Hindus And Others

THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN INDIA TODAY

Edited by Gyanendra Pandey

Pandey, "Which Of Us Are Hindus?"
Which Of Us Are Hindus?

Gyanendra Pandey

Renewed and aggressive demands for a recognition of what are called 'Hindu' rights and the 'Hindu' basis of Indian nationhood give rise to the question that provides the title of this essay. How is the category of the 'Hindu' constructed by the votaries of Hindu nationhood, who gets included among the elect and who excluded, what is meant when the so-called leaders of the Hindus speak about 'Hindu' interests? I wish to examine these questions here with reference to the writings and speeches of Hindu propagandists over the last hundred years or so.

II

Naturalness, it might be said, is the mark of the narrative of community: naturalness of boundaries, of linguistic and/or religious practices, social structure, customs and, of course, the unity that flows from these. The natural unity of 'Hindus', of the 'Hindu community' ('race', 'people', 'nation' are other terms that have sometimes been used), of 'Hindu tradition', has been assumed and stressed by varieties of Hindu spokespersons in varieties of ways from the later nineteenth century to today. India (Hindustan, Bharatvarsha, Aryavarta, Jambudwipa) has the most natural boundaries in the world, it has been said. 'There is no part of the world better marked out by Nature as a region by itself than India, exclusive of Burma.'

Further, the 'Hindus' are the obvious, the original, the natural inhabitants of this land, as the very names 'Hindu' and 'Hindustan' testify.

Given that there has never been any dispute over the proposition that the English, the French and the Germans constitute the nation in England, France and Germany, it is astonishing, these spokespersons have argued, that there should be any confusion about the identity of the nation in Hindustan. 'Hindu society living in this country since time immemorial is the national [and 'natural'] society here... The same Hindu people have built the life-values, ideals and culture of this country and, therefore, their nationhood is self-evident.' Or again: 'Undoubtedly... we—Hindus—have been in undisputed and undisturbed possession of this land for over eight or even ten thousand years before the land was invaded by any foreign race.'

In this way, we are told, there came into being what is assuredly the most 'natural' nation in the world. 'Living in this country since pre-historic times... the Hindu Race [is] united together by common traditions, by memories of Common glory and disaster, by similar historical, political, social, religious and other experiences.' 'Historically, politically, ethnologically and culturally Hindusthan is one, whole and indivisible and so she shall remain.' 'If the Hindus do not possess a common history, then none in the world does': indeed, as the same writer goes on to say, the Hindus are 'about the only people who are blessed with those ideal conditions... under which a nation can attain perfect solidarity and cohesion.'

It is of the essence of such narratives of community that they assert the superiority of their own particular community/nation. The 'Hindus' are declared to be the most ancient and civilized nation in the world, unparalleled in their philosophical and spiritual achievements, accommodating, tolerant, united, luxuriant, even—in a fundamental sense—unconquerable. 'Great as the glories of the English world are, what on the whole, has it to show to match the glories of the Hindu world.' 'The very first page of history records our existence as a progressive and highly civilized nation...'

Hindu discourse has it that a spirit of nationalist unity has guided the history of 'the Hindus' from the beginnings of historical time. The goal of uniting all Hindus inspired the kings of ancient India, who were honoured with the titles of 'Chakravartin' (unifier of all Hindus, according to this dictionary) and 'Vikramaditya' (destroyer of all foreigners, in the same reading) if they were successful in their endeavours. It has been argued with greater conviction that the Hindus waged an incessant battle...
for liberation from alien rule for a thousand years before 1947, that is, since Muslim rulers first established their sway over a large part of northern India. In particular, a whole hagiography has developed around the heroic deeds of the Rajputs, the Marathas and the Sikhs—the valiant struggles and martyrdom of Maharana Pratap, Shivaji, Guru Gobind Singh and others.8

The Hindu struggle continued throughout the colonial period. This is exemplified, according to Hindu spokespersons, by the great Uprising of 1857, and the careers of Rammohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Lokmanya Tilak, Swami Vivekananda and legions more. Here is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) supremo, M.S. Golwalkar, on 1857, which demonstrates once again, in his view, how the ‘living vision of Hindu Rashtra’ inspired ‘all our valiant freedom fighters in the past and in modern times’:

The great leaders of that revolution, at the very first stroke, captured Delhi and... reinstated [Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal King, nominally Emperor of India until he was dethroned and exiled by the British in 1858].... as the free Emperor and... the leader of the War of Independence... But this step made the Hindu masses suspect that the atrocious Moghul [Mughal] rule, which was smashed by the heroic efforts and sacrifices of Guru Govind Singh, Chhataasal, Shivaji and such others would once again be revived and foisted on them... Historians say that this was one of the decisive factors which ultimately led to the collapse of that revolution (of 1857).9

Indeed what we sometimes have is the remarkable proposition that all social and political activities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which Hindus took part were geared to the task of re-establishing the Hindu nation in its superior and glorious splendour. Any political leader and reformer of the period who happens to have been a Hindu may be appropriated to the history of Hindu nationalism, including at times (albeit with some bitterness) Mahatma Gandhi and even Jawaharlal Nehru.

...the whole race of [revolutionary terrorist] martyrs in Bengal, in the Punjab, U.P., Maharashtra, Madras,

throughout the length and breadth of the country, who have been grimly fighting for their mother—the Hindu Race and Nation... And with other weapons, the staunch fighters Lok [many]a Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipin Chandra Pal and a host of others; and the day’s [today’s] notaries—M. Gandhi and others, all Hindu workers, rightly conceiving the national future or not, but all sincerely and sternly fighting the foe. Surely the Hindu Nation is not conquered.10

It is worthwhile pausing to note how the ‘Hindu Nation’ is constructed in this argument, and how its deep commitment to the cause is sought to be established. The underlying proposition is that of a mystical unity, and a fundamental, automatic, unquestioned (and unquestionable?) commitment to its preservation. This is based on a suppression of history, even as history is paraded as its witness.

There is not the slightest indication in Golwalkar’s statement on 1857, for example, that Muslims played a large part in the Revolt. Yet in nationalist folklore Maulvis Ahmadullah Shah and Inayat Ali stand alongside the Rani of Jhansi, Nana Sahib and Kunwar Singh as the heroes of the event, and for long after 1857 the British rulers of India were apprehensive of another such uprising led by the ‘fanatical’ Muslims.

Golwalkar portrays it as a mere tactical mistake on the part of what are obviously meant to be the ‘Hindu’ leaders of the Revolt that they invited Bahadur Shah Zafar to resume his throne and lead the struggle. To put this claim in perspective, it is necessary to note what all recent research suggests, that a reluctant Emperor was practically dragged out of retirement and coerced into accepting the ‘leadership’ of the rebels, not by any of the great leaders of rebellion—Hindu or Muslim—but by the soldiers who had marched from Meerut to Delhi for the express purpose of laying siege to the Red Fort and proclaiming the end of firanghi (foreign, British) rule.

The ‘tactical’ mistake of the leaders in Golwalkar’s account is matched by the united determination of the ‘Hindu masses’ to ensure that they not be subjected to Muslim rule again. Against the prospect of once more being returned to that ‘atrocious’ condition, they prefer the rule of another set of foreigners. Hence, the passage implies, the ‘Hindu masses’, as a body, withdrew their support from the popular struggle of 1857. ‘Historians say’—the scientificity of the proffered evidence is notewor-
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thy, although not a single historical work or historian's name is cited—
'that this [withdrawal of 'Hindu' support] was one of the decisive factors
which ultimately led to the collapse of that revolution.'

In the end, the claim made is this, that every Hindu reformer, thinker,
political activist who fought for local rights, self-respect or increased
opportunity, anywhere at any time, was part of one and the same strug-
gle—the struggle for a Hindu Rashtra. It is striking, for instance, that the
Sikhs are included unproblematically in this category of fighters for
Hindu freedom, in spite of the long and successful Sikh struggle from the
last decades of the nineteenth century onwards, that is, through the very
period when this Hindu discourse was acquiring its modern, militant form,
to establish a Sikh identity distinct from that of 'Hindus'.

If Hindus, or people who were nominally 'Hindu', or those who should
have acknowledged their 'Hinduhood', are known to have risen in protest
against someone or something, that is enough to establish the 'Hindu'
purpose of their crusade. It is pertinent, therefore, to ask when goals like
that of a 'Hindu Rashtra' first came to be articulated, and indeed when
the word 'Hindu' came to acquire its present signification.

III

It would appear, from the historical evidence I have so far seen, that the
notion of a Hindu Rashtra—India as a Hindu nation, the land of the Hindus
alone—was first advanced in the 1920s, and many of the first steps
aiming towards its realization were taken only at this time. This is well
illustrated in the argument about the need for Hindu sangathan (organiza-
tion) put forward by the Arya Samaj leader, social reformer and militant
nationalist, Swami Shraddhanand, in a pamphlet, Hindu Sangathan:
Saviour of the Dying Race, published in 1924.

Shraddhanand advocated as a first step towards the organization of the
Hindus, the building of one 'Hindu Rashtra Mandir' in every city and
important town of India. Each mandir was to have a compound capable
of holding an audience of 25,000, and a large hall for recitations from the
holy texts and epics. Unlike most Hindu temples, associated with a
particular tradition or sect and dominated by their own individual deities,
this 'Catholic Hindu Mandir' was to be devoted to the worship of 'the
three mother-spirits'—Gau-mata (or Mother cow), Saraswati-mata
(Bhumi-mata (Mother earth), 'Let some living cows be there to represent plenty,' Shraddhanand wrote,

let 'Savitri' (मायी मातृ) be inscribed over the gate of the hall
to remind every Hindu of his duty to expel all ignorance and
let a life-like map of Mother-Bharat be constructed in a
prominent place, giving all its characteristics [sic] in vivid
colours so that every child of the Matri-Bhumi may daily bow
before the Mother and renew his pledge to restore her to the
ancient pinnacle of glory from which she has fallen. 12

Shraddhanand wrote in the context of increasing strife between Hindus
and Muslims in urban centres throughout northern India, and growing
demands for shuddhi and sangathan on the Hindu side, with matching
calls for tabligh (propagation of the faith) and tanzim (organization) on
the Muslim side. For many Hindu publicists and politicians, the Khilafat
movement and the Mappila revolt had raised the spectre of a thoroughly
united, well-organized and militant Muslim populace all set to wipe out
the Hindus and their culture. The relative decline in Hindu numbers that
the decennial censuses had apparently established, and the question of the
place of 'untouchables' and tribal groups that were only loosely attached
to Hindu society, now acquired a new importance.

Shraddhanand's pamphlet made these concerns amply clear. Educated
Hindus were reluctant to mix with each other, he noted: the reason
was that 'they have no common meeting place.' Even their bigger temples
could barely seat a hundred or two hundred people together. By contrast,
in Delhi alone, besides the Juna and Fatehpuri mosques which can
accommodate big audiences consisting of 25 to 30 thousands of
Muhammadans, there are several old mosques which can serve as meeting
places for thousands,' (p.139). It was to rectify this imbalance that
Shraddhanand suggested the building of 'Hindu Rashtra Mandirs',
capable of holding 25,000 people, in every town and city.

A call for organization, discipline and training accompanied the call
for building these temples. The large compounds were also to provide
space for akharas where wrestling and gymnastics would be practiced,
and be the venue for dramatic performances. All these activities, and the
temples themselves, were to be run by the local Hindu Sabhas (p. 140).
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‘Protection of the cow is a powerful factor not only in giving the Hindu community a common plane for joint action,’ Shraddhanand wrote,

but in contributing to the physical development and strength of its several members. But if the drain upon the depressed classes ['untouchables' and other low castes] continues and they go on leaving their ancestral religion on account of the social tyranny of their co-religionists, and the onrush of Hindu widows towards prostitution and Muhammadanism, on account of the brutal treatment of [by] their relations, is not stopped by allowing them to remarry in their own community, the number of beef-eaters will increase . . . (p. 138)

Thus, the question of reform in the position of untouchables and widows, of conversion to other religions, of the physical development and strength of the ‘Hindus’, in a word, of organizing and unifying the ‘Hindu Nation’, acquired a new urgency in the 1920s. The context for this was provided by the emergence of countrywide mass political organizations and agitations; what was perceived as a quite new and threatening level of Muslim organization, preparedness and militancy; a powerful Sikh movement for reform of their gurdwaras which the community as a whole should henceforth control; and much else that historians of nationalism and popular protest have written about. The position in the nineteenth century had been nothing like this.

For a start, many of the nineteenth century thinkers and publicists now claimed as the (modern) founders of the movement for Hindu nationhood functioned before the idea had gained the fixity of a popular prejudice that nations and nation-states are the only appropriate—the ‘natural’—form of the political existence of peoples. Not only is this obviously true in the case of people like Ranumohan Roy who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century, it is true in important ways for writers and thinkers of the latter half of the nineteenth century, who were quite evidently struggling with the question of how the ‘we’ of a possible Indian nationhood might be constituted.14 It was only towards the end of the century that some sort of consensus developed that this ‘we’ referred to all the people who lived in the territory called India, a consensus that would itself come to be challenged in time by the proponents of the Hindu and the Muslim Rashtra.

Into the twentieth century, there was considerable experimentation as regards names for the ‘we’ of the Indian nation. Muhammad Iqbal wrote in his famous “Song of India” (Tarana-i-Hind): ‘Hindi hain hum, vaan hai, Hindostan hamara’ (We [the people] are Hindi, our homeland is Hindustan.) And if Iqbal appears to be an exception as a poet, we have more prosaic examples of similar terminological usages. Take for example V.D. Savarkar, an acknowledged founder of the modern Hindu political movement, who declared in his Hindutva (written in prison during the years of the First World War and published for the first time in 1923) that ‘Bharatiya’ or ‘Hindi’ is synonymous with ‘an Indian’, that either term may be used for ‘a countryman and a fellow citizen.’15

The term ‘Hindu’ was also used at times, throughout this period, to designate the collectivity of people of India—Hindu, Muslim, Parsee, et al. In a famous lecture delivered in Ballia (Uttar Pradesh) probably in 1884, Bharatendu Harishchandra declared: ‘Whoever lives in Hindustan, whatever his colour or caste, is a Hindu,’ going on to elaborate his meaning with the proposition that ‘Bengalis, Marathas, Panjabis, Madrasis [sic], Vaidiks, Jains, Brahmos, Musalmans’ were all ‘Hindus’ involved in a common historical project. It has been argued that Bharatendu’s use of the term in this way, at this time, was tendentious, an interested Hindu move to erode the separate cultural identities of other groups in India by an expansionist usage of the name ‘Hindu’. There is, perhaps, some force in this argument: the term has certainly been used in precisely this way by Hindu propagandists in more recent times. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, there was still considerable uncertainty about the appropriate designations for emerging solidarities and new goals and movements, and the meanings and usages of many such terms remained fairly fluid. It is interesting to note, for example, that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) used the term ‘Hindu’ in exactly the same way as Bharatendu, to mean ‘the inhabitants of Hindustan,’16 in a lecture given in Lahore during the same year, 1884.

A couple of decades later, this usage had become very much less common, or even permissible. ‘It is only in America,’ wrote Bhai Parmar man of his experience there in the early 1900s, ‘that the word “Hindu” is correctly used to denote the inhabitants of Hindustan, be they Hindu, Sikh or Musalman by religion.’ Hence, he observed, the question that an American acquaintance had once asked him: ‘Are all Hindus Musalmans?’17

‘Hindu’ as the designation for people belonging to a particular
religious tradition, or set of traditions, was of course already the most common meaning of the term in India even in the later nineteenth century. Thus, in that selfsame Ballia lecture where he included among the Hindus all the inhabitants of Hindustan, Bharatendu Harischandra also had passages addressed to different sections of the collective Indian community-sections called ‘Hindus’ and ‘Muslims’ (or, more specifically, ‘Hindu Brothers’ and ‘Muslim Brothers’). But even where people spoke of ‘Hindus’, ‘Muslims’, ‘Sikhs’, etc., by religion, it was not always apparent who was included, and who excluded, from the category.

The single biggest question in this respect stood over the category of people now coming to be designated collectively as the ‘untouchables’—once considered outcaste, outside the four-varna classification and, hence, pancham (the fifth ‘estate’). I shall have more to say about this and other lower-caste and class groups later in this paper. Suffice it here to say that in day-to-day reckoning the ‘untouchables’ were often not thought of as Hindus by upper-caste Hindus themselves. Officials in Chhattisgarh (eastern Madhya Pradesh) observed early in this century, for example, that whereas ‘over most of India’ the term ‘Hindu’ was contrasted to ‘Muslim’, ‘in Chhattisgarh to call a man a Hindu conveys primarily that he is not a Chamar, or Chamara according to the contemptuous abbreviation [sic] in common use.’ ‘Over most of India’ is a misleading phrase too, based almost certainly on nothing but a general impression. Does this exclude all of the north-eastern states of present-day India, and the bulk of the South Indian peninsula: in other words, a very large part of the land and the people of India? For in Tamil Nadu, and I would guess in other parts of South India and indeed in many parts of North India, the term Hindu is used to this day specifically to designate upper-caste Hindus (the ‘Hindus’) from ‘untouchables’ or Harijans as they are now more often called.

In any event, at the turn of the twentieth century, there was still much uncertainty about the collectivity called the ‘Hindu community’, and many different meanings still attached to the term ‘Hindu’. One question, in particular, had by then been posed sharply. That was whether Buddhists and Jains, Sikhs, members of different bhakti sects such as the Kabirpanthis and Vallabhacharyas, and also of course the ‘untouchable’ and ‘tribal’ groups and castes who literally lived on the physical/geographical fringes of settled Hindu society, whether all of these groups were to be included among the Hindus or not.

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It was precisely this question of who was a Hindu that V.D. Savarkar set out to resolve, once and for all as he would have it, in his book, *Hindutva*.

The problem came into being, he declared, because of the loose and eclectic usage of the terms Hindu, Hinduism and Hindutva, especially in the recent past. The question was important because new challenges had arisen, old categories were being redefined and ‘unified’ in new ways, and the religious/cultural tradition(s) now designated as ‘Hindu’ (or ‘Hinduism’) were also in process of re-articulation.

Savarkar begins his book with a long discourse on the importance of a name:

As the association of the [name] with the thing it signifies grows stronger and lasts long, so does the channel which connects the two states of consciousness tend to allow an easy flow of thoughts from one to the other, till at last it seems almost impossible to separate them. And when in addition to this a number of secondary thoughts or feelings that are generally roused by the thing get mystically entwined with the word that signifies it, the name seems to matter as much as the thing itself (pp. 1–2).

The idea of a mystical unity of ‘word’ and ‘thing’, derived perhaps from Sufi tradition and certain Hindu bhakti practices, now has a political application. Savarkar considers at some length the relative merits of different names that have been applied to India: Aryavarta, Brahmavarta, Dakshinapath, Bharatvarsha, Hindustan. The name he opts for is ‘Hindustan’ which is, in his reading, the original, the authentic and most sacred name of this sacred land.

The commonly accepted argument, then as now, was that the terms ‘Hindu’ and ‘Hindustan’ were derived at some time in the distant past from ‘Sindhu’, the name given by ‘immigrant’ Aryans to the river Indus and, later, to all rivers in the subcontinent and also to the seas. Savarkar, while accepting this view, contests the originality of the Aryan word ‘Sindhu’. “It is quite probable,” he writes, “that the great Indus was known as Hindu to the original inhabitants of our land and owing to the vocal peculiarity of the Aryans [the easy conversion of the sound h to s, and vice versa] it got changed into Sindhu.” “Thus,” he goes on,
Hindu would be the name that this land and the people that inhabited it bore from time so immemorial that even the Vedic name Sindhu is but a later and secondary form of it. If the epithet Sindhu dates its antiquity in the glimmering twilight [sic] of history then the word Hindu dates its antiquity from a period so remoter [sic] than the first that even mythology fails to penetrate—to trace it to its source (p. 10).

The earliest is frequently adjudged in nationalist discourse to be the best. Or if the 'best' requires a leaven of the 'modern', of reform, of adjustment to capitalist and industrial times, the earliest is nevertheless the 'purer', the roots of our glory, an infinite source of strength. As time passed and the Hindus consolidated their sway all over this land, new names arose, notes Savarkar. But they never wiped out that first, 'cradle name of our nation in India.' 'Down to this day the whole world knows us as "Hindus" and our land as "Hindusthan" as if in fulfillment of the wishes of our Vedic fathers who were the first to make that choice.'

'Hindu', 'Hindustan', 'Hindutva', then, are not mere words but a civilization and a history, which can and should be precisely defined. 'Hindutva,' wrote Savarkar, 'is not a word but a history. Not only the spiritual or religious history of our people as at times it is mistaken to be . . ., but a history in full. Hindutva is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva. Unless it is made clear what is meant by the latter the first remains unintelligible and vague.'

'A Hindu,' he says further, 'means a person who regards this land of Bharatvarsha, from the Indus to the seas as his Fatherland as well as his Holyland, that is the cradle land of his religion':

अरिधेन्दुसंस्कृति परम्परा यथा भारत पुराणम् ।
विद्यायुपवर्तक स ये हिंदुत्तित मूर्ति।

'Hinduism' means the 'ism' of the Hindu; and as the word Hindu has been derived from the word Sindhu, . . . meaning primarily all the people who reside in the land that extends from Sindhu to Sindhu [the Indus to the seas], Hinduism must necessarily mean the religion or the religions that are peculiar and native to this land and these people, (p. 104). The term 'Hinduism' has been wrongly used, for Vaidik or Sanatan Dharma alone (p.109). 'Properly speaking [it] should be applied to all the religious beliefs that the different communities of the Hindu people hold,' (p. 105).

The importance of Savarkar's exercise of finding a precise definition of Hindu, Hindutva and Hinduism is well illustrated by the reactions to his book. The publisher's preface to the 4th edition of the book, published in 1949, observed that 'the definition [of Hindutva] acted as does some scientific discovery of a new truth in re-shaping and re-co-ordinating all current Thought and Action . . . At its touch [sic] arose an organic order where a chaos of castes and creeds ruled. The definition provided a broad basic foundation on which a consolidated and mighty Hindu Nation could take a secure stand,' (p. vi).

Swami Shradhanand had responded in similar terms to the first publication of the book: 'It must have been one of those Vaidik dawns indeed which inspired our Seers with new truths, that revealed to the author of "Hindutva" this Mantra . . . this definition of Hindutva!' (p. vi).

One may discount the hyperbole in these reactions, but still recognize that for the champions of Hindutva and Hinduism an adequate, acceptable, workable definition of the terms was still being sought in the 1920s. Hence, Savarkar's statement appeared in the form of a scientific discovery'. It was like a 'revelation'. It brought order out of growing chaos, and gave the advocates of Hindu organization and Hindu politics a clearer foundation from which to work.

IV

All identities are built upon a series of identifications and exclusions, in other words by differentiating between 'Us' and 'Them', the Self and the Other. Savarkar had established, to his own satisfaction and that of many other advocates of Hindu assertion, who was and who was not to be included in the Hindu community. His comments on the Sikhs sum up his position. 'Along with us [they] bewail the fall of Prithviraj21, share the fate of a conquered people and suffer together as Hindus.' There is much to be questioned in this tendentious historical reconstruction, in its assertion of a subcontinent-wide sympathy for Prithviraj Chauhan and its collapsing of the suffering of the Sikhs and of all other 'Hindus' into one, but we will let that pass.

The author of Hindutva finds further evidence of the Sikhs' Hinduness in what he calls their 'adoration' of Sanskrit as a sacred language and the
language of their ancestors. Lastly,

the land spread from the river, Sindhu, to the seas is not only the fatherland but also the holy land [of] the Sikhs. Guru Nanak and Guru Govind, Shri Banda [sic] and RamSing were born and bred in Hindusthan; the lakes of Hindusthan are the lakes of nectar (Amritsar) and of freedom (Muktasar) . . . Really if any community in India is Hindu beyond cavil or criticism it is our Sikh brotherhood in the Punjab, being almost the autochthonous dwellers of the Saptindu land and the direct descendants of the Sindhu or Hindu people . . . (pp. 123-24).

Savarkar goes on to clarify that the Sikhs are not Hindus in a religious sense, and that the Sikh protest against their classification as Hindus arose only because the Sanatanists had appropriated the word Hindu for themselves.

Sikhs are Hindus in the sense of our definition of Hinduva and not in any religious sense whatever. Religiously they are Sikhs as Jains are Jains, Lingayats are Lingayats, Vaishnavas are Vaishnavas; but all of us racially and nationally and culturally are a polity and a people . . . Bharatiya indicates an Indian and expresses a larger generalization but cannot express [the] racial unity of us Hindus. We are Sikhs, and Hindus and Bharatiyas. We are all these put together and none exclusively (p. 125).

This sense of 'Bharatiya' or 'Hindi' ('Indian') enabled Savarkar to accommodate in his polity those Indians who were not, in his view, Hindu. The vast majority of them, he acknowledged, were local converts and had 'Hindu blood' flowing in their veins. But even if India, Bharatavarsha, Hindusthan, was in this sense their 'Fatherland', they no longer recognized it as their 'Holyland'. They did not, after all, look upon Sanskrit as a sacred language. He said:

An American may become a citizen of India. He would certainly be entitled, if bona fide, to be treated as . . .

Bharatiya or Hindi, a countryman and a fellow citizen of ours. But as long as in addition to our country, he has not adopted our culture and our history, inherited our blood and . . . come to look upon our land not only as the land of his love but even of his worship, he cannot get himself incorporated into the Hindu fold (p. 84).

For Savarkar and other Hindu nationalists of the 1920s and Thirties, then, the Muslims and Christians who lived in India, and had lived in most cases as long as the ‘Hindus,’ had a place in the country, albeit probably a subordinate one—as ‘citizens’ (‘Bharatiya’ or ‘Indian’). The emerging and contending visions of the future nation-state had still no room for the notion of separate territories for any of these communities. Later Hindu propagandists have been rather more inflexible in their formulation of the meaning of Hindu nationhood, precisely because the notion of a separate territory gained ground first as an idea, and then as political reality—in Pakistan. For many of these propagandists, the Indian nation has come to be coterminous with the Hindu community. Explicitly or implicitly, Pakistan (and, since 1971, Bangladesh) has become the place where Indian Muslims belong.22

The inclusions and exclusions that go to make up community and nation in the Hindu discourse are, in fact, far more restrictive than Savarkar or any other Hindu writer openly suggests. The ‘Hindu’ is far from being a transparent category, even today. Indeed, it can be shown that only a section of Hindus appear as truly ‘Hindu’ and truly ‘national’ in this selfsame Hindu discourse. M.S. Golwalkar’s speeches and writings, collected in his Bunch of Thoughts published in the mid-1960s,23 provides a useful starting point for a discussion of this proposition.

The ‘Hindus’ appear in Golwalkar’s account as the nation in India. “The Hindu . . . has ever been devoted to Bharat and ready to strive for its progress and uphold its honour. The national life values of Bharat are indeed derived from the life of Hindus. As such he [sic] is the “national” here . . . (p. 218). Definitionally, therefore, the Hindus cannot be ‘anti-national’. There are, however, several groups in the country who are anti-national, as Bunch of Thoughts makes abundantly clear. One section of this book is entitled, “The Nation and its Problems”. Much the longest chapter in this section is headed “Internal Threats”. The three sub-headings for the chapter are 1. “The Muslims” 2. “The Christians” 3. “The Communists”.
The listing of Muslims and Christians is predictable, and the reason for it not far to seek: both are 'foreigners' in this discourse, or people who have allowed themselves to be sold to a 'foreign' ideology and who no longer acknowledge, or are at best ambivalent about, their national religion, culture and traditions. The inclusion of 'Communists', however, requires some comment.

A war over international boundaries had been fought between India and China in 1962, in which the Indian armed forces had been badly battered. Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India until his death in 1964, and his Defence Minister, V.K. Krishna Menon, had come in for much criticism for what was called their policy of appeasement towards China and the military unpreparedness of the country in 1962. This, and the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 in which India's armed forces fared rather better, provide the context for much of what GoIwalkar has to say in this book about the Communists, about international relations and about the need for military strength.

Golwalkar's discussion of the 'nature of [the] yellow peril', in a chapter entitled, "Fight to Win", written we are told 'in the wake of [the] Chinese invasion in October 1962', will suffice to indicate the nature of his argument.

China has always been expansionist. It is in its blood. Over 150 years ago Napoleon had forewarned not to rouse that yellow giant lest he should prove a grave peril to humanity. 70 years ago Swami Vivekanand had specifically warned that China would invade Bharat soon after the Britishers quit ... Now, added to the expansionist blood of China is the intoxicant of Communism which is an intensely aggressive, expansionist and imperialistic ideology. Thus in Communist China we have the explosive combination of two aggressive impulses. It is a case of—अरि च बनि: कवितेश्वर गद्यकला (Already a monkey, moreover drunk with wine.) (p. 381).

A selective xenophobia, an upper-caste racism that marks a good deal of Hindu political and social commentary in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and a narrow nationalism that is readily reduced to the question of territorial integrity and nothing besides, runs through this and other Hindu propagandist statements of the period. The racist character of

Golwalkar's attack upon the Chinese ('intoxicated monkeys') is striking as is the touching faith in the fore-knowledge of Europeans (Napoleon's warning). The RSS thinker goes on to make the comparison in so many words: 'The Englishmen [who ruled India] were a civilized people who generally followed the rule of law. The Chinese are a different proposition,' (p. 382).

It will be evident, however, that the Hindu attack against Chinese/Communists has other 'nationalist' aspects to it. Here and elsewhere, the charge is made that Communism is a foreign ideology and therefore has no place in India.

As a 'foreign ideology', Communism and, by extension, any communist in India become 'anti-national' almost by definition. But two other grounds for the rejection of Communist ideology by the Hindu ideologues also need to be noted. One is that it is 'against religion'—further evidence of its demoniacal character and its alienness to Indian (Hindu? spiritual?) traditions. The other is that it is 'anti-democratic'. Hindu propagandists concede sometimes that the Bolshevik otherthrow of Tsarism in Russia was a blow against oppression and inequality. But the end of landlordism, largely accomplished in Russia and China, and threatened in India in the 1950s, is another matter. This strikes at the heart of bourgeois freedoms: that is, the right to property. By extension—and demonstrably in the practices of Communist regimes in many parts of the world—Communism threatens other bourgeois freedoms too: the freedom of speech, a free press, the right to association, the freedom of religion which we have already mentioned, and so on. But the right to property is the most crucial one of all. To deny that is to deny all social distinctions and hence the very basis of good nationhood; for, as Golwalkar put it in 1939, a good country or nation should have 'all four classes of society as conceived by Hindu Religion'.

To return to Golwalkar's more general account of the 'national' interest, the 'Hindu' (i.e., the truly 'national') appears in this account as 'non-Muslim', 'non-Christian' and 'non-Communist'. But there are other exclusions, too, that go into the construction of the category. The 'Hindu' appears also as male, upper-caste and, though I do not wish to press this point too far, possibly North Indian as well. Let us consider the question of caste (and class) first, which is sharply focused in the debate on the place of 'untouchables' in Hindu society. Census redefinition, and the exceptional importance attached to
numbers in the political and administrative calculations of the Raj, contributed directly to the 'Hindu' fear of losing the 'untouchables', as I have already noted. Historians have commented on the impact of the Gait Circular which directed that separate tables be drawn up in the 1911 census for groups—like the 'untouchables' and many tribal communities—who were not unambiguously Hindus. The circular 'proved a good tonic for the apathy of orthodox Kashi,' wrote Lala Lajpat Rai.

One fine morning the learned pandits... rose to learn that their orthodoxy stood the chance of losing the allegiance of 6 crores of human beings who, the Government and its advisers were told, were not Hindus, in so far as other Hindus would not acknowledge them as such, and would not even touch them... The possibility of losing the untouchables has shaken the intellectual section of the Hindu community to its very depths...  

As the assertion of community identity gathered pace at many levels—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Nadar, Patidar, Namasudra, Bihari, Oriya, Telugu—and economic and political competition between (and among) these groups acquired new dimensions, militant Hindu leaders and organizations initiated a variety of moves to consolidate the 'Hindu community'. Among these was the shuddhi campaign launched by the Arya Samaj in the later nineteenth century, which gained support in many other quarters as well by the early decades of the twentieth.

In the 1920s, Arya Samajists and some of their more orthodox allies 'rediscovered' the Devalasmriti, said to have been written in the century or so after the first Arab raids on Sindh, which prescribed lengthy rules for readmission into Hinduism of Hindus who had been forcibly converted; and in the 1930s, the vratyastama rites (supposedly laid down in the Atharvaveda and the Brahmanas) for re-admittance of those who were earlier judged to have fallen out of 'Aryan' society. And shuddhi came to have a much broader significance than its original sense of 'purification' would automatically suggest, as it came to be applied not only to reclamation, that is, raising the status of the antyaj (depressed) classes and making them full Hindus; but also to:

- reclamation, that is, raising the status of the antyaj...  

Many Hindu spokespersons, from Dayanand's time until today, have spoken out strongly against 'perverse' Hindu religious notions and practices, the 'silly' 'anti-national' tradition of caste divisions, the restrictions on inter-dining and travel overseas, the 'fantastic' ideas of pollution and the consequent ban on re-conversion which ensured that 'millions of forcibly converted Hindus have remained Muslims even to this day.' But the matter was not so easily settled, for Hinduism, Hindu beliefs and practices were heavily dependent on 'silly', 'anti-national' traditions such as caste. The point is well illustrated by some of the paradoxical positions adopted during the debate on untouchables in the 1920s.

A special session of the Hindu Mahasabha, held at Allahabad in February 1924, discussed a resolution which urged that 'untouchables' should be given access to schools, temples and public wells. The resolution went on to say, however, that it was 'against the scriptures and the tradition' to give the untouchables the 'sacred thread' (yajnopavita), to teach them the Vedas or to inter-dine with them: the Mahasabha hoped, therefore, that 'in the interest of unity[sic]' Hindu workers would give up these items of social reform. Owing to the strong opposition of Arya Samaj delegates present at the meeting, this clause had to be amended. But the compromise statement that resulted makes my point just as well. It read: 'As the giving of "Yagyoravita" to untouchables, interdining with them and teaching them Veda was opposed to the Scriptures according to a very large body of Hindus, i.e. the Satanaitas, these activities should not be carried on in the name of the Mahasabha.'

The question of shuddhi also proved contentious. Despite deep divisions, the Mahasabha ultimately (and unanimously) adopted the pronouncement of seventy-five pandits of Benaras whose opinion it had sought. The pandits had declared: 'Any non-Hindu was welcome to enter the fold of Hinduism, though he [sic] could not be taken into any caste!' A remarkable decision, given that caste position has been a central feature of the identity of any Hindu.
The great difficulty of defining what would be the appropriate 'Hindu tradition and practice' in relation to the untouchables and other 'converts' meant that many, non-Hindus especially, would continue to ask whether 'untouchables' and 'tribals' were, in fact, Hindus. Veer Bharat Talwar has argued recently^34 that acceptance of varnashrama dharma (in effect, caste) and the supremacy of the Brahmin, the worship of the cow, and the burning of the dead, are three features of commonality in the beliefs and practices of all Hindus. On the question of veneration for the cow and the manner of disposal of the dead, Hindu propagandists would surely agree: and on that ground much of the tribal population living in and around the forests of India must be reckoned as being outside the Hindu fold even today, for many among them eat beef and bury their dead.^35 A similar question mark must lie over sections of the remainder of the 'depressed classes' (or untouchables) who live in closer proximity to mainstream Hindu society.

"The depressed classes are Hindus," Lajpat Rai asserted; "they worship Hindu gods, observe Hindu customs, and follow the Hindu law." But even he could not claim that all of them worshipped the cow. "A great many of them worship the cow and obey their Brahmin priests."^36 Savarkar put the argument even more strongly in his analysis of the boundaries of Hindutva. Regarding the 'Santals, Kolis, Bbils, Panchamas, Namashudras and all other such [depressed] tribes and classes,' he wrote,

This Sindhusthan is as emphatically, the land of their forefathers as of those of the so-called Aryans; they inherit the Hindu blood and the Hindu culture; and even those of them who have not as yet come fully under the influence of any orthodox Hindu sect, do still worship deities and saints and follow a religion however primitive, are still purely attached to this land, which therefore to them is not only a Fatherland but a Holyland.^37

It is important to note the special pleading that goes into these statements. The 'depressed classes', untouchables, are indubitably Hindu: "they do . . . worship deities and saints," some of them even worship the cow—even if they are, on the whole, rather 'primitive'. In the case of many tribal and untouchable communities, it is commonly argued that they are 'fallen' Hindus, Hindus who do not know (or have forgotten) that they are Hindus and need to be taught this truth. The question that remains is whether these 'marginal' Hindus are not, in the interests of 'unity' and the continued privileges of Brahmans and others among the élite of Hindu society, assigned an entirely subordinate, indeed marginal, place in Hindu society. The answer, it seems, to me, is in the affirmative.

In the nineteenth century reassertion of Hinduism, the argument had been made that the Aryans of Aryadesh were the 'original', and the most civilized, inhabitants of the world. In the Hindu propaganda of the time, this Aryadesh or Hindustan frequently appeared to be co-extensive with northern India. Even Dayanand Saraswati drew the southern boundary of Aryavarta at the Vindhya mountains: it was only in his last years that he seems to have developed an awareness that India south of the Vindhya must also be drawn into the Arya movement.^38

Physical boundaries, however, were only one part of the problem. The physical boundaries of Aryavarta, Hindustan, could be drawn by the Sindus (from 'Sindhu to Sindhu', the river to the seas) or more adequately at the North-West Frontier (from 'Attock to Cuttack', as Hindu propagandists had it). Beyond this lay mlecchasthan, the land of the mlecchas ('unclean'). The physical bounds therefore connoted spiritual bounds as well, and spiritual bounds that could be found within the territory of India—among the Muslims, Christians and others who were, by definition, 'primitive', 'dirty', 'uncivilized'. It is at this point that the marginal position of the untouchables reappears.

This is strikingly illustrated in the writings of Swami Shraddhanand, who was a strong advocate of the abolition of untouchability and openly expressed his anger at the ambivalence of the Hindu Mahasabha on this question in the 1920s. Inter-dining 'alone can solve the problem of untouchability and exclusiveness among the Hindus,' Shraddhanand declared. Therefore 'inter-dining among all the castes should be commenced at once.' But care had to be exercised. The inter-dining was not to be 'promiscuous eating out of the same cup and dish like Muhammadans.' Instead, it would mean the 'partaking of food in separate cups and dishes, cooked and served by decent Shudras.'^39 'Decent', that is, 'clean' Shudras—the relatively privileged among the cultivating and artisanal communities, who had aspired to and attained something of a higher status, economically, politically and culturally, within the local community. Even such equality—the equality of being allowed to cook for and serve the higher castes—could not be conceded to the lowest
classes, the menial labourers, the truly ‘unclean’—whether Shudra or ‘untouchable’.

Savarkar had asserted in the statement quoted above that the ‘depressed classes’ were even more emphatically Hindu than the so-called Aryans, although they practised a rather ‘primitive’ religion. Later propagandists have been wary of any such statement which might admit that some of these castes and tribes have been living in India from before the coming of the so-called Aryans.

A special number of the RSS journal, Panchjanya, devoted to the ‘tribal’ peoples of India and published in March 1982, is significantly entitled ‘Veer Vanvasi ank’. The use of the term ‘vanvasi’ (forest- or jungle-dwellers) in place of the designation ‘adivasi’, which had come to be the most commonly used term among social scientists and political activists talking about tribal groups in India, is not an accident. ‘Adivasi’ means ‘original inhabitants’, a status that the Hindu spokespersons of today are loathe to accord to the tribal population of India. ‘Vanvasi’, on the other hand, points rather directly to a ‘primitive’ character—the character that is being imputed to these brave (veer) but backward, ‘uncivilized’ sections of society that have still to be fully reclaimed for Hinduism.

What we have in the Hindu discourse, then, is an urge to ‘Hindu’ unity and militancy, overdetermined by a concern to preserve ‘natural order’. The Hindu opposition to Communism, which we have mentioned, is in this context based in no small part on the threat that Communism poses to landlordism (zamindari) and class distinctions in general. ‘A good country . . . [or] Nation,’ as Golwalkar said, ‘. . . should have all four classes of society as conceived by Hindu Religion.’ The move I have made here from a Marxist sense of class to a Hindu notion of caste is perhaps legitimate, for in my view the two reinforce each other in the Hindu discourse. But the primary moment is probably that of the varna-vyavastha, with its underlying notions of a hierarchical order based on caste or birth, and differing duties, rights and privileges according to one’s place in that order.

Mlecchas, Golwalkar went on to say immediately after the statement just quoted, are ‘those who do not subscribe to the social laws dictated by the Hindu Religion and Culture.’ It needs to be stressed that the ‘mlecchas’ of this vision often include not only Muslims, Christians and Communists, but also the insufficiently ‘reclaimed’ untouchables and tribals, Kabirpanthis and Satnamis, on occasion ‘women’, ‘South Indians’, the people of the north-eastern states of India, and indeed any other group or sect that challenges ‘the social laws’ of the Hindus as defined by the upper castes and classes of Hindu society. ‘Hindu Religion and Culture,’ in Golwalkar’s statement as in most other so-called ‘Hindu’ pronouncements, stands for ‘Brahman- and Kshatra-dharma’ and for the dharma of other classes as defined by ‘Brahmin’ and ‘Kshatriya’ men. This is a point that may be further illustrated through a discussion of the masculist character of the Hindu discourse.

The figure of Woman plays a crucial part in Hindu discourse, as it does in nationalist discourse more generally in India and elsewhere. Swami Shraddhanand was hardly unique when he wrote of his wish that ‘Every child of the Matri-Bhumi [motherland] may daily bow before the Mother and renew his pledge to restore her to the ancient pinnacle of glory from which she has fallen.’ ‘Every child’ that mattered was apparently male. The community was a community of men—sometimes, indeed, only Brahmans and Kshatriyas. ‘May spiritualized Brahmans take birth in our State, may bold champions of Truth and chastizers of enemies of Dharma, [i.e.] Kshatriyas, may milk cows and strong bulls, fleet horses and cultured ladies, together with youthful sin-conquering members of State be born in our midst.’

‘The Hindu People . . . is the Virat Purusha, the Almighty manifesting Himself.’ But the symbol of the community in its ‘modern’, ‘national’ form is female: Motherland, Mother Bharat. Golwalkar sums up the position for us:

As human life evolves, the concept of mother also takes a wider and more sublime form . . . [Man] sees the rivers which give him food and water. He calls them mother. Once he outgrows the use of his mother’s milk, he sees the cow which feeds him with her milk throughout his life. He calls it mother-cow. And then he reaches the state of understanding that it is the mother soil which nourishes him, protects him and takes him in her bosom even after he breathes his last. He becomes conscious that she is his great mother. Thus to look upon one’s land of birth as mother is a sign of a high state of human evolution.'
inner strength of nationalist discourse. But as a sexual entity, that is also represented as being primitive, innocent and irrational, Woman is at the same time Impure—a lesser thing than man.

This Impurity is evident at regular intervals: during the monthly period, pregnancy, child-birth, when the ‘Hindu woman’, herself polluted, can pollute those who come in contact with her. But Impurity, or its potential, is present in a more continuous sense as well. The sexual desire of women, combined with their innocence and lack of rationality (their ‘primitive’ instincts), means that they may easily turn from their quintessential role as mothers, wives and widows into temptresses and ‘loose’ women, threatening order, morality and the appropriate division between men’s and women’s spheres. Ignorant and weak, Woman is easily misled and often sullied.

Here, the difference between the Woman and the Cow as symbols becomes apparent. The Cow, in no way threatening to the community and the dominance of men, is never impure. It can never be made impure, only killed. Note, for example, the very different kinds of sanctions contained in the ‘circular letters’ or patias that formed a part of the Hindu call to arms for action against Muslims in the Shahabad ( Bihar) strike of 1917. ‘Whatever Hindu, on seeing this patia, will not come, shall incur the guilt of killing 5 or 7, or 12 cows.’ Compare that with the sanctions involving women: if you do not circulate the patias, and follow their injunctions for specified actions against local Muslims, then ’you do mount on your daughter, drink your wife’s piss, and mount on your sister’s daughter. It would be better indeed to marry your mother to a Musalman...’

There were other times when the ‘Hindu’ sacrifice of their women passed from metaphor to grim reality. Perhaps the most unnerving episode in the still largely untold history of the Partition of India flows from the Hindu practice of sacrificing women who are said to have been polluted. When the Indian and Pakistani Governments initiated a move after the ravages of Partition to trace and reclaim for their new nations such of their female nationals as had been abducted, raped, forcibly married or otherwise left on the ‘wrong’ side of the border, the Indian representatives quickly found themselves involved in a struggle to persuade many abducted Hindu women to return to their families and relatives. For the women were far from certain which was the worse fate: staying on, captured and confined in an alien country, or returning, stained and probably unacceptable to their own community and kin.
The family has been an important symbol of both community and nation in India, marking as it supposedly does the domain of natural kinship and oneness—and Woman is of course central to the structure and reproduction of the family. The body of Woman, however, becomes the site for much of the punishment that is deemed necessary to expiate the sins of family, community and nation: 'sins' which, all too often, involve men's deviations from prescribed moral, social or political codes. In Shahabad in 1917, the sacrifice of women's bodies was seen as the chief means of preserving the interests of the community. On the Indo-Pakistan frontier in 1947, the recovery of women's bodies—even under duress—was seen as necessary justice for the new nation.

The point that emerges from the Hindu nationalist discourse is that Woman—'pure' and 'impure' at one and the same time—is not only to be protected but also disciplined and controlled. The emphasis on modesty, on the place of woman in the kitchen and inside the home, the promotion of carefully structured, limited and separate education for girls, Dayanand Saraswati's prescription of niyoga (strictly regulated sexual relationships for the purpose of procreation) in order to prevent widows from straying into 'immorality', were all part of this drive to protect, discipline and maintain control in an era when the needs of the larger community had clearly changed in important ways. But with all that the main task of the (male) community was seen as being that of regaining its strength, in other words its manliness, and thereby protecting its women, its property and its dharma.

Several scholars have written of the great emphasis placed on baahubali, physical strength, and on traditions of military glory and valour in the nationalist, and Hindu, discourse of the later nineteenth century. At the back of this was a perception that Hindu publicists and thinkers shared with nineteenth century colonial writers—that 'the Hindus' were singularly lacking in manliness and military vigour. For the colonials, this was part of the long, unchanging history of Hindustan, a consequence of its climatic conditions. For Hindu leaders, there was need for a differently constructed history and hard training and effort in the present to make up for this lack. Hence the discovery of the heroic Sikhs, Marathas and Rajputs as the common ancestors of all Hindus, be they Bengali, Gujarati or Tamilian. Hence Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's construction of Krishna as a perfect, controlled, rational man of action, untouched by any element of playfulness or eroticism. Hence, too, Vivekananda's prescription of beef and football as ready means for the regeneration of the Hindus.54

The emphasis on military valour and training has continued unchanged in Hindu discourse from then until now. Gopal has speaks for the whole body of Hindu propagandists:

No nation can hope to survive with its young men given over to sensuality and effeminacy... In the First World War, the Generalissimo of the 'Allied Forces' was Marshall Foch, a Frenchman. Such was the heroic state of that nation at that time that they fought the Germans with grim resolve and won the war ultimately. They even pocketed a sizeable portion of Germany. But after the victory, Frenchmen succumbed to sensuality and enjoyment. They lost themselves in drinking, singing and dancing with the result that in spite of their huge military machine and their formidable 'Maginot Line', France collapsed within fifteen days of the German onslaught during the Second World War. The sudden and total collapse of France was due to effeminacy which had sapped the energy of the heroic manhood of France.55

Or, as he put it in a more optimistic vein on another occasion, 'The Race spirit [of the Hindus] has been awakening. The lion was not dead, only sleeping. He is rousing himself up again and the world has to see the might of the regenerated Hindu Nation strike down the enemy's hosts with its mighty arm... At no distant date the world shall see it and tremble with fear...56 The world understands nothing but the language of strength, the argument goes. The 'true Dharma' is the 'Kshatriya Dharma'—the warrior's philosophy of victory. The 'Hindus', grown weak, must become strong again if they are to protect their women, their property and their rights. 'भय बिद्ध है न प्रीति' ('Without Fear, there can be no Love')57. Hindus must therefore instil fear among the non-Hindus who live with them before true love can emerge. It was in accordance with this line of thinking that militant Hindu organizations decided to support the British war effort in India and seek military training for Hindus during the Second World War, and that V.D. Savarkar, President of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha at this time advanced the slogan, 'Hinduize all Politics and Militarize Hindudom!'
Hindus And Others

As against this, femininity, non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi have come in for bitter criticism in militant Hindu writings. Ashis Nandy, Partha Chatterjee and others have pointed out how Gandhi was able to overturn, or at least problematize, many of the most deeply loved assumptions of Western colonial thought—about the inherent superiority of 'masculinity', 'rationality', centralized state power and so on. In certain contexts, indeed, Gandhism privileged androgyny and femininity over masculinity. By contrast, in the militant Hindu discourse that we have been considering, it is 'masculinity' in precisely its Western, colonial construction, where it is equated with military strength, violence, bourgeois rationality and a stiff upper lip, that reigns supreme.

Gautam Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi are held equally responsible for the decline and emasculation of the Hindus—through their 'mealy-mouthed formulas of Ahimsa and spiritual brotherhood.' The founders of Buddhism and Jainism are at times treated with some sympathy on the ground that they advocated 'relative Ahimsa' in an age when this philosophy had some meaning. Not so Gandhi who is said to have espoused a creed of 'absolute non-violence.' On account of this creed, the 'glorious struggle for national freedom' which had lasted for a thousand years was shamelessly surrendered in the thirty years of Gandhi's leadership of the national movement, and the Hindus were forced to accept the 'unchallenged domination of the aggressor over huge portions of our land.'

Virtues like non-violence and tolerance are all very well—and every Hindu imbibes the lesson of tolerance along with 'his' mother's milk, wrote Savarkar, but historical context and political circumstances must determine the extent to which these virtues may be applied. In respect to intolerant foreign religions, 'the very extremely enraged intolerance, which seeks to retaliate their atrocities with super-atrocious reprisals itself becomes a virtue.'

It is in this context that the RSS, Hindu Mahasabha and other such extreme Right-wing Hindu organizations have raised the question, periodically from the 1940s until today, how Mahatma Gandhi with his 'feminine' charkha (spinning-wheel) can possibly be considered the 'Father of the Nation'? In very recent years, they have even begun to celebrate the actions of Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, as the harbinger of another Hindu tradition and the symbol of another nation—one wedded not to 'femininity' and Non-Violence but to 'masculinity' and Violence, not to Truth but to Victory.

VI

One final question that needs to be addressed is why the militant Hindu construction of community, nation and history has had such wide appeal, especially in recent times. An adequate response to this question would require an analysis of a very different kind from that attempted in the preceding pages. But a few points of relevance that emerge from the above discussion may be noted here.

The appeal of this Hindu construction has much to do with two factors that we have indicated. The first is a widespread assumption that since the 'religious' condition, the need to believe in something larger and beyond oneself and this world, is amongst the most deeply felt needs of human beings, organized religion and the community of religion is, somehow, 'natural'. In other words, attachment to particular religions or religious traditions is taken to be automatic, even inborn. The existence of something called a common 'Hindu' interest and a universal 'Hindu' solidarity follows as a matter of course. I hope, however, that the preceding pages will have shown that this is far from being the case, and the identification of a common 'Hindu' interest is not only a very difficult but also a deeply interested move.

A second factor that works in favour of the Hindu construction is the ability of Hindu discourse to appropriate for itself the language of the 'truly' national—even as it speaks, or perhaps because it speaks simultaneously in several different voices. Consider the imbrication of 'religion' and 'nationalism' in Swami Shraddhanand's writings on the need for Hindu sangathan. In the following pages,' Shraddhanand wrote in the preface to his 1924 pamphlet, 'an attempt has been made to describe the history of the Hindu decline . . . As a corollary an attempt has been made to show the way to the nation's emancipation,' (p. 13).

The Hindu Rashtri Mandirs that he wanted built were to be dedicated to the worship of 'the three mother-spirits'—the cow; Saraswati, the goddess of learning; and Bhumi-mata (Mother earth). To remove any doubts that the last of these might refer to nature (the goddess of plenty or the provider of food) alone, Shraddhanand asked for a 'life-like' map of Mother India to be put up in a prominent place 'so that every child of the Matri-Bhumi may daily bow before the Mother and renew his pledge to restore her to the ancient pinnacle of glory . . .' It was as part of this nationalist position that Shraddhanand called not only for the integration
of 'untouchables', steps to prevent child marriages and permit the marriages of widows, protection of the cow but, along with all that, the introduction of a uniform script (Devanagri) and national language (Hindi) as 'absolutely necessary' for the advancement of the nation.

A similar mixing of 'religion' and 'politics' is encountered at other critical junctures of India's recent history. For instance, the Rath Yatra taken out in September-October 1990 by L.K. Advani, then President of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to mobilize support for the construction of a new Ram Temple at the site of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, was initially proclaimed as a purely religious, non-political undertaking. At a later stage, after the arrest of Advani and the stopping of Rath Yatra, it was declared to have been a purely political exercise. The BJP was a political organization, Advani said, and he himself a 'humble' political worker who left religion to the religious leaders, i.e., sadhus and mahants.

The movement for the Ram Temple, it was argued, was more than a religious movement: it was a national movement. Ram was not only a Hindu deity, he was a great national hero. It was not necessary that every Indian, Hindu or non-Hindu, worship Ram: but to revere his memory as part of the great cultural heritage of India—that was a condition of Indian citizenship. This was not an argument about religion, it was claimed; it was an argument about culture.

In fact, of course, it was both. If religion is important in India, nationalism is not less so. Indeed, the political importance of the national cannot be overstated in an age when the discourse of nationalism has come to have enormous power, and in a country where (as in all other 'Third World' countries and now, increasingly, in so many of the 'Second World') the manifest difficulties of 'progress' and 'development' keep the question of appropriate political arrangement more alive than in the advanced capitalist countries of the West.

What is seen as being the 'natural' and the 'true' in this context has a great deal to do with historiographical practice, repetition and political circumstances that help to perpetuate these. Thus, the 'Hindu' view of history is bolstered by the way in which the history of India has been written up and purveyed from James Mill's day until our own. And it is reinforced by the very history of strife between Hindus and Muslims which took on an entirely new dimension from the later nineteenth century, became a central feature of Indian politics in the 1920s, reached a ghastly denouement in the period of Partition, and has recurred frequently since then. Here, propaganda and strife have fed one another and led on to far more vicious and generalized forms of violence, and far more vicious and generalized constructions of Self and Other, than were known before.

In particular, the partition of 1947 has left a deeper mark on the practice of Indian history and politics than is generally acknowledged. In India, as in Pakistan, the history of all 'Muslim politics' and, in a less obvious but in my view, equally emphatic way, 'Hindu politics' is written up as the pre-history of Partition—or, what amounts to the same thing, the struggle to avert it. The history of the 'Indian Muslims' becomes a history of 'Muslim politics', which is quickly reduced to the history of the Pakistan movement and, further, to the history of the Muslim League from its foundation in 1906 to the establishment of the new State in 1947. Indeed, the history of the Pakistan movement is pushed much further back to incorporate the life and career of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, now widely described as the founder of the new Muslim consciousness and 'modern' Muslim politics, that is to say, in other words, of something called 'Muslim separatism', therefore of the Muslim League and, naturally, of the movement for Pakistan.

It is not surprising that Pakistani nationalism and Pakistani nationalist historians should favour such a reading of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century history. What is striking is that their framework is largely shared by others who are not such firm believers in the 'naturalness' of Muslim nationalism in the subcontinent. Hindu propagandists and historians, in their turn, describe 'separatism' as an inevitable consequence of the 'Muslim' character—in India and elsewhere. The movement for Pakistan, then, begins for them too with the very first Muslim efforts at reform and organization in the nineteenth century, if not with the first arrival of Islam in India. If all this is granted to 'Muslim politics', it cannot, I submit, be denied to 'Hindu politics' either. The history of 'Hindu politics' has, therefore, been treated in much the same way—as part of a very old tradition, as an expression of 'natural' solidarity and as the 'natural' course of political development in India.

The point that needs to be made at the end here, even if it has been made many times before, is that this argument is fundamentally ahistorical, that nationalisms everywhere have been long and deeply contested, that 'communities' and 'nations' do not arrive ready-made, springing from the womb of the earth fully formed, natural and unalterable. It also

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needs to be stressed that nationalist discourse, and with it what is called
communal discourse in India is always political—however much it
pretends to speak in the ‘non-political’ language of religion and com-
munity.

The question of political control of the state, and of the consequences
of such control, are central to the construction of modern national and
community identities. The process of homogenizing and sanitizing, sup-
pressing as it does evidence of internal differentiation and struggle within
the claimed community or nation, is a central part of the national/com-
munal reconstruction of the national/communal past. Both the discourse
and the politics that go with it are the handiwork of a specific age and a
specific class which needs to be situated in its particular historical
location, in spite of its great political power in our times and in spite of
its fairly successful appropriation of the language of the natural and the
eternal.

Notes And References

1. An earlier version of this paper appeared in Economic and Political Weekly,
Bombay. My title follows Romila Thapar’s “Which of us are Aryans?”,
6.
Bhishikar, Kshetram: Sangh Nirmala, Delhi, n.d., p. 31. It may be as well to
make the point that there has been nothing like automatic agreement about
the identity of the nation in France, Germany or for that matter
England/Britain.
4. M.S. Golwalkar, We, or Our Nationhood Defined, Nagpur: 1939, 4th edn.,
1949, p. 49.
5. ibid., p. 48; Nathuram Godse, May it please your Honour: Statement of
Nathuram Godse, Pune, 1977, p. 119; V.D. Savarkar, Hinduva, 4th edn.,
Poona, 1949, pp. 95 & 136.
6. ibid., p. 74; Golwalkar, We, p. 10.
7. V.D. Savarkar, Hindu-Pad-Padshahi or a Review of the Hindu Empire of
8. Examples are too numerous to list, but for a particularly lurid one, see V.D.
Savarkar, Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History, Bombay: 1971 [reprinted in
1980].
10. Golwalkar, We, pp. 16–17 (emphasis added).
11. Before this the term itself is not used: witness, the writings of Dayanand
Saraswati and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, for example.
12. Swami Shraddhanand, Hindu Sangathan: Savoir of the Dying Race (1924,
n.p.), 140–41 (emphasis added). Page numbers in brackets in the following
paragraphs refer to this edition.
13. Indeed, as Shraddhanand plainly stated on p. 14, his pamphlet was at least
partly inspired by a meeting with Col. U.N. Mukerji who had written a series
of articles entitled “A Dying Race” in the newspaper, Bangla, in 1909.
Mukerji used the census data from 1872 to 1901, province by province, to
make the fantastic argument that within a given number of years the Hindus
would disappear altogether from India; see K.W. Jones, ‘Religious Identity
and the Indian Census’ in N.G. Barrier, ed., The Census in British India:
New Perspectives, Delhi: 1981, p. 91. Hindu propagandists have of course
continued to repeat this argument down to today.
14. Sudipto Kaviraj makes this point powerfully with reference to Bankim
Chandra Chattopadhyaya, who defined the ‘we’ sometimes as Bengalis, at
other times as all Hindus, and at yet other times as all Indians; see his
forthcoming book on Bankim Chandra Chauopathaya.
15. Savarkar, Hinduva, p. 84.
20. This translation is found on the title page of the 4th edn.
21. Prithviraj Chauhan, King of Delhi and Ajmer, who was defeated by Muhammad Ghori at the second battle of Tarain in 1192 AD.
22. Perhaps the most barbaric indication of this is found in the slogan that has accompanied many recent instances of sectarian violence, "नामर को पूजन या कर्तिलता "
25. The same argument is now put forward with regard to 'secularism'. Interestingly, no such question is raised when it comes to 'nationalism', 'industrialism', or 'capitalism'.
26. Golwalkar, Bunch of Thoughts, p. 263.
27. Golwalkar, We, p. 62.
31. For one example, see Savarkar, Six Glorious Epochs, pp. 154–57, 188, 192–93 and passim.
33. ibid., p. 143.
35. ibid.
37. Savarkar, Hinduuna, pp. 120–01 (emphasis added).
41. I owe this reference and the points arising out of it to Veer Bharat Talwar, see his Jharkhand.
42. We, p. 62.
43. ibid.
44. Hindu Sangathan, p. 141.
45. An ancient Hindu prayer approvingly cited by Shraddhanand in ibid., p. 93.
46. Golwalkar, Bunch of Thoughts, p. 48.
47. ibid., pp. 120–01.
50. These quotations come from two leaflets circulated in Bhagapalpur during the sectarian violence of October–November 1989.
52. See my Construction of Communalism, Appendix 2.
55. Golwalkar, Bunch of Thoughts, pp. 317–18 (emphasis added); cf. the sections entitled 'Be Men with a Capital M' and 'Potent Men vs. Pahton Tanks'.
56. Golwalkar, We, p. 17.
57. Golwalkar, Bunch of Thoughts, p. 377; Savarkar, Six Glorious Epochs, p. 55. This last slogan is also found among the slogans contained in leaflets circulated in Bhagapalpur in 1989.
60. V.D. Savarkar, Presidential Address at the 22nd Session of the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha, Madura, 1940 A.D., p. 41.
62. ibid., p. 169 (see also, p. 185 and pp. 394–95). Cf. the Organizer’s recent pronouncements that “the need of the hour” now is “not tolerance, but courage”.

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63. For an elaboration of this point, see my "In Defence of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India today", *Representations*, No. 37, Winter 1992.


65. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, p. 164, as well as the whole range of Hindu ‘Histories’ produced around the Temple-Mosque question in Ayodhya over the last few years.

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**What Is A Muslim?**

**Fundamental Commitment**

**And Cultural Identity**

Akeel Bilgrami

In recent years, the concept of identity has had its corset removed and hangs loosely and precariously in the domain of culture and politics. This is largely a result of a gradual realization in theoretical work in these subjects that local contexts of study determine our individuation of cultural phenomena quite variously, and that it is much too tidy and distorting to demand, or proceed as if there were stricter criteria for their identification. The point cannot be dismissed as some arcane, post-modern development in the theory of culture. It accurately captures the experience of individuals and communities. I recall that some years ago in India, almost to my surprise, I heard the words ‘I am a Muslim’ on my lips. It is not just to meet a theoretical demand that I had better specify the context. I was looking for paying-guest accommodation in a neighbourhood with a predominantly lower-middle class Hindu population, hostile to Muslims. A landlord who was interviewing me asked me what my religion was. It seemed hardly to matter that I found Islamic theological doctrine wholly non-credible, that I had grown up in a home dominated by the views of an irreligious father, and that I had then, for some years adopted the customary aggressive secular stance of those with communist leanings. It still seemed the only self-respecting thing to say in that context. It was clear to me that I was, without strain or artificiality, a Muslim for about five minutes. That is how
negotiable the concept of identity can be.

Lying behind and consolidating the contextualization of ‘identity’ is a somewhat more abstract point. Willard Van Orman Quine has argued that the concept of identity occupies the minds of theorists only in the primitive stages of enquiry.\(^3\) In this phase one is prone to anxiety over one’s lack of exact criteria of identity of given phenomena, anxieties which are often released in strict stipulations or in taxonomical theorizing, which one then sheds as investigations become more theoretically sophisticated. Quine was concerned primarily with the phenomena and concepts studied by natural science, but the point, it seems to me, is no less valid, for questions such as ‘What is a Muslim?’, ‘What is an Indian?’ and so on. As enquiry advances, the absence of strict criteria needs no longer be seen as a sign of one’s confusion. It is justified by the fact that the concept in question (‘Muslimness’, ‘Indianiness’, as it might be, or ‘electron’, ‘the unconscious’, ...) is to be understood as having a place in a more or less systematic theory, with its own particular role in the inferences and transformations that the theory sanctions. This point is not the same as the point about the local and contextual nature of these concepts, but it allows one to embrace their locality with some methodological right. If, after all, these concepts depend on their place in a network of theory, then shifts in theory due to cultural difference or historical change will shift the inferential place and role of the concepts without any anxieties about losing our hold over them.

One might think that these methodological observations should have made us realize that our obsession with questions such as ‘What is a Muslim?’ is irrational; and, as with all neuroses, that the realization should by itself be the basis of cure. But things have not been that simple and more work needs to be done to properly diagnose the persistence not merely of an intellectual yearning which such questions reveal, but also the social and cultural phenomena which these questions are undoubtedly tracking. One needs to explain our interest in these questions, not merely dismiss them. And, in any case, the best among those who have ushered in the localizing revolution would be the first to say, ‘Context is only the beginning of wisdom’. It does not sweep conceptual problems away nor does it herald the end of theory; it merely removes the rigidities and reifications of a longstanding theoretical tradition.\(^4\)

II

The context of my own interest in the question of Islamic identity is shaped by a prior political interest in the reform of Islam. The fate of a reformist movement within Islam would depend on the extent to which Muslim populations will consider the details of their identification with Islam as negotiable, in the face of other values which they also cherish. There may be some for whom Islam is nothing short of a monolithic commitment, overriding all other commitments, whenever history or personal encounter poses a conflict. But I think it is safe to say, despite a familiar tradition of colonial and post-colonial caricature in Western representations of Islam, that such an absolutist project is the exception in a highly diverse and internally conflicted religious community. For the most part, there is no reason to doubt that Muslims, even devout Muslims, will and do take their commitment to Islam not only as one among other values, but also as something which is itself differentiated internally into a number of, in principle, negotiable detailed commitments. If so, there is a pressing question that arises for anybody interested in the reform of Islam. What are the difficulties that recent absolutist assertions or re-assertions of Islamic identity pose for the prospect of Islamic social and legal reform? Like most questions about the determinants of culture, this question can also be posed from the opposite direction: to what extent is the relative absence of reformist thinking among moderate Muslims responsible for the susceptibility of Islamic politics to constant threat from powerful minority movements which would have it that Islamic identity is, for the most part, non-negotiable?\(^5\)

The complexity of this pair of questions does not lie merely in the conflict between a minority of Islamic absolutists\(^6\) (or ‘fundamentalists’ as they are sometimes misleadingly called) and the far larger class of Muslim moderates who oppose their vision of an anti-secular polity based on Islamic personal and public law (the Sharī'ah). There is widespread today a more interesting conflict within the hearts of moderate Muslims themselves, a conflict made the more excruciating because it is not always explicitly acknowledged by them. This is the tension generated by their opposition to Islamic absolutism on the one hand, on the other, their faith in a religion which is defined upon detailed commitments with regard to the polity, commitments which Islamic absolutists constantly invoke to their own advantage.\(^7\) In the last few years it has become clear to me that
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that what this leaves us with is a moral life filled with fundamental commitments, and no particular space to stand on from which they can be subject to our own moral criticism. Criticism requires a theoretical position outside the arena of these commitments, and that is exactly what the critique of Ethical Theory has removed. Thus when these fundamental commitments conflict, there is little scope for anything but moral ‘tragedy’, something that apparently ancient Greek playwrights understood better than ancient Greek philosophers or philosophers since. For those who have graduated from contempt and fear of the Islamic world to an alienated despair about it, this offers a cheap theoretical confirmation of their mood. Thus, in a curious way, in Williams’ picture, identity remains non-negotiable; it is just that now a number of different non-negotiable identities stand in (possibly) tragic conflict with one another. But the picture is not compulsory, even if one accepts his scepticism about Ethical Theory.

Many have found the very idea of a ‘fundamental commitment’ or fundamental project (an idea and phrase that go back to Soren Aabye Kierkegaard) obscure. They would have us simply think of them as values, adding perhaps that they are ‘thick’ values, if that helps to bring out the particularistic nature of these commitments. (Not justice or goodness which are ‘thin’, but a whole variety of less abstract values ranging from properties of character such as kindness, detachment, sympathy, loyalty... to commitments that people might have such as to religion or theatre, say.)

To them there seems nothing distinctive about fundamental commitments over and above thinking of them as one among many others in this range of specific values.

But this is not my complaint against Williams in this discussion of Islamic identity. There very likely is something distinctive about a devout person’s commitment to Islam, over and above its particularity. Though he never spells out explicitly and in detail what he has in mind by fundamental commitments, Williams says enough for us to infer that they lead up to the existentialist idea (and even perhaps ideal) of authenticity. And it is this connection between a person’s fundamental commitments and the idea of the authentic self that explains the persistence of questions about identity (questions such as ‘What is a Muslim?’) despite an acknowledgment of the radical negotiability of the concept of identity.

A way to expound this theoretical connection is to look to the sorts of effects brought upon a person by his or her abandoning—or the prospect
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of abandoning—such commitments. I once shared a flat with a close 
friend, who was an appallingly successful drug-dealer. He had made far 
more money than I thought was decent, and it was money made on the 
steady destruction of people’s lives, some of whom were talented, even 
brilliant minds in the university. One day, while he was out, the police 
arrived at the door and asked me if I had any suspicion that he was a dealer. 
They said that they did not have sufficient evidence to produce a warrant 
and search the place, but they were morally certain that he was guilty, and 
all they needed was for his room-mate to express the slightest suspicion. 
That would give them enough to legally search his premises. I had long 
quarrelled intensely with my friend about his cynical profiteering from 
drugs and had come to find him utterly reprehensible in this respect. But 
faced with the question from the police, I found myself turning them away. 

Conflicts of this kind are not by any means unusual, nor is the sort of 
decision that I made. The right description to put on my decision, in the 
context of the present discussion, is that I could not abandon the funda-
mental commitment to friendship, even in the face of thorough and deep 
moral pressure from within my own moral values. 

Here one finds oneself saying that what this amounts to is that I placed 
the value of friendship over the sorts of values that made me disapprove 
of his drug-dealing; and there is nothing false about saying it. But I suggest 
that it is not all that it amounts to. 

The suggestion is not that one could never give up a fundamental 
commitment. That is not what is ‘fundamental’ about it. One can imagine 
one’s self allowing the police in, even if one had a fundamental commitment 
to one’s close friends. What makes the difference is the kind of effect that 
the relinquishing of a commitment would have upon one. I think it would be 
fair to say that for many people, in such a conflict, their betrayal of 
friendship would amount, in their own self-conception, to something of 
a different order of wrong (though not necessarily moral wrong, certainly 
not wrong from the point of view of utilitarian principles) than a betrayal 
of the values which take profiteering from destructive drugs to be 
reprehensible. It is notoriously hard to describe why there is a different 
order that is at stake in the comparison rather than merely a difference in 
degree. But one thing to say is that if I had betrayed my friend, I would 
have felt a deep and integrated destruction of my self which is missing 
from the more ordinary, though undoubtedly genuine and severe, bad 
feelings induced in me by my having failed to act on those other values.

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It is not merely that I would have had more such bad feelings or worse 
feelings. It is rather that I would have felt (and many people in my place 
would have felt) that I had lost something much more defining of what 
held my self-conception together. The existentialists described the source 
of this integrity of the self, as ‘authenticity’, an obscure term no doubt, 
but examples like this help to convey what they intended.12 The idea is 
delicate and difficult but it is not incoherent nor irredeemably obscure. 

So it is not the very idea of fundamental commitment that I am balking 
at in Williams. On the contrary, even moderate Muslims may well have 
such a fundamental commitment to their religion, and I think it is 
important to acknowledge this, or else one might make things much too 
easy for oneself, in one’s efforts to think of the way out of the state of 
conflict in which they find themselves. It is partly because the commit-
ment to Islam has this deeper and more integrated place in the moderate 
Muslim’s self-identity, that the conflict seems so entrenched, that reform 
has been, slow to come, and that absolutist minorities have got away with 
the sort of exploitative appeal they have. But, on the other hand, having 
acknowledged that there is this more fundamental level of commitment, 
there is still the danger that one might settle down with the idea of being 
locked helplessly in a conflict, a sort of ‘tragic stasis’; and that would 
make things too easy for oneself in another way—something akin to the 
familiar intellectual laziness that accompanies existential anguish. In 
short, in the study of Islamic identity and the conflict that it generates in 
moderate Muslims today, it would be premature either to dismiss the idea 
of fundamental commitment or to rest with it in the form that Williams’ 
own writings leave us with. 

What is missing in Williams is any interest or effort to offer an 
explanation of what sort of animal any particular fundamental commit-
ment is, what its origins are and what particular role or function it has in 
a person’s or community’s moral psychological economy. Different kinds 
of fundamental commitment will naturally have very different roles, but 
it is only if one pays attention to them that one will come to some 
understanding of what is particularly disabling about any particular 
conflict in which any such commitment figures, and what the rehabilitat-
ing elements might be. Once Williams abandons the pretensions of Ethical 
Theory, which would deliver from on high, general principles with a 
power to criticize particular values and commitments on the ground floor, 
he does not return to focus on the theoretical possibility that one might,
in the process of resolving conflicts between fundamental commitments, come to a fuller understanding of the critical power and generality that is built into the commitments on the ground floor.

I have made this last point with such abstractness that it might help here to repeat it with the more concrete theme of Islamic identity and conflict. Moderate Muslims, I have said, are conflicted between their opposition to anti-secular absolutist forces in their countries and their fundamental commitment to a religion whose book speaks with detailed pretension to issues of the law and of state. They may often not perceive the conflict but there is plenty of evidence for it in their own behaviour. Confronted with this conflict it is tempting, as I said, to think that this is like any ordinary conflict between any two sets of values (in this case modern and traditional) and that sooner or later the conflict will resolve itself, with one side victorious. Even if one discards the Whiggish tendency to think the modernist victory inevitable, there is this temptation to think that there is nothing particularly distinctive or difficult about the conflict and its eventual resolution. There is also the other temptation. Acknowledging that there is something special and difficult about this conflict, which traditional moral philosophers are especially blind to, there is a temptation to say that moderate Muslims have a 'fundamental' commitment to the conflicting values of Islam and of modernity and that it is the arrogance of abstract philosophy to think that it has anything specific and useful to say by way of diagnosis or cure about something so deep-going in a community’s moral psychology. I have already said something to resist the former temptation. In doing so, I have registered sympathy with Williams’ dissatisfaction with Ethical Theory. The latter temptation, I am saying, issues from a lack in Williams’ own approach to moral philosophy. It is a failure to give moral philosophy the task mixing it up with (in this case) history in order to say something about the specific functional sources of given fundamental commitments (such as to Islam) and then, relatedly, a failure to consider a more bottom-up approach to the study of moral principles.

III

What, then, are the sources of a devout but moderate Muslim’s ‘fundamental’ commitment to Islam today?

In answering this sort of question, there is yet another temptation that philosophers are prone to. And that is to make a general and ahistorical claim about the human need for some sense of identity that is not merely determined by their material and social circumstances; a sort of Hegelian nod of acknowledgement that a long tradition of Marxist and Marxist-influenced social thought has neglected the sense of identity that Spirit and non-materially determined consciousness has to offer. Here is G.A. Cohen, chiding his own earlier work for precisely such a neglect:

In Karl Marx’s Theory of History I said that for Marx, by contrast with Hegel, ‘the ruling interest and difficulty of men was relating to the world, not to the self’ [his emphasis]. I would still affirm that antithesis, and I now want to add that, to put it crudely, Marx went too far in the materialist direction. In his anti-Hegelian, Feuerbachian affirmation of the radical objectivity of matter, Marx focussed on the relationship between subject and object which is in no way subject, and as time went on he came to neglect the subject’s relationship to itself . . . He rightly reacted against Hegel’s extravagant representation of all reality as ultimately an expression of self, but he nevertheless over-reacted, and he failed to do justice to the self’s irreducible interest in the definition of itself [my emphasis], and to the social manifestations of that interest . . . I refer to the social manifestations of the interest in self-identification because I think that human groupings whose lines of demarcation are not economic, such as religious communities and nations, are as strong and as durable [my emphasis] as they evidently are partly because they offer satisfaction to the need for self-identification. In adhering to traditionally defined collectivities people retain a sense of who they are.

I do not wish to enter into a discussion of the details of Marxist theory, and my interest in criticizing these remarks is not prompted by a desire to defend economic determinism or historical materialism. The issue between us is entirely over the question as to whether we should rest our analysis of the concept of religious identity with the self’s primitive or ‘irreducible interest in the definition of itself’. I think it both
unnecessary and wrong to assign one's understanding of a particular community's religious commitment, in a particular historical and cultural context, to this kind of irreducible interest in self-definition. That would only distract us from what I really wish to emphasize, namely, the historical and functional determination of a community's fundamental commitments and the sense of identity they impart. I agree with Cohen that it is a crucial function of their commitment to Islam that it does indeed give Muslims a sense of autonomy and dignity, so I am not suggesting that there is a materialist dissolution of religious commitment. But as I argue below, that function is itself to be understood as a function of historical, social and material circumstances in precisely the sense Cohen wishes to abandon for some concession to the subject's 'irreducible interest in the definition of itself.' In explaining what he rightly notices as the 'strength and durability' of religious and nationalist sentiment, Cohen swings from materialist prejudice to an equally unsatisfactory and unhelpful explanatory resting-point.  
In contemporary Islam, the further historically determined function is not hard to trace. It is hardly questioned by any but the most stubbornly resistant 'orientalist' that a good deal of Islamic revivalism in various countries in West Asia, South Asia and North Africa, not to mention some of the northern cities of England, is the product of a long colonial and post-colonial history, which has shaped a community's perception of itself in terms of the other. It is a defensive reaction caused not only by the scars and memories of Western colonial rule but by the failure of successive governments to break out of the models of development imposed upon it by a dominating neo-colonial presence of the superpowers through much of the cold war, and even more so now with American interests more entrenched than ever in West Asia, after a humiliating war. The failure of Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser and of pan-Arab secular nationalism to provide leadership, and the general Arab failure to pressure the West to force Israeli compromise on the Palestinian issue have also contributed to the appeal that Islam holds as a source of dignity and autonomy in the face of what is perceived to be successive defeats in the hands of an omnipresent, controlling West in their midst. These points are familiar by now. I stress them here in order to say that if Islam is a 'fundamental' commitment today, in the sense I had characterized earlier, it also has recognizable historical sources, and has a vital defensive function in a people's struggle to achieve a sense of identity and self-respect in the face of that history and the perceptions formed by it. Hence the 'strength and durability' of Islamic identity has a much more situated and local explanation than Cohen offers.

To be fair, it is not that he thinks religion (or nationalism) are irreducible needs, it is rather that he thinks that the need for a sense of identity is an irreducible need, and a fundamental commitment to religion (or nation) often fulfills that need. But my objection is that once one sees that these identity-constituting commitments have specified functional roles in particular historical circumstances, the very idea of an underlying, explanatory, irreducible need for identity that they fulfill is undermined as superfluous and misleading in the study of identity. That different fundamental commitments constitute different identities under different historical circumstances does not at all imply that there is an irreducible need for identity that is anyway there, and that is fulfilled by some sense of identity or other at different times. There is simply no such irreducible need. To posit it is to posit an explanatory danger.

The issue between us is so large that it would be surprising if there were not problems remaining for my functional account. Though I cannot deal with them all here, it would be evasive not, at least, to mention the most obvious. A central problem with a functional treatment of identity, such as the one I am proposing, is the tendency of some social and cultural phenomena (in the present case, conviction in a religious doctrine) to exceed what is required by their functions, and thereby to attain an independent phenomenological status in the communal psyche. Islamist sentiment, like many nationalisms, in this way impresses an identity on many Muslim communities which outruns the sort of function we have diagnosed it to have. The source of the commitment may lie in its historically local function, but the commitment then acquires a momentum of its own which may survive even after the function has lapsed. I will call this phenomenon the 'surplus phenomenology of identity'. It is a surplus quite literally in the sense that it is more than the functional analysis can account for. It is an excess, a residue; and it is properly described as phenomenological precisely because it has no functional role in the psychological economy of the community. It is an experience without a point.

Now it is possible for Cohen to step in right here and claim that this is precisely what he intends by the idea of the sources of identity as being in 'the self's irreducible interest in the definition of itself'. He says as
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much a little after the passage I have quoted: '... people engage themselves with people and institutions other than to secure an identity, and then the engagement persists when whatever its original rationale was has gone, so that it becomes an identification ungrounded in further reasons.'

In saying that the surplus has phenomenological rather than functional status, I may have given the impression of a concession to this claim. But that impression would be wrong. It is not so much that I want to deny that these engagements might persist. I want to say rather that if they persist in a form that genuinely confers identity in the sense that I have defined above, if they persist in terms of authenticity and fundamental commitment as I have sketched them, then it cannot be that they are ungrounded in some further reasons in the way that Cohen allows. Conversely if they are now ungrounded, then they have lost their blue-chip, identity-impairing aspect and they no longer count as fundamental commitments in the sense that this paper is concerned with. If they really are ungrounded in any important function, relinquishing these engagements and commitments (due to pressure from conflicting values and commitments) would no longer have the traumatic, authenticity-destroying or integrity-destroying effects on the psyche which is special to fundamental commitments, as I defined them earlier.

So, if these engagements persist as fundamental commitments and confer identity in the sense that is relevant to this paper’s theme, then, I would argue, that it is only in appearance that this surplus commitment is ungrounded, it is only at first sight that it has a self-standing validity. In emphasizing the functional explanations of identity-forming fundamental commitments, in refusing to treat them as flowing from a primitive and unanalysable need in our consciousness, I am insisting that this slide from the requirements of the function to a residual surplus phenomenology of identity is, from the point of view of one level of functional explanation, a form of communal irrationality. And like all irrational phenomena it demands another level of functional explanation. Neuroses, for example, are often identified as neuroses only because at the level they are being identified they do not seem to have a function, they do not fit in with the normal assignation of roles to mental states. This does not pre-empt there being another level of functional explanation of the behaviour identified initially as neurotic. Indeed all of psychoanalytic theory is founded on this assumption.

Perhaps a better and closer analogy is with the phenomenon that

T.S. Eliot located in much romantic poetry and other writing, and which he scathingly described as lacking an 'objective correlative'. The sentimentality he noticed in such poetry—missing, in his opinion, in the finest examples of what he and others called 'metaphysical' poetry—was the product of a surplus emotion, emotion which exceeded the demands of its ground or object. Here too it is possible for someone to reply that such excess sentiment is a primitive and irreducible fact in the poetic consciousness and in readers' response, but that again seems to me to misdescribe the facts. Eliot's negative evaluation of the phenomenon depended precisely on its not having this sort of rock-bottom justification within poetics i.e., the phenomenon demanded another level of explanation in the poet or reader's person, which Eliot considered an irrelevant, egotistical intrusion into the poetic and critical tasks at hand. So also, what I have called the 'surplus phenomenology of identity' is to be seen as an irrational tendency in the life of cultures and communities because it too outpaces the level of functional explanation we have offered, and similarly demands a further, extrinsic level of functional investigation.

It may be helpful to move from these analogies to an example. Take the survival of Hindu nationalism in India today. Its sources are usually analysed in terms of the function it served in mobilizing the Indian masses against British colonial rule, but it is evident everywhere that the communal sentiment has survived that function since colonial rule ended. This would, from the point of view of that level of functional analysis, be correctly viewed as a form of irrationality. And I am saying that it would be quite wrong to claim that, whatever its functional sources, once the sentiment comes into existence it meets a self-standing rationale in the subject's irreducible need for self-definition. There are clearly other functions it now serves, which would require another level of functional investigation, thereby explaining the irrationality. (I have elsewhere analysed the most recent wave of Hindu nationalist feeling in terms of the function of creating a mythological Hindu unity in the face of recent efforts to expose the deeply divided nature of Hindu culture by the implementation of affirmative action policies in favour of backward Hindu castes.)

I conclude, then, that there is no reason to take a theoretical stance which would deny the irrationality of these surviving or surplus phenomenologies of identity and glamorize them with obscure, unanalysable philosophical notions such as the subject's search for
irreducible definition of itself. It is true that it is not a form of irrationality which has been much studied by philosophical anthropology or the theory of culture. But that may well be just because it is too often relegated to some rock-bottom need for self-identification, which then absolves these disciplines from further diagnostic work.

IV

Let me return to how the identifying of the specific historical and functional sources of the commitment to Islam opens things up in the study of the conflict under discussion.

It is because their commitment to Islam today is to a large extent governed by the highly defensive function that moderate Muslims find it particularly difficult to make a substantial and sustained criticism of Islamic doctrine; and this, as I said, leaves them open to be exploited by the political efforts of absolutist movements which exploit the doctrine for their own ends. Their defensiveness inhibits them with the fear that such criticism would amount to a surrender to the forces of the West, which have for so long shown a domineering colonial and post-colonial contempt for their culture. Thus it is that the historically determined function of their commitment, the source of their very self-identity, loops back reflexively upon Muslims to paralyse their capacities for self-criticism.

That a fundamental commitment could be further diagnosed along these lines—something that Williams' theoretical framework has no particular place for or interest in—opens up various other lines for thinking about its unsettleability in the face of conflict. For it gives us space to examine whether there might be aspects of the commitment and its function in one's psychological economy, which are superfical or even incoherent. It thus gets us beyond the stultifying idea of being locked in a tragic and irresolvable conflict between such commitments. Let me pursue this general point further with the specific issue of Islam.

I think that it is possible to argue that critical reflection on the inhibiting effect of the defensive function of their contemporary commitment to Islam should lead Muslims to the conclusion that there is a simple but deep philosophical malaise at the heart of it; and that, in turn, should open a path to distinguishing between different aspects of their faith in a way that allows for its doctrinal reform, and so eventually allows for the conflict they find themselves in to be resolved in favour of a more determined opposition to Islamic absolutism than they have been able to produce so far.

What do I mean here by a philosophical malaise? I have already granted that the contemporary re-assertion of Islamist sentiment in many countries as well as a good part of the moderate Muslim's own commitment to Islam is the product of a certain history of subjugation and condescension, which continues today in revised but nevertheless recognizable forms. Why, then, am I not showing the appropriate sympathy towards these defensive stances? It is in answering this question that the specifically abstract character of the malaise is revealed.

The answer is that Muslims themselves have taken the wrong attitude to this historical determinations of their Islamist sentiments. Their own observation of the role of colonialism and the West in shaping their commitments and identity ought to—but alas, does not—have a strictly limited and circumscribed role in their own self-conception. The acute consciousness of and obsession with the historical cause of their commitment has made them incapable of critical reflection about the commitment itself. For too long now there has been a tendency among Muslims to keep saying: 'You have got to understand why we are like this,' and then allow that frame of mind to dominate their future actions. This has destroyed their capacity for clear-headed, unreactive political thought and action.

There is an air of paradox in my claim: one's coming to an understanding of the historical source and function of one's commitments can put one in an unreflective and uncritical state of mind about those very commitments. But the paradox is only apparent. Understanding a phenomenon is something that occurs in the third person. And, of course, we do often take such a third person stance toward ourselves. But, to allow such a stance to develop into defensive and reactive commitments is to rest with a third person conception of ourselves. It is to deny the first person or agent's point of view. Thus (when considering the spread of absolutist sentiment in their countries) moderate Muslims are often heard to say, 'This is how things are with us because of colonial and neo-colonial domination.' Or, to take another closely related recent example (when considering Palestinian support for Saddam Hussein), moderate Muslims are often heard to say, 'This is how things are with us because of Israeli intransigenence and America's refusal to come through with serious
pressure on Israel.' And so on. These remarks are impeccable. But they are bits of knowledge that one has when one takes a third person stance toward oneself. And that stance, I am saying, cannot be allowed to exhaust one's self-conception. On the lips of sympathetic others ('This is how things are with them . . .') these remarks are the only stance to take. But on our lips, on the lips of Muslims, they cannot be the only remarks we make unless we treat ourselves as objects, unless we think of our future as we think of our past, as something that we cannot make a difference to. The philosophical malaise is quite simply that in allowing the third person point of view to dominate our political responses we are failing to live up to the basic conditions of free agency.

This point echoes, in a much more specific and political context, a point made famous in the third section of Immanuel Kant's *Grundlegung*. In the form that it occurs in Kant, the point's relevance to politics is not obvious, indeed its relevance to anything outside the very general conditions for the possibility of agency is not obvious. The idea of seeing ourselves primarily as objects, the idea of taking an exclusively third person point of view upon ourselves, in that very general Kantian setting, should have the effect of making us altogether passive; extreme versions of the eponymous figure, Obломov, in Ivan Goncharov's novel. After all if one did not think that the future was any different from the past, why would one act at all? Though that is the extreme and logical end of taking such a perspective on oneself, my claim is that, when the concerns are not as purely general and metaphysical as they are in Kant's discussion, there are less extreme effects of adopting such a perspective—or at any rate of being dominated by this perspective—which consist, not in passivity, but in reactive and defensive actions, rather than fully autonomous actions.

A failure to see through the implications of their opposition to the absolutists, a failure to press for the reforms that will undermine the ground upon which the absolutists stand, is just one among the many examples of such reactiveness and defensiveness on the part of moderate Muslims. Their sulking, censorious response to Salman Rushdie's book in which there was a complete blindness to the book's own anti-absolutist polemic and import is another example, as is the constant disposition of moderate Muslims to lend silent support to third-rate, vainglorious leaders such as Muammar al-Qaddafi and Saddam Hussein, who offer instant autonomy and dignity in the face of Western domination with ineffectual war-like stances. Their understanding of themselves as the victims of a history of Western domination constitutes the third person perspective which then perpetuates just these sorts of defensive actions. If this third person point of view did not so overwhelm their vision of themselves, it would leave space for the first person point of view, essential to the very idea of agency. The first person point of view would not allow the context of understanding the colonial past to breed the defensiveness that weakens their opposition to the absolutists, it would not allow the Palestinians to give up the moral high ground by their self-destructive support of such leaders as Saddam Hussein.

I should add that this philosophical fallacy informs a great deal of defensiveness not only in the more obviously political arena, but in the academy as well. Recent powerful, trenchant and much-needed critiques of orientalism have forced scholars to shun the essentializing tendency in studies of Islam and the Third World, and they have taught them to pay attention to the detail and diversity of their subject. This effect is laudable. But they have also created a bandwagon effect that inhibits self-criticism in the fear that one is playing into Western and 'orientalizing' caricatures of Islam and the Third World. Criticism and reform does mean abstracting from diversity and detail in order to identify a core doctrine or tendency to which one is opposed. Indeed, as 1 argue in 'Intrinsic and Extrinsic Explanations of Islam', it is not merely criticism and reform but even the very idea of explanation of social phenomena which requires such abstraction. This methodological ploy does not amount to essentialism or caricature and we cannot afford to be tyrannized into thinking so by bandwagon intellectual trends. It is not essentialism because quite simply no social science, no historical understanding, no agenda for social and political change can afford to ignore this simple methodological canon. Moreover, every scholar in this bandwagon has (quite justly) abstracted from the diversity of the West to explain the West's colonial and neo-colonial domination of these regions. It then seems methodologically inconsistent to discourage such abstraction from the diversity within the Islamic people and nations for particular contexts of explanation and of Islamic reform.

So speaking initially in the third person moderate Muslims might correctly say: 'In the face of colonial history and in the face of recent frustrations and defeat, Islam has an appeal for us, it is grounded in a doctrine we embrace and which has comprehensive pretensions and
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claims on us, including—crucially—on our politics, and this gives us a sense of autonomy and identity. If I am right that this defensive attitude reflects a predominantly third person perspective on ourselves, it will do no violence to the use of 'us' and 'we' here if we replace them with 'them' and 'they'. This is, after all, the voice of a community's understanding of its own condition and its causes. It is the voice of the subject that takes itself to be an object.

But then, if I am right, there should be place and possibility for the switch to the first person, for the voice of the subject as agent to say: 'This appeal of Islam is something we have uncritically and indiscriminately embraced out of demoralization and defeat, often allowing it to dominate our political actions, and it has got us nowhere; it is up to us to assess the relative merits of its diverse doctrinal commitments, up to us to work towards its reform, up to us to oppose the inviolability of the Sharia, to fashion a depoliticized Islam so that its appeal and relevance is spiritualist and universalist rather than to the polity, so that it does not remain perpetually exploitable by the fundamentalist political factions, whom we oppose.' This is not merely not the passive voice, it is not the reactive voice either. It is, bending language a bit, the active voice.

V

These are of course very general things to say about the need for reform and they require detailed and specific study and analysis, as well as a systematic and strategic agenda for reformist political action. That is beyond the province of this paper. But certain general lines of direction should flow obviously from points I have made so far. The idea of reform in the particular context of the conflict we have been discussing apply only to those portions of the Quran, which are exploited by the absolutists for ends which moderate oppose, those portions which speak to questions of the polity and to personal and public law. Reform thus can leave intact all the verses with the more purely universalist and spiritual claims and commitments. It is a well known and highly significant fact that the early verses written in Mecca are all of the latter sort. It is only some of the verses which follow upon Muhammad's arrival in Medina which make detailed claims about the state, the economy, inheritance, marriage, divorce, the status of women in the home and society, and so on. Once they have shed their defensiveness, it is possible for Muslims to argue that after the initial, deep, spiritual, defining pronouncements of the new faith in Mecca, the post-Medina verses were intended to address a very specific historical context in which conversion was paramount in the concerns of the Prophet. Conversion was bound to be more effective if the faith addressed itself to a variety of social and inter-personal themes so that Islam could present itself as offering the (often nomadic) regional populations a hitherto unavailable sense of belonging to a unified community. It should also be possible for Muslims, therefore, to argue that since that historical context of seeking conversion has lapsed, the verses to be emphasized now are the Mecca verses which have no specific political commitments. This would indeed constitute an Islamic Reformation. It would re-open the gates of 'ijihad' (re-interpretation of Islamic doctrine) which have been closed for centuries in the rigid readings of the Sharia.25

Notice that this conception of Islamic reform, and this argument for it, will not be overturned if it turns out that I am wrong about the functional analysis of Islamic identity. That analysis was intended to counter an unnecessarily limited notion of fundamental commitment and an un-malleable notion of conflict that it generates. But the actual conclusions and argument about reform are independent of the analysis. Even if my functionalist claim (that a good deal of the moderate Muslim's fundamental commitment to Islam is out of a historically determined defensiveness) is exaggerated, even if one emphasized the view I have downplayed (that their commitment is primarily out of the need for some purely spiritual basis for self-identification), the point of this reformist proposal for a depoliticized Islam, which stresses precisely the universal and spiritual commitments in the early verses of the Quran over many of the later verses, would still retain its validity.

My use of terms like 'universalist' should not be made to carry more weight than is intended, so let me make the intention a little clearer. It may appear that in asserting the primacy of the Mecca verses and their 'universalist' appeal, I think of reform as requiring an abandonment of what is specific and unique to Islam, leaving some deer core which is hardly recognizable as relevant to the subject of this paper, viz., 'Muslim identity'. That appearance is not only not intended, but I would argue that it is conjured up only within a framework of thinking about communal identity which thoroughly misdescribes a community's psychology of
identity. It is only if one saw communal identity as a highly codifiable phenomenon, as a list or code of necessary and sufficient principles, that one would even be tempted to say that a relaxation or abandonment of some set of principles would have the effect of changing the subject. Though, I will not argue for it here, I think it is an egregious misconception of religious identity to see it as a codifiable phenomenon. The idea that without the specific doctrinal commitments of public and personal law, Islam would be indistinguishable from all other universal and spiritual claims would be, in the spirit of this codificatory misconception, to divorce the message of the Mecca verses from their origins and history, as well as the abiding set of specific Islamic institutions and practices—of prayer (namaz), pilgrimage (hajj), fasting (roza or sawm), funerals (janazah), various religious feasts (Id), to name just a very few—which they have spawned. No such divorce underlies my use of terms like ‘universalist’ and ‘spiritualist’ to characterize the message of these verses. Their use is meant merely to mark a contrast with the specific political and legal commitments that should be the targets of reformers today. Depoliticization, however, does not imply deracination. Thus, though such a transformation in Muslims’ fundamental commitment to Islam would now leave no particular doctrinal element that absolutists could invoke, it would all the same be a transformation within a commitment to Islam. It would, therefore, still constitute an answer to the question “What is a Muslim?”

In a recent work, Fazlur Rahman, who wrote with learning and acuteness on these subjects, seems to have been struggling to make this point as part of a plea for modernization, but botches it somewhat by describing the Quran as a unity. The suggestion of Quranic unity is precisely what intellectuals of the absolutist movements themselves invoke to resist reform, arguing that reform would violate such a unity. The revealed word of God may tolerably be reformed precisely because the revealed word is not a unity. Different revelations can now be seen as indexed—e.g. qua revelation—to different historical contexts. It is really the non-codifiability that Rahman should be stressing rather than unity, and not of the text but of the sense of identity in which the text has a place among other identity-shaping practices and institutions. This point about non-codifiability of identity should allow one’s religious identity (of even a highly devout moderate Muslim) to take within its stride the idea that some revealed verses may be stressed over others as historical contexts lapse.

But to return now to the larger point, for such reform not to seem a total surrender to longstanding, hostile, alien, cultural and political forces, Muslims will have to take the first step in resolving the present conflict by overcoming their acute defensiveness which, as I said, comes from taking an overwhelmingly third person perspective on themselves. How a community acquires the alternative perspective (of autonomy) in specific historical contexts is a subject that I cannot address in this paper, whose aim is merely to uncover the malaise that makes a conflict seem irresolvable. But I will say this. A failure to overcome the defensiveness, a failure to acquire the first person perspective, will prove a point of the bitterest irony. A failure to come out of the neurotic obsession with the Western and colonial determination of their present condition will only prove that that determination was utterly comprehensive in the destruction it wrought. That is to say, it will prove to be the final victory for imperialism that after all the other humiliations it has visited upon Muslims, it lingered in our psyches in the form of genuine self-understanding to make self-criticism and free, unreactive agency impossible.

VI

An underlying theoretical point of this paper has been that if fundamental commitments and the questions of cultural identity that they bring with them (What is an X?) are understood in terms of functional analyses of the kind I have tried to give in the case of Islamic identity today, then there is scope to see these commitments as susceptible to various criticisms in the particular context of a conflict in which they might figure. All this seems to me to offer far more scope and interest to moral philosophy than Williams allows it, even after granting to Williams the validity of the central role he gives to the idea of fundamental commitment and the validity of his critique of traditional moral philosophy.

The paper has studied the question “What is a Muslim?” in the dialectic of a conflict arising out of a concern for Islamic reform. The conflict is one that arises because of moderate Muslims’ fundamental commitment to a doctrine which contains features that are often effectively invoked by the absolutists whom moderate Muslims fundamentally oppose. If a full
analysis of the commitment reveals its defensive function which have
disabled Muslims from a creative and powerful opposition to the ab-
solutists, and if, moreover, this function of the commitment is diagnosed
as itself based on a deep but common philosophical fallacy, it should be
possible then for moderate Muslims to think their way out of this conflict
and to transform the nature of their commitment to Islam, so that it is not
disabling in that way.

The question of identity, 'What is a Muslim?', then, will get very
different answers before and after this dialectic about reform has played
itself out. The dialectic, thus, preserves the negotiability of the concept
of identity and the methodological points I began with, at the same time
as it situates and explains the urgency and fascination that such questions
hold for us.

Notes And References

1. An earlier version of this paper appeared in Critical Inquiry, Chicago and
   Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay.

   I should stress at the outset that this essay, though in an important sense of
   self-standing, is one of three essays on the subject of Islamic identity. The
   others entitled, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Explanations of Islam" (forthcom-
   ing, Transition, eds., Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr) and
   "Islamic Identity and Quotidian Institutions" address aspects of the subject
   that the present essay ignores. The first of these essays addresses issues in
   political economy and the political sociology of the state, as they impinge
   on the question of religious identity. The second, explores the role of
   mosques, prayer, pilgrimage, fasting, and other such customs and institu-
   tions in the sustaining of identity. The present paper's concern is more with
   underlying philosophical issues. (All three papers are written within the
   context of a question and concern for the prospects and possibilities of
   reform and modernization.) The reader is urged, therefore, not to assume
   that the points made here aim at anything approximating a comprehensive
   treatment of the subject. All the same, the sense in which the paper is
   self-standing is that there is nothing in the other two papers which seriously
   revise or qualify the claims made in this one. See also, footnote 7 for a more
   specific statement of this last point. My thanks to G.A. Cohen, Ronald
   Dworkin, Charles Larmore, Isaac Levi, Thomas Nagel, Carol Rovane,
   Stephen White, Bernard Williams, the members of the New York University
   Legal Theory Seminar and the Fellows of the Whitney Humanities Centre,
   Yale University for comments and criticisms which have helped to improve
   this paper.

2. No suggestion here that my commitment to being a Muslim has not been
   more than five minutes long. There are several other contexts, and many
   more sustained contexts, in which someone with that background and those
   anti-theological views could identify himself or herself as a Muslim. There
   is no particular list of types of such contexts for identification. If there were,
   that would undermine the very idea of locality since it would allow us to
   formulate the very sort of generalizations that stricter criteria of identity
demand. Someone with no theological commitments might feel a sense of
   identity with Islam in contexts as diverse as: when he feels shame at the
   actions of Muslims—as say, the Muslim response to the publication of
   Rushdie's The Satanic Verses; when he feels concern about the future of
   Muslims in some hostile area—as say in parts of India or England; or quite
   simply by an intellectual inheritance of public-mindedness from the fact that
   his family has been involved in Muslim politics for a very long time. There
   is no interesting common thread running through these different contexts;
   and I take it to be obvious that birth into a Muslim family is not sufficient
   nor (given conversion) even necessary to Muslim identity, though, of course,
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one would expect the relevance of the contexts I have just mentioned to usually presuppose the fact of birth.


4. In saying this I am taking a stand against the more apocalyptic, theory-destroying view of the emphasis on context which is to be found in Richard Rorty’s numerous recent writings on the effects of pragmatism. This disagreement may turn on the fact that pragmatism for him, but not for me, is mixed in with Kuhnian incommensurability and deconstruction.

5. The threat is very real and can be seen, not just in the spectacular developments in Iran during the 1980s, but also in the ‘Islamization’ policies of Pakistani governments, in the compulsion of powerful guerrilla forces and political parties in Afghanistan and the Maghreb respectively, in the accelerating Islamist reaction in West Asia to recent Iraqi defeat, as well as, more generally, in the policy commitments in personal law, especially regarding the status of women, in many Muslim populations, even despite the fact of being under de facto secular governments. Recall from ‘orientalist’ misrepresentations of Islamic countries should not blind us to the reality and threatening promise of these developments.

6. Though it will not be relevant to my concerns in this paper, it should be mentioned that the absolutist minority does not form a unified movement. There has, for some time, been division between the anti-imperialist Islamist groups and the Islamist groups who draw resources from and give allegiance to Saudi Arabia. There is partial coincidence of this division with the Shia–Sunni division because the anti-imperialist groups are inspired by the Iranian example, but it is only partial. This division is much more marked since the Gulf war for reasons that should be evident.

7. This internal conflict in the moderate Muslim is an essential stage in the dialectic of this paper. The paper’s interest is to study what notion of reform and what extent of negotiation and transformation of identity is possible, once one records that there is this conflict.

8. There are two quite opposite theoretical tendencies which resist the idea of doctrinal reform. First, there is a tendency to think that if the doctrine, at least in its originary formulations in the Quran, is conceived of as the revealed word of God, no genuinely devout Muslim, however moderate, will tolerate its reform. Thus, it will be objected that I am, in emphasizing the need for doctrinal reform, unfairly imposing the theologically sceptical cast of my own mind—admitted to at the outset—on the devout moderate. See my remarks toward the end of the paper about the non-codifiability of religious identity, which address precisely this objection. Second, there is a quite different tendency to think that a full and proper understanding of the underlying political, economic and cultural conditions (the specific themes of the other two papers cited in the first footnote) relevant to the question of this conflict, will undermine my claim (or this paper) about the necessity for doctrinal reform. The tendency is to think that changes wrought in these underlying conditions, without any need for doctrinal reform, would be sufficient to defeat the claims and the influence of absolutist movements. Such a view is usually the product of a fear that otherwise one would be endorsing simple-minded Western essentialist explanations of Islamic absolutism, where it is seen to be an intrinsic part of, or growth from, the doctrine and the faith itself. In the first of the two papers mentioned earlier, I try and demonstrate how many Islamic absolutist movements sustain themselves and thwart efforts to bring about such political, economic and cultural changes by exploiting certain aspects of the doctrine. Thus doctrinal reform, I argue, must be a necessary part of the moderate Muslim’s opposition to such movements. To that extent, and only to that extent, I think there is a kernel of truth to the idea of intrinsic or essentialist explanations of Islamic absolutism, over and above the extrinsic or nominalist ones invoking political, economic and cultural causes.

9. There has also been a partially overlapping intellectual tradition, much less current, which adds to this, an a priori historical conviction which makes it an inevitable outcome of the progressive development of social, political and economic formations that this liberal vision will hold. This strand of argument has lost its thread in the last few decades but the more purely philosophical claims are still the subject of interesting and lively dispute among philosophers.

10. I will continue to use the expression ‘Ethical Theory’ with capital letters to mark that it is traditional moral philosophy which is the target of this critique. The critique may be found in a number of Williams’ writings, including his contribution to J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973. See also, “Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence” in his *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. In a more recent work, Williams addresses Aristotelian ethical theory in some detail as well and his relation to it is much more complex than to Kant and to utilitarianism. Since this paper is not intended primarily as a commentary on Williams, I will restrict my discussion to the points he makes in his earlier work, which I wish to exploit in the discussion of Muslims’ fundamental commitment to their faith. I should also add that in a letter to me Williams quite rightly points out that in his more recent work he is far less obviously the target of the criticisms I make of him in this paper. See particularly, the Postscript to his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London: Collins, 1985.

11. This distinction may be found in Williams himself and is by now common in philosophical discussions of moral value.

12. It is conceivable, though not perhaps routine, that people have fundamental
commitments not to things like friendship and religion but to utilitarian and other sorts of principles of traditional moral philosophy that Williams is inveighing against.


15. I should stress that the question here is not primarily at the level of individual sensibility and psyche. When in this passage Cohen talks of the 'strength' and 'durability' of religious and nationalist sentiment, he is referring to a communal phenomenon. I think that despite his claim that the spiritual search for identity in the individual subject explains the communal phenomenon, Cohen would nevertheless say that these are different phenomena, irreducible to one another. What I say below, by way of disagreement with Cohen, obviously does not amount to a denial of the fact that individuals often have spiritual yearnings. Rather it amounts to a denial that this fact satisfactorily explains the phenomenon of communal religious identity, as we find it in many Muslim countries today. That is, I deny that the phenomenon is, to use Cohen's words, merely a 'social manifestation' of the 'self's irreducible interest in the definition of itself'. It has quite distinct functional and historical explanation, about which more below.

16. Here I should add that, despite my opposition to Cohen's point, which is advertised by him as a point inspired by Hegel, the view I am promoting is perfectly in consonance with that aspect of Hegelian doctrine which precisely emphasizes historical conditioning of self-definitions. My complaint, then, is that Cohen's essay fails to think through the implications of the fully Hegelian doctrine. The idea of the 'self's irreducible interest in the definition of itself' which Cohen is stressing in this essay is at odds (in the way I argue below) with a historically conditioned conception. What I below describe as the 'rock-bottom' attitude to what I call the 'surplus phenomenology of identity', an attitude which Cohen, for all he says in that paper, can claim as his own, is just the attitude which is made unnecessary by the historical conditioning. It is just the attitude which makes the phenomenology un-Hegelian.

17. I am not suggesting that this defensive function exhausts the functional explanation of Muslims' fundamental commitment to Islam. (In the papers cited earlier, I consider other functional roles.) But it is the central function to fasten on when the task is to diagnose the failure to think one's way out of the present conflict. See below.


20. Writings in these disciplines, to their detriment, do not mix it up enough with historical and political studies, to develop theoretical (philosophical) treatments of this phenomenon of 'surplus phenomenology'.


22. Incidentally, it should go without saying, but perhaps it will not, so I will say it: it is not a matter of the moral high ground for its own sake. The point is straightforwardly one of self-interest. If Machiavelli was given to advising displaced people rather than princes, he too would have said: Do not give up the moral high ground unless you are absolutely certain that this man in this real world of US military domination will deliver you from displacement.


24. I have written in more detail about the methodology and substance of this reformist agenda in "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Explanations of Islam".

25. In "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Explanations of Islam", I discuss more fully the place of the Sharia in our understanding of Islamic doctrine, and I disentangle the different aspects of doctrine (Quran, Hadith, Sunna), which are relevant to the question of the sort of reform that I have briefly gestured at here.


27. A first step would be to acknowledge the conflict itself, which for the most part lies hidden; such an acknowledgement might lead to the processes of reflection that are necessary. The specific forms of reflection that underlie the first person point of view is a large and important philosophical subject. See Chapters VII and IX of Thomas Nagel's The View from Nowhere, New York: OUP, 1986, and Chapter IV of Isaac Levi's Hard Choices, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987, for interesting discussions of this problem.

28. My emphasis on the requirements of the perspective of free agency and the philosophical malaise underlying the moderate Muslim's failure to acquire it fully may seem as if I have, after all, introduced a purely philosophical argument in favour of reform and of the secular ideal. But that is not quite right, I am happy to grant that the adoption of this first person perspective is itself to be justified on grounds that are internal to other values and commitments of moderate Muslims, thereby keeping faith with the point of Williams' initial critique of the philosophical ambitions of traditional 'Ethical Theory'.