the guise of a descriptive analysis providing facts about the "Other" the indological/social scientific account proceeds to show how the "Other" is radically different from "Self," i.e. western man. The next step is to show that the "Other" as a "gross distortion of the Self or the opposite of the Self." Inden explains that

9. Unfortunately a review of the important work exploring the role "area studies" in colonial and post-colonial exploitation is beyond the scope of this paper. See especially, Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), and from a marxist perspective, Robert Bohm's *Notes on India* (Boston: South End Press, 1982).

... these threatening differences are not allowed to remain. The Indological text also goes on to provide (or evoke) an explanation of the differences. These explanations or interpretations are almost always naturalistic. That is, they lie beyond, behind, or outside the consciousness and activity of the Others involved. It is necessary for the Other to be the way he/she is because of its environment, its racial composition, or its (inferior) place on the evolutionary scale. Once the reader comes to know the natural reason for the Other's otherness, the threat of it is neutralized. The Explanation is, thus one which restores the unity of mankind with Western Man as its perfect embodiment. It does this by hierarchizing the Others of the world, by placing them in a spatial, biological, or temporal scale of forms, one which always culminates in Homo Euro-americanus. (Inden:416)

Inden characterises the motivation and process behind 150 years of systematic distortion which may help explain the short shrift given theistic Hinduism. For cultural reasons Western scholars have (unself-consciously(?)) elevated Śankara's advaita vedānta and ignored (or relativized) the contributions of the theistic schools. I believe that one reason for this preference is that many scholars—unable to transcend the limits of their inherited Judeo-Christian/social scientific worldview—found the central conceptions of theistic Hinduism intellectually embarrassing.

The Vallabha Sampradāya, for example, has as the center of its devotional life the regional *haveli*, or home of Lord Kṛṣṇa. There the devotee goes for *darśan* of the "*svarūpa*," the self-manifestation of the Lord in concrete form. Thus, in the *haveli* of Srī Govardhana Nāthajī in Nathdwara, the deity is awakened, dressed, fed, entertained, put to bed, in a regular ritual cycle of devotional service (*sevā*). From the standpoint of early Christian observers this could be one thing and one thing only: idol worship in its rudest form. For different reasons the "methodological agnosticism" of Indology and the related social sciences was equally unable to accommodate such notions. According to Joanne Waghorne, "the identification of divine powers with the physical world was seen as an anachronism." She argues that such an identification simply could not fit into the categories of thought available to the 19th century theorists.

It was simply not possible to suppose that religion did not move from a vague sense of matter-made-divine toward a separation of such misplaced concreteness, from pure spirituality, with science taking over the role as explicator of the natural world. There could no more be an advanced matter-based religion than there could be a literate duck-billed platypus. (Waghore:3)

The inability to take seriously a matter-based religion underscores the observations made by Inden. Bound to a culturally biased epistemology it was impossible to come to grips with the Hindu claim for a matter-based divinity. This, unfortunately, is not a problem which has been resolved. A contemporary example is the film, widely viewed in classrooms of America and Europe, "Hinduism: 330 million Gods." Early in the film commentator-cum-seeker Ronald Eyer is assured by one informant-a tourist guide and paṇḍit who could be a devotee of Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, instead of the goddess kālī-that Hindus don't think that the concrete deity is god, "really it's like a symbol, a finger pointing to god." Another informant, an Indian professor of philosophy at the University of Surry England, quickly discards the idea of concrete divinity: "even the unsophisticated villager understands he is encountering nothing more than a symbol." This kind of explanation is pervasive and it finds support in the epistemic position of advaita vedānta, as well as in some modern western views of religious symbol. However, it fails to recognise, let alone take seriously, the possibility that theistic vedānta rests upon a view of reality which reserves, in fact demands, a place for matter-made-divine.

In its own way this example goes far in explaining the historical popularity of advaita vedānta in the West. Śankara's school is more valuable, epistemologically and ontologically, in explaining away the "embarrassing" idea of concrete divinity because, according to advaita vedānta, a devotional preoccupation with "icons" is relegated to a lower level in the spiritual hierarchy. The implicit message is this: theistic vedānta need not be taken too seriously. Thus, both Christianity and secular scholarship helped move to center stage a school within Hinduism (an important school, but one among many none the less) that corresponded to their own needs and intellectual expectations.

In this way the influence of Christian as well as secular views of the nature, function, and place of religion have had a profound impact

on the development of the western view of Hinduism. A variety of factors led to the idea that advaita vedānta is the preeminent manifestation of Hindu religious expression, as well as the idea that in order to understand Hinduism one need only understand advaita vedānta. The impact of these ideas on the unabashedly theistic sentiment guiding the Vaiṣṇava was unfortunate.

One answer to the question of Vallabha's relative obscurity, then, must appeal to the magnetic hold exerted by advaita vedānta which acted as a filter through which scholars saw the rest of Hinduism. As Julius Lipner points out, in the introduction to his recent study of Rāmānūja, many modern Indian intelligentsia believe that Śankara is representative of all Hindu religious thinkers. With regard to Vallabha, a response regularly encountered, even from among Indian scholars, is that Śankara is simply superior to Vallabha, both philosophically and stylistically. With the style issue there may be some truth: the period during which Vallabha wrote is relatively late and the momentum for composition in Sanskrit was already in decline. While several important authors in the Sampradāya kept up a Sanskrit commentary tradition for a time, writings in the vernacular became increasingly prevalent. But the appeal to Sanskrit style in answer to the question is rather trivial; philosophical superiority, if it could be substantiated, is a much more serious claim. But on what basis is such a claim made? To argue that Śankara's advaita philosophy represents the essence of Hinduism begs the question. As we have seen the claim of Śankara's superiority is really a case of attractiveness rooted in neither philosophical nor stylistic issues.

Ultimately the problem of Vallabha's obscurity goes beyond an antagonism between theistic vedānta and Śankara's school. If this were the root of the difficulty we would well expect all of theistic vedānta to be in the same boat. But this is not the case. Extensive and significant scholarship has focused on Rāmānūja. Gauṛīya Vaiṣṇavism has achieved an unprecedented profile in recent religious studies. Despite some attempts to rectify the situation, Vallabha is still not taken very seriously. In 549 pages of Klaus K. Klostermaier's *Mythologies and Philosophies of Salvation in the Theistic Traditions of India* (1984) Vallabha is given one sentence. Even within the context of the study of theistic Hinduism Vallabha is ignored. The question is: why?

Looking at the record it is clear that the commentary tradition begun by Vallabha himself loses momentum in the 18th century. We might

expect that the leadership of the group—the descendants of Viṭṭhalanātha who managed the affairs of the Sampradāya—would maintain forms of traditional learning. Unfortunately, this did not generally occur. Many of the Sampradāya's leaders could not read the Sanskrit manuscripts in their own libraries.

There are important exceptions to this general decline in the 19th and 20th centuries. The work of Telivāla, a loyal member of the Sampradāya, has already been mentioned. Telivāla's text-critical work is continued by Gosvāmi Śyāma, a respected leader of the Sampradāya who currently lives in Bombay. Gosvāmi Śyāma's efforts have produced a series of publications designed to make the Sanskrit writings of Vallabha available for scholarly study. In addition to promulgating the basic literature of the group, he has supported the work of scholars both in India and in the West. His efforts influence the Hindi translations of Vallabha's work done by K.N. Mishra at Banaras Hindu University. Among Western scholars, both Richard Barz and James Redington acknowledge their debt to Gosvāmi Śyāma. It seems clear that with such work appearing on Vallabha we can safely claim to have moved into a higher level of scholarship.

Despite such recent, positive developments the Sampradāya has, over the past one hundred and thirty years, maintained an isolationist attitude which has directly contributed to the lack of scholarly interest. The skepticism and suspicion with which many leaders of Sampradāya greet outsiders had its roots, I believe, in the negative, and judgmental tenor of Western scholarship since the mid-19th century. One important example, paradigmatic of the negative tenor, is the article on "Vallabha" in the 1921 edition of *Hasting's Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. After first comparing the Sampradāya with the Epicurians, and then translating Vallabha's term "pushti-marga" as "the way of eating, drinking and enjoyment," (12:581) D. Mackichan, the author of this four and a half page article, writes:

The husband who regards with complacency the desecration of the virtue of his wife, the father who consents to the violation of his daughter by these debauched pretenders to religious sanctity, is obsessed with the monstrous delusion that spiritual gain can come to him through the sensual indulgence of his spiritual guide. The male worshipper is himself eager to submit to any degradation that appears to do reverence to these high-priests of defilement. (12:582)

Mackichan ends his article with a report of the infamous 1862 libel trial which generated much negative publicity for the Sampradāya. This trial was brought before the High Court in Bombay by one of the leaders of the Sampradāya who alleged that he had been libeled in a Gujarati newsletter called *Satya Prakasha*, "The Light of the Truth." The primary purpose of the newsletter, edited by one Karsandas Mulji, a former member of the group, was to expose the corruption and immorality of certain Vallabha leaders. In his defense against the charge of libel his counsel produced an array of witnesses who described, in lurid detail, the personal debauchery of the plaintiff, Yadunātha Vrajaratnaji. Perhaps even more damaging in the long run, his counsel produced so-called expert witnesses who testified that the teachings of Vallabha directly supported this licentious behavior.

The case had everything needed to make it a cause celebre in newspapers throughout India: religion, sex, and corruption. Although the court decided that the plaintiff had indeed been libeled, the final verdict clearly favored the defendant. Before the year was out Bombay Gazette Press had published the court transcript in a 480 page book. Three years later, in England, Trubner and Company published anonymously the *History of the Sect of the Maharajas or Vallabhacaryas in Western India* written by none other than Karsandas Mulji, the chief defendant in the libel case. Clearly, these two works influenced attitudes of Western scholars; Mackichan is not an isolated case. Similar misunderstanding of Vallabha's teachings can be found in the work of earlier scholars like Growse, Farquahar, and Monier-Williams.

Highly critical attitudes on the part of such important scholars inevitably filtered down into the more popular presentations of Hinduism. In an article titled "Indian Religion" in *Religions of the World: Their Nature and Their History* published in 1931 the famous trial is mentioned "in order to show the tremendous contrasts that are met with in the religious history of India and to illustrate the danger of judging it as a whole from partial knowledge." (117)

It is not difficult to understand how such a sustained criticism of the Sampradāya, based largely on misunderstandings and inappropriate conclusions drawn from the celebrated trial, would instill in the group a general skepticism and suspicion of outsiders. However much this may have detracted from the development of a more balanced scholarship, a deeper

problem is exposed by further examining the trial and its fall-out. In this regard, consider once again Mackichan's article in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*.

... the history of the Vallabhacaryas has been narrated here for these reasons, that it led to the full disclosure of the real character of the teaching of this sect and of the width of the gulf which lies between morality and religion in the current conception of multitudes of the people of India, and that it also illustrates the powerlessness of public opinion, as it exists in India, to grapple with social customs that rest on religious sanctions having their roots deep down in the amorphous soil that is the product of ages of pantheistic thinking. (12:583)

Mackichan, in this concluding paragraph, moves from the specific to the general: the immoral teachings of the Vallabha Sampradāya are sanctioned by the ignorant multitudes of Indians, who cannot recognize immorality for what it is, because of the conditioning of ages of faulty metaphysical thinking.

A similar logic appeared again and again in the Indian English press immediately following the trial: indignation at the sexual conduct of one Vallabha leader became diatribe directed at the teachings of Vallabha and, finally, an attack on Hinduism in general. For example, *The Indian Mirror*, May 15, 1862 asserts:

For the good of India and humanity ... the den of Vallabhacaryan wickedness has been penetrated by the keen-eye of the law, and the depraved culprit has been dragged out and visited with condign punishment. Who can say that there are not abominations yet more hideous than these lurking in some secret corners of Hinduism not yet exposed Let our educated countrymen rise as one man and demolish the stupendous edifice of Hinduism, and save millions of their countrymen from the horrors of idolatry We can assure them that their highest conceptions of Hinduism's horrors will fall far short of the reality, and that half measures will never avail to exterminate them. (Mulji: 165-166)

The occasion of the 1862 libel trial captured the attention of the English, Hindu-phobic press in India. The immorality of a religious leader in Bombay was only the tip of the iceberg; finally Hinduism would be shown for what it is: a pernicious, wicked idolatry. Hinduism had been put on

trial; and now that the verdict was in all that remained was for the press to announce the sentence. It was left to the *Friend of India*, May 8, 1862.

Hinduism will never reform itself. Slowly the process of mortification is beginning. The light which our missionaries, our schools, our courts, our railways and all that is English is letting into the land makes it seem only the more hideous. A religion which makes proselytism impossible must perish of inanition . . . Vedantism will as inevitably rise in time into the region of a higher faith, as Hinduism must degenerate till it expires under the weight of such corruption as this case has revealed. (Mulji: 159-160)

This passage is remarkable because it exposes the often implicit attitude which helped to shape the western study of Hinduism. This view, as we have already seen, affirms an ontological and epistemological gulf between advaita vedānta and the devotional schools, and, from a more explicitly Christian perspective, the belief that advaita vedānta will "rise in time to the region of a higher faith," the so-called "Christian Vedanta."

The Western study of Hinduism has developed its categories of understanding within the same worldview which has produced the attitudes of Christian superiority, and the epistemological monism of the social sciences. Vallabha refuses to fit into these categories. He dares to claim that Kṛṣṇa, and not Christ, is the only son of God; that the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, and not the Bible, is the only book of God; that Śrī Govardhana Nāthajī, and not Yahweh, is the only God worthy of devotional service. Is it surprising that the early scholars chose to sit with paṇḍīts and Brahmins who spoke the language of advaita vedānta, and who gave assurances that such ideas about Kṛṣṇa, et cetera, represented a lower level of understanding? Paradoxically perhaps, advaita vedānta is more palatable than Vallabha precisely because it devalues the phenomenal world. A "life-negating" Hinduism mollifies contemporary Western sensibilities, so that the vast array of Hindu deities need not be branded idolatry; instead of concrete instances of the divine, they can be understood (and hence dismissed) as pointers to ultimate reality. From the stand-point of advaita vedānta spokesmen, like Vallabha, are labeled populist, common, the little tradition, a lower level of development in Hinduism's spiritual hierarchy. The question we must now ask ourselves is: to what degree does this view remain

with us today, influencing our seeing, our understanding, and our scholarship?

The reason for the dearth of scholarship on Vallabha is complex. The Sampradāya's general decline in disciplined theology and commentary traditions during the 18th century, coupled with the growing suspicion of outsiders arising in the 19th century did not help to promote balanced study. The fundamental reason, however, is that western scholarship has developed within a worldview naturally hostile to some of the most basic assertion of theistic Hinduism. I have attempted to argue that caution is warranted: what appears as descriptive analysis often carries an implicit theological or methodological agenda. In the case of Vallabha this agenda supported the view that the moral transgression of one leader characterizes an entire community. In the case of theistic vedānta it supported the assumption that advaita vedānta expresses the essence of Hinduism. In both cases it denigrates the devotional schools relegating them to second class status. Today the picture is changing for the better, but we must continue to strive for both self-consciousness about our own implicit categories, as well as an appreciation for the depth and diversity of Hinduism. As scholars we inevitably inherit a context for our discourse; but we need not accept uncritically the hegemonous presuppositions and patterns of thought which have guided our predecessors.

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