INTRODUCTION
The Historical Vicissitudes
of Bhakti Religion

David N. Lorenzen

In the context of North India, all Sikhs as well as almost all Hindus may be called followers of bhakti religion since their dominant mode of worship is one of "devotion" *(bhakti)* toward a divine being. Although both the ways of expressing this devotion and the ways of conceptualizing the object of this devotion vary dramatically, all manifestations of bhakti religion do share common historical roots. More specifically, all its sects and currents were heavily influenced in their origins, and many still today, by two Sanskrit texts: the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. This common heritage gives all its manifestations a family resemblance that is not shared by other religions of India such as Christianity and Islam in which devotion to a divine being also plays a central role.

Since the latter part of the fifteenth century, bhakti religion in North India has been divided into two major streams or currents— *nirguṇī* and *saguṇī*—ostensibly on the basis of a theological difference in the way of conceptualizing the nature of the divine being that is the object of worship. Those who prefer *saguṇ* ("with attributes") bhakti constitute the majority. They worship anthropomorphic manifestations of the divine being, usually forms of the gods Vishnu, Shiva, and the Goddess, and of these gods' close associates or family members. The persons who follow *nirguṇ* ("without attributes") bhakti are fewer in number and generally prefer to worship a divine being who remains mostly unmanifest and non-anthropomorphic. Historically, Sikh religion derives from this *nirguṇī* current of bhakti religion, although it has established a conscious identity as a separate religion. Exactly how and when it did so is still a matter of scholarly debate as Harjot Oberoi's essay in this book demonstrates.

In actual practice, most followers of *saguṇī* religion in North India today direct their devotion especially toward two avatars of the god Vishnu—Krishna and Rāma—and toward the latter's associate

1

Hanumān. Fewer persons direct their devotion primarily toward Shiva and the Goddess. Those who do generally worship Shiva in the semi-iconic form of a *liṅga*, while the Goddess is most often worshipped as Durgā or Mahiṣamardinī, the killer of the buffalo demon. On the other hand, followers of *nirguṇī* religion, including the Sikhs, generally reject worship of the avatars of Vishnu or any other anthropomophic gods or forms of God. Although *nirguṇī* literature directs the devotee to worship a formless, universal God, this God does take partial embodiment in the Name of God and in the collective Words *(bāṇī)* and the person of the Guru and the saints. Particularly in the case of the Sikhs, the words of the Guru and the saints take the physical form of a holy Book, the *Ādi Granth* or *Gurū Granth Sāhib*.

In this introduction, I will first discuss the relation between religious and social identities in the context of the growth of religious communalism in modern India. Next, I will review the historical development of the social ideologies associated with the traditions of *saguṇī* and *nirguṇī* bhakti. Finally, I will offer some critical comments on the ideas of Max Weber about the nature of low-class religion.

Community Identity and Communalism

Theological differences are not simply the product of historical accident; they are symptomatic and expressive of differences in social identities. Religions are communities of persons who follow, or claim to follow, common systems of beliefs and practices. Even those beliefs and practices that appear to be sociologically and politically arbitrary serve to express and define the limits of any given religious community. In other words, taken together they define the group's identity, its membership and its ideology. This is true even though other factors such as class and caste, gender, ethnic group, language, region, and race generally play important roles in deciding who is likely to become a member of the group.

The Sikhs provide a good example. The essays of Harjot Oberoi and Michael Shapiro in this book illustrate two aspects of the formation of this religious community. Oberoi concentrates on how ritual differences increasingly served to mark and define Sikh identity, while Shapiro shows how distinctive theological features of Sikh religion were woven even into the grammar of the language used in Sikh scripture.

Many religious beliefs and practices are employed not only to define a given community identity but also to provide a utopian vision for the future of the community and of the society of which it forms a greater or lesser part. In other words, these beliefs and practices are normative both in a descriptive, definitional sense and in an ideal, moral sense. Together they constitute, in short, both the identity and the ideology of the community.

The concept of ideology has been given many senses. I prefer to define it as a form of discourse, primarily verbal but also behavioral, that directly or indirectly claims to describe the structure and functioning of society in such a way as either to justify, or to protest against, an unequal distribution of social status, economic wealth and political power among different groups within the society. Although ideologies inevitably have manipulative aspects, their spokesmen for the most part believe what they say, even if they know, deep down, that it is not the whole story. Ideological discourse is not simply cynical propaganda. Propaganda implies a conscious manipulation of the truth to achieve covert economic, social and political ends that benefit certain groups to the detriment of the society at large. Ideology, on the other hand, functions in much more unconscious, and even altruistic, fashion. For its supporters, an ideology represents the proper, and even the natural, arrangement of society.

The classical Marxist argument that each society has essentially only one ideology, to be identified as the "dominant ideology" of its ruling class, is no longer tenable.[1] Still useful, however, is A. Gramsci's idea that the ideology (or ideologies) of privileged classes may exert, by a combination of persuasion and coercion, a "hegemony" over the ideology (or ideologies) of the nonprivileged classes in the same society (Anderson 1976/77). Indeed, it is precisely the distinction between hegemonic and subordinate or subaltern ideological discourse that underlies the distinction between the *nirguṇī* and *saguṇī* devotional movements, as will be argued below (also Lorenzen 1987a). Furthermore, since ideological discourse always claims that its social prescriptions will benefit the society as a whole—even when in fact they serve as much or more to protect the privileges of an upper-class elite—ideological discourse and discourse that defines community identity are always inextricably linked.

In the context of North India, the term "community identity" inevitably invokes the related concepts of *communal* identity and

communalism. Communalism, particularly as it relates to devotion to the avatar Rām, is the single most recalcitrant and dangerous source of social and political conflict in India today. In this book the essays of Lutgendorf, van der Veer and Devalle all are directly concerned with this problem. Clearly some discussion of the concept and the phenomenon is in order.

Perhaps the most lucid discussion of the varied meanings that the terms "communal" (or "communalist") and "communalism" have acquired in the speech of imperialists, nationalists, and assorted academics is that found in Gyanendra Pandey's book, *The Construction of Communalism in North India* (1990). According to Pandey (1990, 6):

> In its common Indian usage the word "communalism" refers to a condition of suspicion, fear and hostility between members of different religious communities. In academic investigations, more often than not, the term is applied to organized political movements based on the proclaimed interests of a religious community, usually in response to a real or imagined threat from another religious community (or communities).

For Pandey, however, the true "meaning" of communalism as a concept is not to be located in its contemporary Indian usages, but rather in the history of the "discourses"—imperialist, nationalist and academic—in which the concept arose and developed. His aim is (1990, 5–6) "to explore the history of the 'problem' of communalism through an examination of the discourse that gave it meaning."

What Pandey finds in his examination of the historical "construction" of the concept is that (1990, 6) "communalism . . . is a form of colonialist knowledge" since the concept was first developed in the discourse of imperialist administrators who used it as a catchall label for different sorts of social and political unrest. By calling this unrest "religious," these administrators purposely implied that Indian society was fundamentally imbued with religious bigotry and irrationality.

In Pandey's view, nationalists, and to some extent liberal colonialists, have countered this basically racist or "essentialist" interpretation of communalism with another that was more rational and "economistic," but also basically negative (1990, 11): "The nationalists . . . recognize communalism as a problem of recent origins, as the outcome basically of economic and political inequality and conflict, and as the handiwork of a handful of self-interested elite groups (colo-

nial and native), with the mass of people being essentially 'secular'."
For both the colonialists and nationalists, communalism has been re-
garded as an obstacle to the development of a mature nationalism and
ultimate self-government. To the extent to which both have shared this
bias in favor of nationalism and secularism and the supposed ground-
ing of these "isms" in rational thought, Pandey claims (1990, 13),
"both nationalist and colonialist positions derive from the same liberal
ideology."

While Pandey's account of the history of the concept does much
to illuminate some of the biases and value judgements inherent in its
everyday usages, his suggested solution to the "problem" seems to me
to be wrong-headed. Rather than to recommend that we simply try to
become more conscious of, and thereby correct or modify, the biases
and value judgements inherited from colonialist and nationalist dis-
course, he apparently thinks that it is possible to virtually "deconstruct"
the concept of communalism out of existence. In its place, he would
prefer that we regard each historical case of conflict between the major
religious communities of India on its own terms. For this reason he
rejects, in no uncertain terms, the recent historical trend that empha-
sizes the "continuities" in Indian history, particularly Christopher
Bayly's (1985) attempt to identify "The Pre-History of 'Communal-
ism'" in religious conflicts of the eighteenth and early nineteenth cen-
turies. For Pandey (1990, 15), "there is really no sense of context here,
not a hint that human beings and their actions, the events of history,
derive their meaning from the political, economic, social and intellec-
tual circumstances in which they are placed."[2]

One cannot, however, simply deconstruct communalism out of
existence in this postmodernist fashion. The "meaning" of the concept
of communalism is not exhausted by an analysis of the biases and value
judgements inherent in the discourses in which it arose. One can, I
think, fairly invoke the well-worn distinction between what a term
connotes and what it denotes. Pandey's "meaning" overvalues the
connotations of the term at the expense of its denotation, the latter
being roughly equivalent to its contemporary everyday usage. Com-
munalism is a concept, but it is a concept that most people employ to
refer to and classify a quite specific range of attitudes and actions.
Without such classifying terms and concepts, any discourse is of course
impossible. In the case of "communalism," I fail to see that Pandey can
offer *any* acceptable substitute.

Pandey may well be correct to reject Bayly's extension of the term communalism to include religious conflicts before 1860, but his charge that Bayly's argument lacks any "sense of context" is unfair. As G. Barraclough has noted (1967), the identification and evaluation of the continuities and discontinuities in society over the passage of time is precisely the principal task that historians undertake. Bayly, of all people, is certainly well aware of the historical context of the examples of religious conflict he has discussed. Where he differs with Pandey is in the much less historically specific meaning he assigns to the concept of communalism. This is the reason Bayly sees continuity where Pandey sees discontinuity.

One vital aspect of any analysis of the phenomenon of communalism is an evaluation of the extent to which it is the product of elite manipulation of popular attitudes and actions. There is little doubt, for instance, that the religious and political elite that control the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have shamelessly manipulated for their own ends the popular religious sentiments invoked by the Rām-janmabhūmi and Bābarī-masjid dispute. It is also clear, however, that these elites have been able to draw from a deep well of popular Hindu discontent and antagonism against the Muslim community with roots going back to medieval times. In his essay here, P. Lutgendorf discusses some of this medieval background to communalism, particularly its relation to Tulasīdās's *Rāmacharitamānas*. P. van der Veer concentrates more on the association between communalism and the nationalist movement, and S. Devalle tackles the problem of the relation of communalism to modern political ideologies and communalist concepts such as *Hindutva*.

Secular nationalists, including Marxists such as Bipan Chandra, have often regarded communal discontent and antagonism as the product of elite manipulation and a typical manifestation of "false consciousness." Chandra (1984, 1) defines communalism as "the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion they have, as a result, common social, political and economic interests." In this view, such concrete interests do underlie communalism, but they are the interests of elite manipulators, not the common people. If this were in fact true, however, the destruction of communalism would be relatively simple, at least in theory. One need only educate the people to see how their communalist sentiments are in fact based on elite ma-

nipulation. It is like the position of the Advaitin who compares illumi-
nation to the destruction of an illusory serpent by recognizing that it is
really a rope.

The chief problem with this point of view is that it underestimates
the deep historical roots of the self-identities of the religious communi-
ties of India, a subject I will return to shortly. The snake in question is
far from illusory. Communalism may well be a comparatively modern
phenomenon arising in large measure from elite manipulation, but it is
also firmly rooted in community identities that cannot be simply wished
away. Furthermore, once created, communal ideology (i.e., one that
defines the community in excessively negative, oppositional terms)
generates its own social, economic and political reality; it becomes a
self-fulfilling prophecy. Once the religious Other is radically excluded
from the community, he does in fact become a rival in social, political
and economic terms as well as religious ones.

Admitting the reality and practical importance of religious com-
munities, however, need not imply that one should abandon the quest
for a secular society. Ashis Nandy (1990) tends in this direction when
he attempts to promote a more traditional and religious social identity
that is at the same time more tolerant and noncommunalist than the
"Hindutva" of the more fundamentalist Hindu nationalists of the RSS,
VHP, and BJP. As Peter van der Veer points out in his essay, Nandy
can be seen as a post-independence heir to the religious nationalism of
Mahatma Gandhi. Somewhat surprisingly, both Gyanendra Pandey
(1990, 21–22) and Veena Das (1990) openly flirt with the idea of
supporting Nandy's "anti-secularist" position.

Nandy's views and those of Bipan Chandra (1984) provide an
instructive comparison, particularly with regard to the evaluation of
the role of the state in communal conflict. Both agree that the colonial
state played a significant role in fomenting the growth of communal-
ism, but disagree about the role of the state since independence. On the
whole, Chandra views the independent state as a relatively neutral
arbiter in situations of communal conflict and argues that this positive
neutrality is closely linked to the espousal of a secular ideology. Nandy
on the other hand regards the "secular" state as often being a source of
communal conflict and pins his hopes for avoiding such conflict on the
traditional religious tolerance of the majority Hindu community. As
van der Veer points out, however, this tolerance is grounded on the
doctrine of a hierarchy of religious truths wherein different religions

are thought to have received partial revelations of a spiritual reality that is fully manifest only in Hinduism. It is not surprising that the followers of other religions—particularly those that claim virtually exclusive access to God's message such as Christianity and Islam—do not share Nandy's enthusiasm for this doctrine of tolerance.

Chandra's evaluation of the role of religion in communalism tries to make a distinction between "religiosity," which is bad, and "religion," which is good. He defines religiosity as a (1984, 171) "deep and intense emotional commitment to matters of religion and as the tendency to let religion and religious emotions intrude into non-religious or non-spiritual areas of life and beyond the individual's private life, to refuse to separate religion from politics, economics and social life— that is, to be over-religious or to have too much religion in one's life." As van der Veer points out, however, this idea of religion as something personal and separate "from politics, economics and social life" is a quite dubious ideological proposition derived from the European Enlightenment. In Europe and North America religion did in fact to some extent retreat into a more private domain as a result of, first, the necessity of neutralizing the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism and, second, the rise of the modern nation-state and science. Even in Europe, however, the idea that ethics and values can be empirically (rather than simply logically) separated into personal (religious) and social (political) categories is at best a well-meaning hope that repeatedly flies in the face of reality.

In the case of modern India, Chandra argues that (1984, 167) religious difference was used "to 'mask' the politics of classes and social groups arising in the secular, non-religious spheres." One has to agree with Chandra that communalism represents "too much religion in one's life," but he is mistaken when he argues that this represents an improper overflow of religion into other, nonreligious aspects of life. In large measure religious ethics and values are, in a very basic sense, also expressions of social, economic and political needs and aspirations, as scholars as diverse as Marx, Nietzsche, Durkheim, and Weber long ago recognized. From this point of view, both religions and political philosophies can be regarded as considerably overlapping subsets of the more general category of "ideology."

In its propensity for violence and irrational hatred, communalism has sometimes been called "pathological," an epithet that Pandey (1990, 9–10) and Devalle reject, but that Chandra and Nandy accept (at least

implicitly).[3] Provided that this term is understood to be a metaphor, a physiological analogy, it can be of use. The pathology of communalism stems from its exaggerated elaboration of otherwise "normal" aspects of community identity, not the introduction of strange new abnormalities. It is analogous to the pathology of an individual whose commonplace fears, hates or desires—whether rational or not—become obsessive and out of control. In communalism, the defining attributes and ideology of a religious community become obsessively directed against other communities. This obsessive hatred represents a reaction that far outstrips any conceivable objective threat that these opposing communities might pose. The hatred expressed—whether fomented by elite manipulation or not—has become basically irrational and ultimately self-destructive.

If communalism is a pathological condition, an obsessively oppositional form of community identity, it is fair to ask about its causes, the etiology of the pathology. There have been four principal historical factors, I think, that have fostered the development of communalism in South Asia, apart from and in addition to the underlying problem of the existence of several religious communities in one territory.

The first factor is the adoption of the modern ideas of nationalism and popular sovereignty by the Indian elites in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the participation of these elites in nationalist organizations, both secular and nonsecular, as well as in other collective political groups such as caste associations. There is in fact considerable truth to the liberal-secular claim that, as Pandey puts it (1990, 14), "communalism was nationalism gone awry." Both Hindu nationalists and Islamic nationalists insisted that their respective religious communities were also nations or national communities. More recently the advocates of Khalistan have made the same claim for the Sikh community.

A second, related factor is the introduction of the system of electoral politics, first in limited fashion by the British colonialist regime, and later in the democratic parliamentary governments of independent India and Pakistan (the latter remaining democratic only in fits and starts). Electoral politics as a total system—and not simply its directly "communal" aspects such as the issue of separate electorates—inevitably leads to competition between all sorts of communities, including religious ones, for government support in satisfying economic, educational and social goals. As is well known, the British colonial government often

cynically and cruelly exploited this competition using the tactic of divide and rule, thereby setting a precedent that is still often followed. The identification of religious communities in the decennial census of the population, an institution closely linked to the development of electoral politics, also contributed much to the growth of communal consciousness.

A third important factor is the demographic explosion which began, or at least became more acute, in the nineteenth century and has continued, only partly controlled, up to the present day. This explosion has helped create dramatic scarcities of agricultural land and other natural resources and made it virtually impossible for the supply of jobs to keep pace with the ever increasing number of job-seekers. The resulting economic and social tensions have been easily channeled into communalist conflicts.[4]

A fourth factor, mostly derived from the others, is the failure of the postcolonial political regime in India to satisfy the hopes of the mass of the population for peace, social order and economic prosperity. Although most national and state governments have made sincere efforts to follow secular policies, the failure to satisfy these hopes have inevitably led to discontents that are easily exploited by Hindu nationalist organizations such as the RSS, VHP, and BJP. Particularly tragic, since it was more avoidable, has been the endless international conflict with Pakistan. Whichever country has been more to blame, and whatever has been the role of the cold war in perpetuating the conflict, the wounds of partition have never healed, and the Muslim community of India remains an easy target for accusations of disloyalty and fifth-column activities by Hindu nationalists. Also significant has been the introduction of a certain amount of communalist propaganda ("playing the Hindu card") by the Congress Party, traditionally the most resolutely secular party, into the general election campaign of 1984, as Devalle notes in her essay. This set a dangerous precedent that may have contributed substantially to the legitimation of communalist parties, particularly the BJP in this and subsequent elections.

Beyond these general, structural factors for the rise and persistence of communalism—factors that largely define communalism as an identifiable historical phenomenon—each specific example of communal conflict must obviously be examined on its own terms and in its own historical context. What were the existing local tensions that made the social terrain ripe for the outbreak of communal conflict? What was

the immediate cause of the conflict? How did the conflict proceed? What was the role of the police and government in resolving or aggravating the conflict? What part did existing communal organizations play? Only postmortem examinations of each specific conflict can answer such questions.

It remains true, however, that communalism cannot arise without the prior existence of a religious community. As commonly defined in India, communalism is based on the broadest of all community identities: those of the Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. Each of these broad communities embodies a full range of social classes and castes as well as an ample number of separate religious currents, sects, subsects, and individual congregations. How is it possible for such heterogeneous communities to create social identities cohesive enough to make possible the pathology of communalism?

Part of the answer undoubtedly lies in the overlap of national and communal identities and the association of each religious community with specific "home" territories: Pakistan and Bangladesh for the Muslims (though this is obviously of dubious value for the Muslim community in India), Punjab for the Sikhs, and all of postindependence India for the Hindus. More important, however, is the fact that each of these communities offers its members a common history (even if often largely imagined), a more or less common set of religious beliefs and practices, and a common social ideology. Each community can also reinforce its group identity by referring to their long histories of mutual conflict and the associated process of self-definition by means of mutual opposition.

For reasons that are not entirely clear to me, a number of contemporary academics have attempted to deny the existence of this long history of mutual conflict and oppositional self-definition among these three religious communities. In particular, they have claimed that in India the very concepts of Hindus and Hinduism as *religious*, as opposed to *ethnic* and/or *geographical*, categories were created in quite recent times. C. J. Fuller's comments in his recent book on popular Hinduism provide a good example (1992, 10):

> Consider the very terms "Hindu" and "Hinduism." The Persian word *hindu* derives from Sindhu, the Sanskrit name of the river Indus (in modern Pakistan). It originally meant a native of India, the land around and beyond the Indus. When "Hindu" (or "Hindoo") entered the English language in the seventeenth century, it was similarly used to denote any native of Hindustan (India), but

gradually came to mean someone who retained the indigenous religion and had not converted to Islam. "Hinduism," as a term for that indigenous religion, became current in English in the early nineteenth century and was coined to label an "ism" that was itself partly a product of western orientalist thought, which (mis)constructed Hinduism on the model of occidental religions, particularly Christianity. Hinduism, in other words, came to be seen as a system of doctrines, beliefs, and practices properly equivalent to those that make up Christianity, and "Hindu" now clearly specified an Indian's religious affiliation.

In point of fact, the Muslim intellectual al-Biruni (1964) had already clearly delineated the system of religious doctrines, beliefs, and practices of the Hindu community, as opposed to the system of Islam, early in the eleventh century. One can perhaps object that he should be considered a Muslim outsider or an unrepresentative intellectual. Moving ahead to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, one finds that the poems of virtually all *nirguṇī* saints beginning with Kabīr and Gurū Nānak repeatedly refer to "Hindus and Turks" and "Hindus and Muslims *[musulamān]* " in contexts that clearly show that the authors had in mind religious, and not ethnogeographical, communities. These poems generally follow a pattern in which the Hindus are said to do or believe one thing (worship Vishnu and Shiva, etc.) and the Muslims/Turks another (pray to Mecca, etc.), but neither knows the highest Truth. Medieval *saguṇī* authors more often speak simply in terms of "us" versus the *mlechchha*s or *yavan*s, but even these authors can hardly be accused of not understanding the contrasting natures of the religious beliefs and practices of the two communities. Some eighteenth-century Englishmen may have confused ethnogeographical and religious categories, but they did not acquire this confusion from the Indians themselves. Even today Spanish speakers still commonly call all the inhabitants of India *hindúes*, whatever their religious affiliation. Here the confusion clearly stems from ignorance based on a lack of contact, not a conscious resort to an ancient geographical etymology.

All this suggests that in fact the Hindu community of India became much more conscious of its identity as a community under the stimulus of its contact with the Islam of the Turks, Afghans and Mughals who invaded India in the medieval period. Sheldon Pollock (1993) has forcefully argued that the rise of the worship of the avatar Rāma in this

same period was in large part a response to the Muslim presence and the Hindu search for a cohesive oppositional identity.

Social Ideologies of Bhakti Traditions

As was noted at the outset of this discussion, the tradition of *sagun* bhakti has been dominant in the Hindu community for a thousand years or possibly more. *Nirguṇī* tradition has also exercised considerable influence in North India since about 1500. Except in the Punjab, however, it has remained a subordinate, minority tradition subject to the "hegemony" of the *saguṇī* tradition. Older "orthodox" traditions such as those centered around Vedic recitation and sacrifice, philosophic and yogic enlightenment, and Tantrism, have continued to exist, but none of them remains the principal religious concern of more than a small number of elite practitioners. Even these practitioners have often syncretically combined their traditions with that of *sagun* bhakti.

One of the basic functions of the dominant religious tradition of any given society, in the present case *sagun* bhakti, is to articulate a social ideology intended to serve as a sort of psychological glue that helps preserve both harmony and privilege within the religious community and within the society as a whole (including its subordinate communities). In practice, however, most ruling elites are forced to resort to direct coercion, or the threat of such coercion, in order to maintain their hegemony over the rest of society. Rarely if ever do the subaltern (Gramsci) or nonprivileged (Weber) classes of society either wholeheartedly accept the ruling ideology or knuckle under elite domination without some form of (usually covert) resistance (see Scott 1990 and Devalle 1985). In North India, *nirgun* bhakti has served as one of the more significant forms of ideological resistance of these classes.

Although the contrast between the *saguṇī* and *nirguṇī* traditions is usually defined in theological terms—both by outside observers and by the followers of these two traditions—it is the social ideologies of the two traditions that lie behind and give strength to these differing theologies. And behind the ideologies lie the communities themselves. This is why the obvious theological affinity between *nirguṇī* tradition and orthodox Advaita—an affinity that Sanskritizing intellectuals within the Kabīr Panth such as Hanumaddās (Lorenzen 1981) often cite as a

proof of Kabīr's greatness—is ultimately of little significance. How-
ever similar the theologies may be, neither the social ideologies nor the
communities that have supported the two movements have had much
in common.

More significant are the obvious similarities—stemming in part
from their shared historical roots—of *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ* bhakti. Some
scholars have gone so far as to deny that the differences between the
two traditions are significant. John Hawley, who does acknowledge
important differences, nonetheless insists (1988, 4) that "we are talk-
ing about a single family of saints . . . the family of *bhakti*." Much can
be said in favor of this point of view. For example, even though the
social bases of two traditions—and the movements within each—can
be fairly clearly distinguished, these bases do have considerable over-
lap. It is also true that the songs and verses of the major poet-saints of
both traditions are often loved by the common people in rather indis-
criminate fashion. In his essay here, Philip Lutgendorf argues that
there is a progressive, *nirguṇ*-like side even to Tulasīdās, who is more
often regarded as the maximum champion of a conservative interpreta-
tion of *varṇāśramadharma* within the *saguṇī* camp.

John Hawley, in his essay here, points out that many medieval
manuscripts contain collections of songs by both *nirguṇī* and *saguṇī*
poet-saints. As Hawley has noted elsewhere with regard to the poetry
of Sūr Dās (1984, 121–60), however, it is common for most *saguṇī*
poets to dedicate some songs to God in his transcendent, *nirguṇī* aspect
A much closer examination of the individual songs in these "mixed"
manuscripts is needed before we can determine to what extent they do
in fact span the theological and social divide between the two traditions.

While some scholars have stressed the common features of *nirguṇī*
and *saguṇī* traditions, many well-known Hindi scholars—most nota-
bly Pitambar Barthwal, Paraśurām Chaturvedī, and Hazārī Prasād
Dvivedī—have emphasized their differences. Most of the mostly Ameri-
can and European scholars in K. Schomer and W. H. McLeod's edited
volume *The Sants* (1987) have also emphasized the differences, both
theological and ideological.[5] In what follows I will try to explain why
I strongly support the view that these differences are more important
than the similarities.

Since *saguṇ* bhakti is historically prior to *nirguṇ* bhakti and,
more importantly, has come to embody the hegemonic ideology of
modern Hindu society, we should begin by looking at how this tradi-

tion has been structured. Historically, *sagun* bhakti represents a "liberal" reform of an earlier Vedic and *śāstrik* Hinduism that had become the exclusive province of a small, all-male, Brahmin elite who unilaterally barred the rest of the population from any direct eligibility for salvation, or even from hearing the Vedic texts on which the Brahmins' religious authority depended. Even so enlightened a philosopher as Śaṅkarāchārya (c. 750) maintains just such a socially reactionary argument (Lorenzen 1987b).

Without in any way directly challenging the Brahmins' exclusive control over the Vedas, *sagun* bhakti did attempt, often somewhat reluctantly, to open the doors of salvation to all persons including women and members of most nonprivileged classes *(varnas)*. Only the Untouchables *(avarna)* were excluded from this right, and even their exclusion was often left ambiguous. Perhaps the earliest, and certainly the most important, statement of this extension of salvation to previously excluded groups is found in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (9.32): "Those who take their refuge in me, O Pārtha, even if they are born from a sinful womb, or as women, Vaiśyas or Śūdras; even *they* will reach the highest goal."

In the *Bhagavad-gītā* this path to salvation through bhakti coexists, somewhat uneasily, with two other paths: that of wisdom or gnosis *(jñāna)* and that of disinterested proper conduct *(karma)*. Several scholars, most recently A. L. Basham (1989), have in fact argued that the *Bhagavad-gītā* chapters propounding the bhakti path represent a later addition welded onto the earlier sections of the text. Many scholars within Hindu tradition have also been well aware of the logical incompatibilities among the paths of bhakti, gnosis and proper conduct and have attempted to smooth over the rough spots with two supplementary doctrines: that of socially appropriate levels of worship and that of the crisis of the Kali Yuga, our present benighted age.

The doctrine of socially appropriate levels of worship maintains that the path of gnosis is appropriate only for learned Brahmins, while bhakti is especially appropriate for lower levels of society including women and Śūdras. In the conservative Advaita version of this doctrine, gnosis is the *only* path that can lead directly to salvation, but sincere bhakti can at least lead to an eventual birth as a learned male Brahmin and hence to salvation. In Mādhava's *Śaṅkaradigvijaya*, a medieval hagiographic life of the Advaita philosopher Śaṅkarāchārya, Śaṅkara is confronted with the dilemma of advising his dying mother

on how to approach death. He first offers her instruction about the unqualified Absolute (*nirguṇa-brahman*), but she finds this too difficult to understand. Next he recites a hymn to Shiva, but when this god's messengers appear she rejects them. Finally, Śaṅkara recites a hymn to Vishnu-Krishna, and his mother allows this god's messengers to lead her to the highest heaven.[6]

The second supplementary doctrine is that of the crisis of the present, infernal Kali Yuga. This doctrine claims that in this age the paths of gnosis and proper conduct are no longer available to men (much less to women). In the present age, our intellectual, moral and social condition is simply too degenerate for any path to salvation to function apart from bhakti. It is for that very reason that God (usually identified with Vishnu) introduced the path of bhakti to make salvation available in this Kali Yuga. Often the texts go on to claim that birth in our Kali Yuga is paradoxically the most fortunate birth possible, since in this age God has made available this easy path of bhakti by which everyone—even women and Śūdras—can win direct salvation with little or no effort on their own part, exactly how little effort being an issue for debate among rival theological schools. For example, in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* the sage Karabhājana tells king Nimi:[7]

> Noble persons—those who appreciate good qualities and partake
> of their essence—honor the Kali Yuga. In it all one's aims are
> realized simply by chanting the name of God *[saṃkīrtana]*. . . . In
> the Kṛta and other ages, O king, the people long for a birth in the
> Kali Yuga. Indeed, in the Kali Yuga [good people] worship
> Nārāyaṇa.

One of the principal innovations of bhakti religion was the central role given to telling stories about the lives of avatars and saints. Here a distinction needs to be made between stories that are basically myths, that is, have little or no historical foundation, and those that are basically legends, that is, involve a mixture of myth and history. Although the dividing line between these two categories is sometimes rather fuzzy, stories about avatars clearly belong to the first category and stories about poet-saints such as Kabīr and Mīrābāī clearly belong to the second. Although this distinction is not openly made in Hindu tradition, it corresponds very closely to the distinction made there between stories about the avatars and saints of former *yuga*s and those

about the saints of "our own" Kali Yuga. The term "hagiography" should be limited to such legendary stories about the saints of the Kali Yuga.

The doctrine of the avatars of Vishnu is already present in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (4.7), where Krishna says: "Wherever there is a lessening of dharma, O Bharata, and an increase of non-dharma, at that time I send myself [to earth as an avatar]." The phrase "in every age" in fact implies ages other than the Kali Yuga. Most texts assume that all the major past avatars, with the exception of the Buddha and the future avatar Kalki, were born in earlier yugas. Even though the direct activity of the avatars in the world has long since ended (or not yet begun), the proponents of *saguṇ* bhakti argue that devotion to these avatars can still lead to their intercession on behalf of their devotees and to personal salvation, conceived of as either the end of rebirth and individual existence or as a final birth in Vishnu's heaven.

An important difference between *saguṇī* and *nirguṇī* traditions is that the stories about avatars are a basic defining element of the former, while in the latter usually either the existence of the avatars is denied or their importance downgraded. The few *paurāṇik* stories about avatars and saints that are popular in *nirguṇī* circles—most notably those about Prahlād, Dhruv and Jaḍ Bharat—appear to mostly derive directly from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and to concern legendary saints who are the patient victims of unjust suffering (see Lorenzen 1992).

Nonetheless, both traditions have come to give a prominent place to hagiography, particularly to stories about the founders and principal poets of specific sectarian traditions. These include the *saguṇī* saints Chaitanya, Vallabhāchārya, Sūr Dās, Mīrābāī, Tulasīdās, Narasī Mehatā, and Tukārām, and the *nirguṇī* saints Nāmadev, Kabīr, Raidās, Pīpā, Gurū Nānak, Dādū Dayāl, and Haridās Nirañjanī. To these may also be added the somewhat less historical Nāth saints, Gorakhanāth and Gopīchanda.[8]

The importance of hagiography in medieval and modern bhakti tradition contrasts sharply with the lack of interest in it in Vedic and *śāstrik* Hinduism, where almost the only important hagiographies are a few late medieval texts about Rāmānuja and Śaṅkarāchārya. The inspiration for these texts was probably vernacular hagiographic literature of bhakti religion in any case (Lorenzen 1983). This absence of hagiography in Vedic and *śāstrik* Hinduism ultimately derives from the rejection of historical precedent as a source for spiritual authority

by the traditional exponents of Vedic exegesis, particularly the follow-
ers of Mīmāṃsā. Philosophers such as Kumārila Bhaṭṭa claimed that
the authority of the Vedas and *śāstras*—and hence of the Brahmins that
know them—is eternal, revealed and independent of the process of
historical creation (see Pollock 1990 and 1989). In this view, religious
Truth cannot have a human origin. The ancient sages were only the
transmitters of the Vedas, not their authors. These texts, and the Truth
they embody, exist eternally outside the realm of time and human
effort. The history of specific peoples and individuals belongs to a secon-
dary, mundane realm and has little or no relevance to spiritual Truth.

It should be noted that historical precedent and authority —ex-
pressed principally through hagiography and genealogies of teachers
and disciples—tends to play a somewhat more prominent role in *nirguṇī*
than in *saguṇī* religion. This is particularly true of Sikh tradition in
which the historical saga of the ten Gurūs has been indispensible to the
formation of Sikh identity. Within *nirguṇī* tradition, the distinction
between myth and legend, between the avatars of former yugas and the
saints of our Kali Yuga, is sometimes purposely made ambiguous. In
her essay here, Uma Thukral discusses the Purāṇa-like hagiographies
of the Dharmadāsī branch of the Kabīr Panth in which Kabīr is treated
as an avatar. Insofar as this literature mimics *saguṇī* Purāṇas, it can be
regarded as a product of Sanskritization, the emulation of higher caste
culture. On the other hand, Dharmadāsī hagiography also aims to re-
place and finally subvert the *saguṇī* Purāṇas. In my own essay on
nirguṇī hagiographies, I have focused on the extent to which the life
stories of various *nirguṇī* saints tend to follow a hagiographic pattern
similar to, but not completely identical with, the life stories of *saguṇī*
saints.

The doctrine of transmigration and rebirth, called by Max Weber
a "theodicy," forms one of the two central pillars of the ethics of *saguṇī*
religion. If one behaves properly, one can expect a better rebirth in
one's next life, above all a rebirth as a male in a higher caste. Not
surprisingly, the followers of *nirguṇī* tradition generally manifest little
enthusiasm for this theodicy and for the law of karma in particular.
Nirguṇī poets do usually accept the idea of the cycle of rebirth tied to
the moral character of one's actions, but tend to regard all human births
as rare and equally valuable. Kabīr says (1972, *sākhī* 115): "A human
birth is hard to get. It won't come a second time. Once a ripe fruit has

fallen, it won't reattach itself to the branch." Edward Henry's essay on contemporary *nirguṇī* songs in this volume gives some indication of the continuing vitality of these ideas, as does Schaller's essay on the contemporary movement of the followers of Raidās.

The second pillar of *saguṇī* ethics is, of course, the doctrine of *varṇāśramadharma* (the law of social classes and stages of life). According to this doctrine, one obtains a better rebirth precisely by following the rules of conduct appropriate to the *varṇa* (roughly "class") and *jāti* (caste) in which one was born. The rules of behavior for different *varṇa*s are set out in elaborate detail in the legal texts of Hindu tradition: the *dharmasūtra*s, *dharmaśāstra*s and legal digests. These texts provide sometimes conflicting legal expressions of the social and ethical norms implicit in the doctrines of rebirth and *varṇā-śramadharma*. Taken together, these laws and underlying norms constitute the social ideology of *saguṇ* bhakti and other "orthodox" forms of Hindu tradition.

As is well known, the doctrine of the four hierarchically structured *varṇa*s can be traced all the way back to the *Ṛg Veda* (10.90). Even the more detailed legal expression of *varṇāśramadharma* ideology was well established before the appearance of the *saguṇ* bhakti of the *Bhagavad-gītā*. This latter text makes its support for this ideology quite explicit when Krishna explains what he means by "proper conduct" (3.35): "Better is one's own dharma, even if imperfect, than the dharma of another, though well-performed. Better is death in one's own dharma. The dharma of another brings only danger." Later and longer *saguṇī* texts, including the influential *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, are repeatedly laced with lengthy didactic passages that present elaborate expositions of the doctrines of transmigration and rebirth and of *varṇā-śramadharma*.

Apologists for this ideology, including the ancient authors of the *dharmaśāstra*s and modern religious and academic intellectuals, have always been quick to point out that this model of a hierarchically ordered society assigns specific economic and social rights to each *varṇa* and *jāti*. In both theory and practice, however, more and better rights were always given to the social groups with higher social status. For this reason it is logical to ask to what extent does *saguṇ* bhakti's support for *varṇāśramadharma* represent a manipulation of religion for economic, political and status-related ends by the mostly Brahmin

elite that wrote the *saguṇī* texts and propagated them among the general population, and by these Brahmins' immediate class allies and patrons, the wealthy landowners and merchants? In Marxist terms: to what extent has *saguṇ* bhakti embodied support for a typical dominant ideology?

Any convincing answer to this question would require the presentation of more empirical evidence than is possible within the limits of this essay. My own opinion is that such ideological manipulation by social elites, particularly by the Brahmin priesthood, is in fact a major element of *saguṇī* religion. The essays here by Lutgendorf, even as he defends Tulasī's social liberalism, and by van der Veer, who more directly attacks the ideology of Hindu nationalist organizations, do, I think, provide evidence that *saguṇī* bhakti has served to justify *varṇāśramadharma* and the status and privileges of Brahmins and other upper-caste groups.

This does not mean that *saguṇī* religion is simply Brahmin or upper-class propaganda. As has been noted, ideology and propaganda are quite different concepts. For the most part the supporters of *saguṇī* religion sincerely believe that *varṇāśramadharma* serves the interests of all those who belong to the society, the high and the low, for without it there would be only social chaos, often described as the condition of *matsyanyāya* (the law of the fishes), wherein the bigger eat the smaller.

Even when dominant ideologies such as *varṇāśramadharma* are expounded by upper-class groups with sincerity and good will, however, some element of rational calculation of self-interest is undoubtedly present. Likewise, it is certainly not the case that the lower-classes of society do not to some extent "see through" the class bias of dominant ideologies. When they do so, they sometimes reject these ideologies outright and sometimes reinterpret and refashion them in the light of their own interests and needs.[9]

It is easy to demonstrate that *nirguṇī* religion, particularly in its early stages, has embodied a fairly direct rejection of the ideology of *varṇāśramadharma*. It is somewhat more difficult to identify the ways in which the lower-class and female followers of *saguṇī* religion have reinterpreted its ideology to suit their own interests. In this area, much empirical research remains to be done. Some indication of the ways in which these lower-class followers may pick and choose among different *saguṇī* doctrines is suggested by the ways in which the few *saguṇī*