

Introduction

South Asian Religions in Migration

A Comparative Study of the British, Canadian, and U.S. Experiences

John R. Hinnells

Academics in various subjects, Sociology for example, have studied Asian communities in the Western world for decades. The existence of these groups has often been used by scholars of religion to legitimate Religious Studies, as opposed to the traditional emphasis on Christian Theology, on the grounds that Asian religions now have immediate relevance to the Western world because of their visible presence here. But these two trends did not interact much until the end of the 1980s. Sociological, anthropological, political, and other studies have rarely taken significant account of the religious beliefs and practices of the communities studied, and Religious Studies has commonly focused on

the classical (and thereby ancient) literature of the religions in the "old countries." Until recently, the diaspora groups have been considered marginal to the study of the "main" religion, and they have been viewed as peripheral in studies of Western religion. In Sociology, and other disciplinary studies, the focus has been on the problems encountered by migrant groups, such as prejudice in the workplace, in housing, and in public places. Undoubtedly there have been problems, but to focus so much on that dimension of the ethnic minority experience, has resulted in the impression that the groups themselves are to be seen as problems. The vitality, social contributions of, and spirituality within the groups were overlooked. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the era when South Asian migration grew, most outside commentators assumed the second and third generations would inevitably and increasingly assimilate into the host society. That has not happened. As various chapters in this book show, the visible evidence of South Asian religions in the West is far greater in the late 1990s than it was before, not only in the form of splendid new temples and mosques, but also in the more common wearing of turbans and the *hijab*, and in the number and range of religious ceremonies performed in the communities. Why that has happened is discussed in the chapters that follow. Behind this publicly visible front are a myriad of diverse forms of religious activity. Workers in race relations who neglect the religious dimension of the ethnic minorities are neglecting what the members of those groups commonly consider significant. Many researchers report that their informants have commented that they believe they have become more religious after migration than they were before, because religion is an important part of individual and community identity. The growth in the studies of migrant religions in the 1990s is therefore a welcome scholarly development.

New or developing subjects commonly have problems with their technical vocabulary, and their methodology. The first paragraph deliberately used a number of terms that are common in the media, and in academic works, but which specialists in the field would consider highly ambiguous if not questionable and dubious. Perhaps the most debated terms are "race" and "ethnicity." The term "race" has widely been taken to imply a biologically determined set of characteristics that condition personality type, abilities, and so on. Although racial prejudice is now officially banned in most Western countries, the presuppositions behind the offensive and invalid theories, at their most potent in the work of Hitler, are not far beneath the surface of some popular and official attitudes. In order to avoid the pejorative associations of "race" many writers

have turned to “ethnicity,” usually interpreted as a shared sense of history, language, culture, or religion. In popular usage, however, “ethnic” has come to be identified with “Black” or “Third World.” A famous international chain store, for example, has an “ethnic jewelry” section, but includes only items derived from what some term “underdeveloped” countries. But all people have their own “ethnicity,” be that Derbyshire, English, mid-Western, and so forth. A vivid example of the vagueness with which the term “ethnicity” is used is the 1991 British census, which listed among ethnic categories not only Indian, and so on, but also “White”—despite the number of different White British ethnic and national groups (Welsh, Scottish, Irish, as well as many continental Europeans, Americans, etc.) living in the British Isles. There are many more terms that have to be questioned. “Migrant groups” is naturally offensive to the many young British/ Canadian/ American Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and so on, who were born in the West, see their future here, and identify with the country of their birth, as well as with their religious or cultural heritage. The term “host” community has also been challenged. What is “the host” community? Most recent migrants find the wider White society anything but a host, it is often alien, prejudiced, and vocal extremists call for repatriation. The effective hosts are members of their own community. The word “community” has frequently been questioned. Certainly there is nothing corresponding to the (South) Asian community, and rarely a single entity such the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Zoroastrian community—there are Gujarati or Bengali movements; diverse branches of the Islamic tradition, and so on. The divisions, be they religious, caste or class, “ethnic,” cultural, national may be more significant to the people under discussion than the universalizing “Hinduism,” Islam and so forth. Similarly the concept of “culture” has been described as a vague and meaningless, if common, reification (Baumann 1996). Is there a phrase that can be used as an umbrella term? Hinnells 1996 argued for the term *diaspora religions* to indicate those groups that have a sense of being a minority, commonly an oppressed minority, living in an alien culture at a distance from the “old country.” This has been objected to not only on the grounds that it is a term derived from the field of Biblical Studies, but also because it is not appropriate for many religious groups. Christians, for example, have a sense of a holy land, but British and American Christians from the major denominations can hardly be described as living in a diaspora. What of Muslims living away from Arabia, but where they are a majority, for example in South East Asia? Perhaps one may be in a religious

majority but in a cultural diaspora (e.g., Indian Christians in the United States)?

Another question of definition relates to the phrase “New Religious Movements.” This is true in the study of religion as a whole, but comes to the fore with the study of Asian religions in the West. What from one perspective may be seen as a New Religious Movement, for example, ISKCON, can from another be seen as the modern expression of classical Indian teaching. In one sense definitions are concerned with drawing the appropriate boundaries around subjects, but there are times when strictly drawn boundaries are artificial. The lack of an accepted technical vocabulary does not necessarily indicate a sloppy academic discipline, it can also be a sign of a subject that is new and changing rapidly. Although this book deals with some of these definitional issues in passing, it does not address them directly because there is already a rich literature on such questions. But it is important to point to the debates.

What is different about this book is that it seeks to study the phenomena comparatively in two senses: (1) comparatively between the religions and (2) comparatively between three Western countries. Comparative Religion has often been seen as a vague subject, characterized by generalizations and a lack of specialist understanding, which inevitably undermines any conclusions drawn from the material. However, the value of comparison is that it identifies not only what is common, but also, and perhaps more importantly, what is distinctive or characteristic of a particular phenomenon. There is a saying in Comparative Religion: He who knows one, knows none. If a person studies only one religion, say Christianity, then he or she cannot be said to be studying religion, only Christianity. Equally, if one studies only, say, Hindus in the United States, one is not studying diaspora/transnational religion, only Hindus in the United States. That may be a valid field of study in its own right, but in order to understand what is distinctive about Hindus in the States it is increasingly recognized that one has to study “both ends of the migration chain,” that is, the old and the new countries. Taking the argument one stage further, perhaps a degree of triangulation is necessary, that is, the study of the old country and a comparison of two diaspora groups. This book takes that approach much further by comparing six religious movements—Hinduism, Islam, Indian Christians, Indian New Religious Movements, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism—in three countries—Britain, Canada, and the United States. A single chapter each is devoted to South Asian Christians, Zoroastrians, and the New Religious Move-

ments in the three countries. Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism are considered separately for each of the three countries. Not only are the authors specialists in their respective fields, scholars who have done fieldwork in the groups they write about, there is also a logic and coherence behind the structure of the book. The focus is on religions from the Indian subcontinent and how these different groups from a related background have fared in three Western countries sharing a common (English) language and with an interwoven history. The study is, therefore, of six religions in related Western environments. So although the subject matter is broad, it is also focused. It is the first attempt at such international collaboration in this field. The book grows out of two meetings, the first at the American Academy of Religions in Philadelphia in 1995, and the second a workshop at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London in 1996. At the latter, participants circulated their papers in advance, were given five minutes to identify what they considered the key issues, and these were then discussed for forty minutes. There were further debates at the end of each section (on Britain, Canada, and the United States) and at the conclusion of the Workshop on what are the distinctive experiences of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and so on, and what is specific to the British, Canadian, and United States contexts. Authors produced the final text of their chapters in the light of these discussions. There has, therefore, been considerable interaction between contributors. Of course, there are still differences of emphasis and treatment because the religions and the countries are different, as are the research backgrounds of the various scholars. However, this scholarly debate identified a series of themes that bind what might have been a very disparate book into a logical whole.

The themes that emerged as significant for many, if not most, religions studied were: the significance of the distinctive histories of migration in the different countries; the consequences of life in the new world for religious practice, exemplified, for example, in sacred space, institutional, public, and private worship; the effects of public policy in the various countries on the minorities (e.g., multiculturalism, religious and higher education); strategies of adaptation; generational issues; relations with the old country, and the place of women in the religions in the West. The emphasis may vary between chapters, sometimes the issues appear as headings and sometimes not, but each chapter addresses them to the extent that they are appropriate for the subject under discussion.

What has emerged is a rich diet of ingredients, blended into a balanced, wholesome menu. Clearly, there are problems encountered

by all the religions in each country. The role of women is one which has already been mentioned. There are related issues, notably marriage. However westernized South Asians, young or old, may be, when the time of marriage approaches the force of traditions becomes potent. In different ways and to different degrees, inter-marriage commonly emerges as a major issue. Whatever the teaching against caste in classical Sikh literature, in practice *jati* becomes crucial for many Sikhs. Similarly among Muslims, although conversion of marriage partners is part of the tradition, Gujarati or Bengali ties may become prominent when marriage plans are made. The impact of Western education is another important issue, not least because South Asians value education so highly. In Canada and the United States it was overwhelmingly the well-educated South Asians who were the original migrants. Although this was less true of the early Indian settlers in Britain, the second generation pursues higher education to a far greater extent than do the White Anglo-Saxon majority. The question of how to integrate traditional values and westernized attitudes is a common concern. In the 1970s scholars wrote of the second generation as "caught between cultures." More recently Ballard has suggested that one should view the South Asian young in the West as "skilled cultural navigators," people who move comfortably between the culture of home and wider society, just as bilingual people switch easily between languages (Ballard 1994). Hinnells 1995 suggests there is truth in both positions with regard to different groups within any community. However the young react, the problems, tensions, and opportunities that face each tradition in the West are similar.

Although caution was expressed above concerning an overemphasis on the problems encountered by diaspora or transnational religions, nevertheless there are religious problems encountered by South Asians in the West that have not yet been fully addressed. Several authors in this book refer to the difficulties posed by the pressures of working life in the West, by the pattern of the working week and of public holidays. One of the most profound set of problems is associated with death and bereavement. Western funeral parlors and undertakers are not equipped to allow for the various death ceremonies that are important for the different religions. The time allocated at crematoria, the enormous (insurmountable?) problems associated with purity and pollution in a Western environment, which almost by definition is seen as impure, confront the grieving with yet greater distress. The inability to observe hallowed tradition can be a cause of guilt, however illogical such an

emotion may be. Similar, though usually less acute, problems may be associated with childbirth and suffering (both physical and psychological). The West therefore confronts the various groups with substantial religious and personal problems.

Western public policies affect the internal structures and self-perceptions of the members of the various South Asian religions. Several authors comment on how the American laws governing charitable status determine community structures of internal management with committees, Memoranda of Agreement and Incorporation, the role of leaders, and so forth. In Britain there is a further problem posed by the fact that religious education is a core part of the state school syllabus. Apart from the fact that this may inculcate Christian values, even where Asian religions are part of the syllabus the image and emphasis that are conveyed can determine the self-perception of young Hindus, Muslims, and so on. The obvious example is the priority given to doctrine and "scriptural" texts, rather than to family practices and values. Interfaith dialogue can produce a similar result. The goal, clearly, is to spread understanding and thereby tolerance, but the emphasis on "faith," as in the common phrase "the faith communities," gives a particular Christian slant to what is seen to be the essence of religion. The widespread Western assumption that to be effective, prayers must be understood, the stress on congregational worship, all result, in the view of many scholars, in the protestantizing of non-European religions.

Western images of South Asian religions impact on the communities in different ways. The hostile stereotyping of religions inevitably triggers antagonism and an understandable reassertion of tradition. The obvious example of this is the all too common media image of Muslims as fundamentalist fanatics. A different example is the Western image of all Sikhs as bearded wearers of turbans resulting in the idea that the only "true" Sikhs are those who grow beards and wear turbans. A third interaction is that between Western scholarship and the traditional members of the religion, best exemplified in the conflicts between "orthodox" Sikhs in Canada and the United States and the distinguished scholar Hew McLeod, discussed in two chapters in this book. Increasingly younger Asians are studying their heritage at Western universities. What the long-term impact of that will be, and how it will affect relations between this Western-educated youth and leaders in the old countries has yet to be seen. There can be little doubt that what happens in the diaspora will, for better or worse, have an influence on the religion in the old country.

There is one term that has not yet been examined, but which has to be: what is meant by “the West”? Edward Said challenged Western stereotypes of “the Orient,” in particular the imperialist simplification of a unitary phenomenon, as a false reification (Said 1974). Equally one might question the concept of “the West.” America is east of Australia, and Britain is east of America. The Eurocentric map projection of the world locates Australia on the bottom right, as an eastern country. But in the popular use of the term “the West” Australia and New Zealand would be included. Their omission from this book was simply a question of time and space, but on grounds of principle perhaps they should have been included as a fourth example of English speaking “Western” countries. It would, however, be simplistic to suggest that there is any such entity as “the West.” It was said above that there is much that binds Britain, Canada, and the United States together, for example, language and an interwoven history. But it has often been said that Britain and the United States are two countries divided by a common language. As there is much in common, so there is much that is different between the countries, for example, Britain has a state Church, with all that entails regarding government. It has even been questioned whether a non-Christian could be a prime minister. The only Jew to obtain that position was Disraeli, and he converted to Christianity (Saghal and Yuval-Davis 1992: 12). In Britain, the Prime Minister recommends the name of candidates for bishoprics to the head of state, the Queen. How would a Muslim or Sikh do that? In the United States there has been a strong demarcation between state and church, yet religion has a far higher public profile in the United States than in Britain, with a higher number of active Christians, both in absolute and proportional terms. Christian groups have had much more influence in U.S. elections for the presidency than in Britain. As the following chapters indicate, Muslims and Zoroastrians have established continental “America-wide” umbrella organizations that include both Canada and the United States. But despite their close relations, there are significant differences between the two countries. The obvious one to highlight in this book is the contrast between the Canadian multiculturalism and the American melting-pot theory. It must immediately be said that the U.S. government has moved beyond that early policy, but it remains a significant part of the South Asian groups’ perception of that country, because it is seen as such a threat to the preservation of identity. But what is also important for this book is the different groups that have settled in the three countries. The history of migration to the three countries is differ-

ent. Migration in Britain dates back to Roman times; until the twentieth-century migration to Canada and the United States was almost wholly European. The South Asian migration to Britain was earlier than that to the American continent, but was different in other ways also, as detailed in the chapters below. Briefly it came with all the presuppositions, on both sides, which grew out of the Empire. Because of Britain's needs, those who migrated were almost all single, young, male manual workers, reinforcing imperial perceptions of Indians as coolies. (Asian) Indian religion was first seen in the States as a consequence of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago and was perceived as a mystical, meditative religion. When Asian migration developed to Canada and the United States in the 1960s, instead of attracting "the tired, the poor and the huddled masses," as it is said on the Statue of Liberty, it was the highly educated professionals and the scientists who came. The history and demography of the migration is therefore different. And so also is the wider context of the history of immigration. In Britain, the South Asians are, apart from the Irish, the major non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic group. Apart from Chinese (mainly from the ex-British colony Hong Kong), there are no large East Asian groups in Britain. In the United States, the South Asians are just one group among Latin Americans, East and South East Asians, and a much larger Black African population than in Britain or Canada. Immigration in the United States is a far more varied mosaic than it is in Britain. Canada is, in this regard, somewhere in the middle between the other two countries.

Various authors look to the future developments in the diaspora religions in the West. The first point to make is that in all three countries it seems certain that numbers will increase. Although primary migration has been reduced in the United States and Canada, and especially in Britain where it has virtually ceased, the age profile of all the groups is such that numbers will increase. Although the numbers of births per family tends to reduce to Western norms as communities become more established, the fact that young people far exceed the numbers of elderly means that the birth rate exceeds the death rate. As the numbers grow and the number of economically successful individuals increases, so the resources available to the religions increases. Two contrasting trends may be discerned. On the one hand, through increased international travel, not only to the old country but to other diaspora groups, and through telecommunications and the Internet, the process of globalization becomes more evident. Among some, the demand is for an emphasis on the religious ideals and the curtailing

of “simply” ethnic traditions. There is therefore a quest for a pure Islam, Hinduism, and so forth. How that “true” religion is perceived varies. In some cases there is a trend toward what may be seen as a “sanitized” form of the religion, one thought to be more acceptable in the West, for example, a Hindu emphasis on the Gita and Gandhi rather than on purity laws. The *sampradaya*, or the guru lineage (e.g., Sai Babha), is also an increasingly popular tradition, not least because of the educational and community infrastructures that these movements have evolved. On the other hand, increased resources mean that unlike in the early years of settlement there was less need for different groups to share centers. For example, in the 1960s it was not uncommon to find Indian cultural centers that housed not only images of the various Hindu gods, but also pictures or statues from Sikhism and Jainism. The political tensions in India during the 1980s, as well as increased resources, resulted in separate Sikh centers. But this trend has developed further as more regional Gujarati or Tamil centers have grown. Whether the future communities will be more global or regional in nature, or a mixture of both, is unclear at the dawn of the third millennium.

The importance of the diaspora groups, and their impact back in the old country, seems almost certain to grow. Leading teachers from the old countries are often invited to the West, and when not present in body they are seen on the video screen. Similarly, Western leaders visit the old country where they are sometimes seen as important and successful people, who have something to offer to the old country. Whereas it used to be thought that it was people in the old country who preserved the traditional religion, and the diaspora was a force for change, various writers in this book report that in some instances it is the diaspora groups who prove more resistant to change as they seek to preserve their identity in a sea of change. Those of us who were active in the study of diaspora religions in the 1960s did not foresee the vitality, and strength, of the religions that would characterize these groups at the end of the millennium.

There are, of course, more common experiences and differences than this short introduction has identified. But perhaps enough has been written to indicate, in broad brush strokes, some of the questions, issues and themes addressed in this book with its breadth of scope, but clear focus. For a fuller picture, the reader is invited to study the following chapters!

This intellectual collaboration grew out of the shared interests and friendship of the three editors. They would like to thank the

contributors for their scholarly cooperation, the good spirit in which the meetings took place, and the bodies that sponsored them. The Workshop at SOAS was sponsored by the British Academy, the Spalding Trusts, and by SOAS.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ballard, R. (ed.) (1994). *Desh Pardesh, the South Asian Presence in Britain*. London: Hurst.
- Baumann, G. (1996). *Contesting Cultures: Discourses of Identity in Multi-ethnic London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hinnells, J. R. (1995). *Zoroastrians in Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hinnells, J. R. (1996). *A Handbook of Living Religions*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Sahgal, Gita and Yuval Davis, Nira (1992). *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*. London: Virago Press.