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Against Invention: A richer history for 'Hinduism'

Podcast with **Will Sweetman** (19 February 2018).

Interviewed by **Thomas White**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

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Thomas White (**TW**): *Kiaora! And a warm welcome from the Otago University recording studios here in Dunedin, on New Zealand's South Island, where I'm joined today by our very own Associate Professor, **Will Sweetman**. Professor Sweetman is an historian of religion, whose research focuses on the interactions between the religions of Asia and the West in the modern period, and has published three books and several academic articles that explore the historical and the theoretical aspects of the study of religion, with a theoretical focus on South Indian traditions. Will, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview and welcome to the Religious Studies Project.*

Will Sweetman (**WS**): My pleasure, thank you.

TW: *Now, the topic I'm hoping to discuss today with you is what you described to me as a defence of the "ism" – with the particular ism in question being Hinduism. But perhaps, to ease our way in, we maybe should start at the beginning, or at least your academic beginning, as it were. So, Will, could you please describe your early training in the study of the history of religion and how this has shaped the trajectory of your research career?*

WS: Sure. So it was very much a happy accident. I did my undergraduate degree at Lancaster, which is probably well-known to the listeners of this podcast, but it wasn't to me. I had chosen to go to Lancaster to study Maths and Philosophy, and Religious Studies was . . . you were required to study a third subject in your first year. And for me, it was very much a toss-up between Religious Studies and Psychology. But the queues for Psychology were much longer!

TW: (Laughs)

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WS: So I decided to choose Religious Studies, and really never looked back. So I switched to Philosophy and Religious Studies for the remainder of my degree. But what that meant was my understanding of the academic study of religion was shaped by that Lancaster tradition – which was open to all traditions and emphasised, really, none. And even though much of the work I did was, in fact, on the Christian tradition, because of my interest in Philosophy, and because there were papers in the Lancaster Religious Studies department that were focussed on . . . the paper was called: "Modern Religious and Atheistic Thought." And it was focussed, really, on 18th century and after philosophical thinking about religion. My work was very much focussed on Western Christian thinkers and thought, coming out of that tradition. But I didn't privilege that, in a way. Then when I went on, my initial aim was to do more philosophy of religion. And I went to Cambridge to do an MPhil in Philosophy of Religion and very quickly discovered that that wasn't quite what I wanted to do. But partly because although Cambridge had a Religious Studies . . . the faculty of Divinity was teaching Theology and Religious studies, the assumptions were so different. And really, it was that jarring discovery that the Lancaster way was not the only way – because Lancaster really was my only experience of what it was to treat region in the academy. But at Cambridge it was very different, and that prompted in me the question: how did these two such different traditions emerge? And really, that led me to the 18th century and looking at foundational works, like Hume's *Natural History of Religion* – but how this naturalistic approach, that privileges no religious tradition, emerged. That in turn then led me to looking at the religions that were being studied – or the non-Christian or non-Western traditions that were being studied or discovered in Europe at that time. And because, I suppose, of the colonial expansion going on in India it was particularly Hinduism that was being discovered and discussed at that time. Which then led me to my doctoral work on the study of Hinduism and the conceptualisation of Hinduism from the 17th through to the 18th century. Originally, I intended to include the 19th century but . . .

TW: *It got a bit too much?*

WS: Yes – as many PhD students discover.

TW: *Ok, great. It seem that you've got quite a personal narrative feeding into your research interests. In terms of the actual methods of the historical study of religion, particularly inter-religious contact, what would you say are the best habits of analysis, or the important things to watch out for when you're engaging in such research?*

WS: So for me, by temperament I think, as much as anything else – because I'm not really trained as a

Historian, although that's how I would describe myself – attention to the sources is absolutely paramount (**5:00**). And that means – particularly in the context of what we're talking about, where most of my work is set, that is, the period of European expansion overseas, encounter with and study of Non-Western cultures – well, two things: first of all the European sources, but particularly, also, the sources on the other side. Now that's always harder, I think, in . . . . There may be a few exceptions in some periods or highly literate cultures but certainly it's much harder, generally, to recover the voice from the non-European side of the encounter. Harder but, I would say, not impossible. There are ways of doing it and it's important, even though it's difficult, not to short-cut that process. So there is a tendency, I think, even in the works of some scholars whose work otherwise I would admire . . . . I'm thinking here, particularly, of Urs Apps' *The Birth of Orientalism* which is wonderful book, but he has a tendency to dismiss the sources that are described by Western scholars as their own inventions, to say that they simply made up the source: it doesn't exist. Now that's a possibility, but before you can say the source doesn't exist, you have to do your damnedest to find out whether it does! And there is a particular example in my own work. This is an early 18th century Protestant German missionary who assembled a library of Tamil Sources, which he documented, he catalogued quite carefully, which is unusual for that period. More often, other similar writers – missionaries and others – would simply have done general term like: "in their books". But he identifies the texts, and some of them are very well-known and it's not difficult to identify them. But there's one particular text which he said is the "most important of all Hindu texts". It clearly isn't. Particularly because there is no other reference to this text anywhere, so far as I can discover. I had the good fortune when I came to Otago to be given some research money that was pretty much . . . I didn't have to compete very hard for it. I simply had to propose a project. So I proposed a project I thought nobody else would ever fund, which was a wild goose chase to go looking for this text.

TW: *Yes.*

WS: And courtesy of a brilliant research assistant, Ilakkuvan, who worked with me – a young Tamil Scholar. It took him about ten or twelve months going through archives very diligently and he found the source. So it is possible to recover the source. And it's not the most important text. It was wrongly evaluated. But it was the most important text for this particular missionary. And by reading this source we can see what he's doing with it, and how that's shaping his own account of Hinduism. Which is, undoubtedly, shaped by his Protestant, Christian presupposition.

TW: *So this is the missionary, Bartholomew?*

WS: Ziegenbalg. Sorry. So it's still . . . It is fed through his Christian presuppositions, but it isn't sheer invention. He is following a text. And what's interesting about this text is that it's a basically monotheistic text. So when Ziegenbalg describes Hindus as monotheist this is not only a relic of Christian assumptions about the natural light of reason and a universal revelation, but the result of his close reading of a text – so we can now follow him, and read that text, and discover. . . . So that's what I would say is the key to this: attention to those sources. On the European side of the encounter, I would also . . . I regularly bemoan the fact that because the sources are thickest in the 19th century, and because the vast majority of people who work – particularly Indian scholars, but not only – are Anglophone: that's all they read, is English sources. And it's really important, I think, to look at sources in other European languages. And there are, of course, people looking at those languages. I've recently started using Portuguese sources which are the most amazing mine of material. And they have been read, but largely they've been read by Portuguese scholars who tend to publish in Portuguese. Not exclusively, there are exceptions to that. So I would say that going beyond the Anglophone sources – or rather, the failure to go beyond the Anglophone sources is a particular problem in much of the historiography of colonial encounters of religion (**10:00**). Again, there are exceptions, but as a generalisation.

TW: *So the importance of linguistic analysis, and making sure that you're covering all the different cultural, colonial experiences of the European adventure. Perhaps relating to this, at the start of your book:* Mapping Religion, Hinduism and the Study of Indian Religions 1600-1776, *published in 2003, you equated the dominant history of religion in India as a "Just So Story". What did you mean by this?*

WS: So a "Just So Story", as I'm sure you know, is Kipling's stories of "How the Leopard got his Spots", and so on. And I think there are a couple of accounts of how many of the terms that we are familiar with in the study of religion, how those terms came to be used. So, in the case of Hinduism, there's a popular account that this was a matter of divide and rule: that the British, by dividing Muslims from Hindus were able to dominate both – set them against each other. Or there's another story, which I first heard from one of my teachers at Lancaster, which was that the missionaries needed an opponent. They were used to systematic debates, and therefore they constructed an opponent with whom they could have a debate. Now what's "Just So" about these stories is that though it could have happened like that, that may be how it happened, there's no evidence that it did. Or, I would say that obviously there's a grain of truth in both of those stories, but the real story is much more complicated, and involves, again, patient attention to the sources. So again, in that book, what I trace is how the emergence of the concept of Hinduism as a single pan-Indian religion, distinct from

Buddhism and Jainism in particular, emerges – at least in part – from experience of Europeans in India and attention to texts. So the question of the spread of Hinduism as a religion throughout India, but confined to India – and therefore different from similar-looking or outwardly-similar religious traditions elsewhere in Asia – partly arose from Europeans observing phenomena like pan-Indian pilgrimage. There are pilgrims from the North of India coming to the major pilgrimage sites in the South. Or that some of the . . . . For example, the mythology of Krishna: much of it is set in North India, but there were Europeans reading the mythology of Krishna in South India, in South Indian texts, in Tamil Sources, which describe Krishna in places in North India. So it was on the basis of this that Europeans began to connect phenomena of Hinduism in different parts of India. And then, the opposite part of the question is: what do you exclude? And again it was from looking at Indian sources that Europeans decided that Buddhism and Jainism were regarded as more-or-less beyond the pale. And again, if you look at South Indian religious sources, the Tamil texts are very clear. There's one Tamil author who devotes one verse in each of his poems to denouncing the "filthy Jains", and the "heretic Buddhists". And it was through attention to these sources that Europeans worked out that there was a dividing line here, somewhere. There may well have been . . . And no doubt this idea was consolidated by the practice of censuses by the British. And there was a degree of the other Just So Story that I mentioned, of the missionaries seeking an opponent: so, using Indian sources saying, "Not all Indians agree with us. The Buddhists disagree with you. They say the Veda is idol worship." So there's a grain of truth in those stories. But the full story is more interesting, I think. And it also shows a greater degree of Indian agency in the production of these classifications – or if not directly "agency", at least "input".

TW: *So, the argument that Hinduism is actually a far more coherent, or far more collected systems of rituals, beliefs and institutions than perhaps the "Hinduisms narrative" presents. How do these arguments sit, perhaps, within more current debate about religion and the public space in India? Is there a way that this kind of scholarship can speak to contemporary issues, perhaps regarding the BJP or Hindutva or other current religious public sphere issues taking place in India at present?*(**15:00**)

WS: It's an interesting question. And there is a danger, I think, that arguing for a greater coherence in Hinduism will give succour to those who argue that Hinduism is *the* Indian religion and there should be no other. But there's also a danger – and you can see this in the works of some modern Hindutva ideologues or thinkers, who present the critique of the idea of Hinduism as an attack on Hinduism. So, "You're trying to tell us that our religion doesn't exist." So in a way, those who – not for that reason of course – but who have attempted to deconstruct the idea of Hinduism are also able to, or are in danger of giving succour to those who want to say, "See. The West is out to destroy you. Hinduism we need

to unify and rise up!" So the dangers are. . . . So I guess, in the end, you can't control how your ideas are going to be used. Some unusual people have cited my work in ways that don't or were never part of my intention. But that's . . . you can't control that. You have to go where the sources lead you. And it's not an argument, I think, to say, "We shouldn't say this because it might be used in a way that's not to our liking."

TW: *Yes. I'm finding similar questions and challenges in relation to my research in Fiji, in terms of: where do these ideas feed into other political agendas? But I think you're right. You just have to go where the sources take you. Now, as I understand it, you've been collecting case studies regarding the conceptualisation of religion, or world religion-type concepts in pre-colonial and colonial encounters outside of India. Can you tell us a little about this?*

WS: Yes, so this isn't really something that I've done consciously. But I guess, over the last ten years or so, I have done little more than pay attention to where I have seen arguments similar to my own being made in the case of other traditions. And, for a while now, I've thought that it would be interesting to do some kind of survey or compilation of the kinds of evidence that's being presented, and look at what that is telling us about – or what that suggests about – this broader critique of the formation of the "isms". So I'll be giving a paper at the Australian Association of the Study of Religion conference fairly soon, which will be entitled: "The End of Invention." And it's the first attempt to survey the kinds of evidence that's coming out. And I think, really the invention thesis, if I can call it that, which is now old hat, as it were, it's become orthodoxy: that would be that the isms – Hinduism and Buddhism, say, are the ones' most pertinent to my work, but also the term religion itself – are invented. By which it's generally meant that these are modern, that they are Western, emerging out of a colonial encounter, and outsiders' terms. That they have no analogue, or they don't represent anything in the worldview or mind-set of the people who are described under these terms. I think all of those things are false. So there's some very interesting work coming out of . . . attention, again, to Portuguese sources, on Buddhism, Stephen Berkvitz has recently published an article challenging this idea that you find in the work of people like Philip Almond and others, that Buddhism was a 19th century invention based on the study of text. And he's showing that no, very clearly in the 16th and 17th century Portuguese, mostly Jesuits were communicating with each other across Asia, or travelling in some cases. So Loís Fróis, a 16th century Jesuit, spent a lot of time in India and then went to Japan. And he understood the connections between India and Japan, and the trajectory of Buddhism from one to the other (**20:00**). From the other perspective, or the other direction, Eva Pascal has recently written about Franciscan friars coming from the Philippines into Thailand or Siam and engaging with Buddhism. And again, like Fróis, who described Buddhism as a religion, making the same analogy. So

that's one set of case studies. There's another which is looking, perhaps, more at indigenous understandings of this. So this would be the work, I'm think here of Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst who's looked at Islamic South Asian Sources, which not only classify religions in a way that's not dissimilar to the supposedly modern Western way in which we classify religions, but she's also shown that the very scholars in the 19th century to whom this classification is usually attributed were influenced by . . . they were reading these sources. So Abu'l-Fazl- a Muslim intellectual, a Mughal intellectual, who describes the religions of India, was being studied intently by British scholars in the middle of the 19th century. And then finally – and again you could see that, the Mughal Empire, as a form of cross-cultural encounter, even though it's an Empire. But there are even, on a deeper level, indigenous accounts. And here I'm thinking mostly of the work of Andrew Nicholson and his book, *Unifying Hinduism*. So he looks at pre-modern doxographies, from as early as the 6th Century, in India, which are concerned with classifying the different schools of thought that there are. And so these are not all Hindu, there are Buddhist and Jain texts and, perhaps, particularly Buddhist and Jain sources were interesting in this. But what's very interesting is that he shows that toward the slightly later texts, but still very much pre-modern, there is a kind of coalescing of an idea of an *āstika* – so, texts that affirm the *Vedas*: a unification of . . . it's not quite what we might call Hinduism, but it's not a million miles from it either. So, hence the title of his book is *Unifying Hinduism*. And again, this is not a reaction to either Muslim or Western incursions or colonial structures, it's something coming from within the tradition and within different schools of thought within the Indian tradition. So, I think, there are some other older works as well, Michael Pye's work on Tominaga Nakamoto – again pre-European influence – a Japanese intellectual discussing the three religions, *san jiao*, in China: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism . And again, coming up with a generic concept that's not unlike the concept of religion which is supposedly invented, like everything else, in the 19th century.

TW: *OK, Well, the argument seems to be that the use of the term religion is older, broader, transects outsider/insider distinctions. Does that mean that scholars of religion are safe? Can we rest easy? Are we no longer at risk from the conceptual tools of our analysis?*

WS: I think the approach that I would take to this is to say that it's better the devil you know. So the work that's been done in deconstructing historicising the concept of religion is by no means valueless. I'm not saying we should discard that, and go back to a happy sense that this is a natural kind and it emerges from the world unproblematically. But I think the proposals from some scholars that we should replace religion with some other term – I mean, you go all the way back to Cantwell Smith and, I think, "cumulative traditions", or Timothy Fitzgerald has made various proposals of things that we might . . . . The problem is that those terms are no less the result of our attempts to construct reality in

accordance with our presuppositions. So the advantage, to my mind, of terms like religion and Hinduism is that we are now – because of the work of these scholars who've deconstructed them – much more keenly aware of their limitations. And I don't think that they are applicable in every circumstance. So, I think there are scholars who've done ethnographic work on sites in India, where you will have people coming to a particular site which is, or might formerly have been described as Hindu, and what they're showing is this label is very problematic (**25:00**). And the kinds of people who are coming to those sites aren't, maybe, clearly identified, or can be labelled as Hindu, or Muslim, or Christian in some cases. And I would agree, in that context, the label Hinduism is perhaps not useful. But that doesn't mean there's no context in which it is useful. So it's always a matter of what the context is, what the purpose is for us. I think one of the things that strikes me as a little bit odd, is – and again this is something I've kept track of over the years – is the number of times you will hear a speaker, or at the beginning of a book somebody will deconstruct the term Hinduism. And having cleared their throat and covered their bases with this term will then go on to use the term with exactly the same referent as the supposedly pre-critical scholars who used this. So, Donald Lopez had a nice joke about this. He said you could spot scholars of Hinduism by their over-developed pectoral muscles, from continually having to make "scare quotes" in the air . . .

TW: (Laughs)

WS: …every time they used the word Hinduism! But the point is, that they continue to use the word Hinduism and the scare quotes were there. So, I think we can and we should continue to use the term, and the danger of replacing it, or of replacing religion with some other term– because those terms haven't been so thoroughly deconstructed – is we would be tempted to think of them as more closely corresponding to some actual reality and less constructed, in a way in which they aren't really.

TW: *Yes. That's also a lot of heavy lifting to go and create these new terms, and try to describe how they can kind of convey meanings that aren't subject to the same problems as previously.*

WS: I think the other dimension here is that precisely because of their history, these terms have a purchase beyond the academy that we can't ignore. And so this is sometimes described as, you know, people in Religious Studies sawing off the branch on which they sit. Now, if it were the case that there was a compelling argument for discarding the term and disbanding departments of the study of religion, our own financial self-interest wouldn't be a reason to retain the term. But there are other reasons, as I've tried to explain, why I think we should. And given that, if we are to speak to the public sphere, we need to do so in ways that are intelligible. And talking about cumulative traditions or

hierarchical structures simply doesn't cut it.

TW: It doesn't communicate.

WS: And we can go on to complicate what those terms mean, but we would be ill-advised, I think, to abandon them from that point of view, as well.

TW: *Yes. I agree. I do agree. OK. Last question, Will. We've been talking about the historical study of religion and its importance to the broader discipline of Religious Studies and its methodologies. Now in 2020 the International Association for the History of Religion will host its next World Congress here in Dunedin. Now, as head of department for Religion and Theology at Otago, I'd imagine you've already started to think through what you hope this might look like, or what ambitions you might have for the event. Can you share some early thoughts that you might have on this, please?*

WS: Sure. I think there's a lot of reasons for doing this. Some of my colleagues think I'm mad for even contemplating it! But I think there's a lot of benefits that I see in this. I mean, one of the primary aims is to share this wonderful part of the world with scholars from all over the world, and we hope many will come. And I think we should be honest about the fact that that's a reason why many people will come! Because New Zealand is a wonderful place and it will be great to share it. But it's also, for me, the other side of that is Religious Studies in New Zealand, as it is in many parts of the world, is a relatively small, and in some cases embattled discipline. We have lost departments of Religious Studies even in the short time that I've been in New Zealand. And those that do exist are small, for the most part, and not exactly directly threatened, but not as secure as they'd like to be. So I hope that hosting an event of this sort will help in a host of ways to consolidate the discipline here (**30:00**): to create visibility both internationally – for work that's been done in New Zealand – but also within New Zealand, to bring to the attention of our academic colleagues and people more broadly, also, what the academic study of religion is. That's a constant battle. New Zealand is a country where religion is – I would compare it often . . . . For many people what your religion is, or religion at all is about as much interest as whether you prefer strawberry or chocolate ice-cream. There's a kind of apathy toward religion. Not always, but. . . . And I think, demonstrating the importance of what we do by bringing the best scholars from around the world to talk about what they're doing, and why the study of religion is important will be important. And also it will give our graduate students . . . . We're a remote location, we don't get an opportunity to interact with these people. So it will be a once in a lifetime opportunity, I think, for younger scholars in New Zealand to really see the scope of what's going on overseas and to interact personally with those people. There's something irreplaceable about that

opportunity which, I think, young scholars in New Zealand don't have as much as scholars in other parts of the world.

TW: *Thank you, Will. Well, on that rather optimistic and forward-looking note I think we'll draw this interview to a close. But thank you very much for sharing your thoughts and expertise with us.*

WS: Thank you. And we look forward to seeing you all in 2020!

TW: *Indeed! Thank you.*

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