Enlightenment, Empire and Deism: interpretations of the 'Hindoo religion' in the work of East India 'Company Men', 1760-1790.

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

2017

Jessica Patterson

School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
Contents

Abstract 4
Declaration and Copyright Statement 5
Acknowledgements 6
Introduction 7
  i. The Writers and a Deist Interpretation of Hinduism 12
  ii. Enlightenment and Deism 17
  iii. The Company 23
  iv. Method and Structure 27

Chapter One: The Company, Politics and Religion 32
  i. The Political Backdrop 33
  ii. The Religious Policies of the East India Company 42
  iii. Europe, India and Deism 49
  iv. Enlightenment and Orientalism 62
  v. Conclusion 65

Chapter Two: Holwell's 'Religion of the Gentooos' 66
  i. The Gentooshastab 68
  ii. The Fall of the Delinquent Angels: A Narrative Decline 78
  iii. The Doctrine of Metempsychosis 86
  iv. Theodicy 92
  v. A ‘Christian Deist’ 102
  vi. Conclusion 108
Chapter Three: Alexander Dow’s ‘Religion of the Hindoos’  

i. Scripture and Authority  

ii. Universal Religion and the ‘Dirm Shaster’  

iii. The ‘Bedang’ and the ‘Neadirsin’  

-Vedānta/Bedang  

-Nyāyā  

iv. Dow in Context  

v. Conclusion  

Chapter Four: N.B. Halhed and Charles Wilkins  

i. The Company Setting  

ii. The Code and its Preface  

iii. The Gěě  

iv. An Alternative Context  

v. Conclusion  

Chapter Five: Enlightenment and Empire  

i. Holwell, Dow & the European World of Letters  

ii. Holwell, Dow, the Company & its Critics  

iii. Halhed & Wilkins: Chronology, Controversy and the Company  

iv. Conclusion  

Conclusion  

Bibliography  

Word count: 73,894.
Abstract

In the latter half of the eighteenth century the British presence in India meant that East India Company servants were at the forefront of European researches into the region’s history, culture and religion. This thesis offers an analysis of the work of four such Company writers, all of whom produced accounts of what they perceived to be India’s native and original religion: J.Z. Holwell (1711-1798), Alexander Dow, (1735-1779), N.B. Halhed (1751-1830), and Charles Wilkins (1749-1836). It argues that their particular interpretation of what they termed the ‘Hindoo’ or ‘Gentoo’ religion was based on their own preoccupations with European religious debates, from a perspective that can loosely be described as deist.

At the centre of this thesis is the claim that these British interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ instigated an important shift in the way that Indian theology and philosophy was understood in eighteenth-century Europe. This new paradigm moved away from characterisations of the religion according to eye-witness accounts, towards a construction of Indian religion based on the claim of British researchers that they were penetrating the original philosophical origins of a much maligned and ancient system of thought. This new interpretation of a ‘philosophic Hinduism’ was both based in and shaped Enlightenment intellectual culture, to the extent that by the turn of the century it had firmly cemented its place in not only the thought of prominent figures such as Voltaire and Raynal, but also constituted a significant topic in the emergent discourses of German idealism.

The notion of a British interpretation of Hinduism has previously been discussed as both a marker in what some have termed the ‘invention’ of Hinduism, and by those researching the history of Orientalism as an academic discipline. In the first instance, these authors are characterised as moments in a process, with some suggesting that the real ‘invention’ occurred as part of the nineteenth-century imperialist project. In the second place, these authors are most often seen as unscholarly precursors to the work of the first true British Indologist, Sir William ‘Orientalist’ Jones (1746-1794). This thesis will challenge these positions by positing these four authors as the architects of the shift towards a European conception of ‘Hinduism’ as a rational and philosophical religion.
Declaration and Copyright Statement

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

i. The author of this thesis (including any appendices and/or schedules to this thesis) owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the “Copyright”) and s/he has given The University of Manchester certain rights to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

ii. Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

iii. The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trade marks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions.

iv. Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright and any Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions described in it may take place is available in the University IP Policy (see http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=487), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, The University Library’s regulations (see http://www.manchester.ac.uk/library/aboutus/regulations) and in The University’s policy on Presentation of Theses.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank most sincerely Professor Stuart Jones, Professor Jeremy Gregory and Dr Jacqueline Suthren Hirst for their enthusiasm, steady stewardship and patient advice during the varied stages of this process.

The guidance of the wider academic community at the University of Manchester must also be noted. In particular I found a very warm welcome at the John Rylands Early Modern Print and Materiality seminar series, thanks to Dr Sasha Handley and Dr Jenny Spinks. My fellow postgraduate students were also a source of great support, with special thanks to Ben Wilcock and Sarah Wood. Thanks also to Michael Smith, who began at the same time and has shared many of the ups and downs since.

Many others, beyond the University, have helped me throughout this process. Thank you to Rosy for her hospitality in London, who always readily offered her couch. The same too goes for Kiran and Tom, in Oxford. To my international comrades, Josh, Kat and Ben, thank you for the long-distance solidarity and invaluable sense of perspective.

To my family, I would like to say thank you for always being there to hear me complain and reminding me that the worst that could happen is never really that bad. Finally, thank you to Tom Fox, for everything.
Introduction

India played an important role in the assault on religious orthodoxy during the late Enlightenment. ‘Hinduism’ in particular came to occupy the space that Chinese Confucianism had once held for thinkers like Leibniz, as an intellectual counterfoil to European civilization.¹ Finding themselves with a privileged access to Indian languages and advisors, British East India Company servants became instrumental in delivering information about ‘Hinduism’ to European audiences. In 1767 East India Company servant J.Z. Holwell described the central tenets of the ‘Gentoo’ religion as ‘short, pure, simple and uniform’, arguing that the multiple gods associated with it were merely figurative.² A year later, another Company servant, Alexander Dow, declared that the ‘Hindoo religion’ was orientated towards a belief in a singular ‘Supreme Being’.³ Following this, in two separate published works commissioned by the then Governor-General of Bengal, N.B. Halhed controversially suggested that the ‘Gentoo’ scriptures were of greater antiquity than the Bible, and Charles Wilkins described the ancient Brahmins as ‘Unitarians’.⁴ For these ‘Company men’, ‘Hinduism’ was an unjustly maligned and essentially reasonable religion, the main tenets of which were compatible with Christian moral teaching.

In contrast, a decade before Howell’s remarks, East India Company Servant John Henry Grose offered a different account of the Gentoo. In A Voyage to the East-Indies, with Observations on Various Parts There Grose described his experiences in the regions of Bombay and Surat, as well as offering a recent history of the Mughal empire,

---

the Catholic missions, and a miscellany of social practices. In terms of the ‘Gentoo religion’ Grose thought that there was ‘little or nothing to add’ to the impressions of earlier travel writers and missionaries and so confined his discussion to ‘those particulars of it that struck [him] the most.’ These ‘particulars’ were namely their religious toleration, ‘their treatment of cows’, and the ‘practice of voluntary burning’ among widows. Grose only went on to speculate about the origins of the religion in the second edition of *A Voyage to the East Indies* (1766), which described the ancient Gentooos as ‘descended from Shem’. This was a reference to the biblical notion, made popular in the early modern period, that after the Flood Noah’s sons, Japheth, Shem and Ham had repopulated the three continents of Europe, Asia and Africa. After this, claimed Gross, they were ‘instructed by the Greeks in the worship of the heroes of fabulous antiquity’, eventually consecrating an elephant as an idol. For authors like Grose, then, the Gentoo religion served as the idolatrous counter-point to revealed Christianity.

The division between Grose and the four authors above illustrates the emergence of a different approach to the interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ according to the concerns of Enlightenment religious and intellectual culture, as opposed to the conventional narratives of biblical history. In the mid to late eighteenth century East India Company servants began to produce what were described by contemporaries as the most ‘systematical accounts of the doctrines of the Gentooos’. This thesis will explore the work of four such authors, the already mentioned: John Zephaniah Holwell (1711-1798), Alexander Dow (1735-1779), Nathaniel Halhed (1751-1830) and Sir Charles Wilkins

---

(1749-1836). It will advance two central arguments: firstly, that their work advanced a uniquely ‘philosophic’ interpretation of ‘Hinduism’; and secondly, that this was a result of their engagement with heterodox religious thought. In turn, this philosophic interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ will be shown to have played a significant role in the intellectual culture of the late eighteenth century.

Contrary to the previously ‘ethnographic’ or ‘anthropological’ approaches of missionaries and travel writers like Grose, the interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ forwarded by these authors focused on its theological and philosophical content, and not on the observation of contemporary practices.\textsuperscript{11} Joan-Pau Rubiés has recently outlined a similar approach to changing attitudes regarding Hinduism. He has described a transition from ‘comparative antiquarian apologetics to a comparative libertine anthropology of religion’ in the course of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{12} Rubiés’s work builds on Hunt, Jacob and Mijnhardt’s extensive study of Bernard’s \textit{Religious Ceremonies of the World} (1723-1737).

Taking their conclusion that the book’s comparative approach to world religions ‘sowed the radical idea that religions could be compared on equal terms’,\textsuperscript{13} Rubiés argues that Bernard’s ‘Deistic brand of religious libertinism’ was the conclusion of an important evolution in European attitudes to eastern religion.\textsuperscript{14} While this thesis strongly confirms the claim that European attitudes to Hinduism had a profound effect on the religious culture of the Enlightenment, it will also challenge Rubiés’ chronology, which jumps from stating the significance of ‘comparative libertine anthropology’ to the ‘arrival of

\textsuperscript{11} The use of ‘anthropological’ and ‘ethnographic’ to describe this approach (which was grounded in the observation of customs and practice) takes its cue from two sources: Joan-Pau Rubiés, Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance. South India through European Eyes, 1250-1650, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, Wijnand Mijnhardt, \textit{The Book that changed Europe: Bernard and Picart’s Religious Ceremonies of the World}, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).


\textsuperscript{13} Hunt, Jacob, Mijnhardt, \textit{The Book that changed Europe}, p.1.

\textsuperscript{14} Rubiés, “From Christian Apologetics to Deism”, p.127.
British orientalists such as William Jones’ at the end of the eighteenth century.\(^\text{15}\) Instead, I argue that while Bernard and his predecessors were still bound by an essentially ‘anthropological’ approach, there was a further crucial shift in the period 1760-1790 among British authors, whose claims to have penetrated the original principles of this ‘symbolical religion’ instigated a redefined ‘philosophic’ approach to the interpretation of ‘Hinduism’.\(^\text{16}\)

Secondary to this is a consideration of the relationship between the emergence of these interpretations and the development of East India Company policy. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the expanding presence of the British in India meant that the opportunities for greater knowledge of Indian religion and culture were mostly exploited by Company men. Holwell and Dow were two such pioneers, both independently researching and publishing their discoveries of what they believed to be the original religion native to India. As the century progressed, the Company’s gradual transformation into a sovereign entity pressed the question of how it would accommodate its non-Christian polity and prompted a deepening official engagement with the religious history, tenets and practices of India. These were the conditions in which the works of Halhed and Wilkins were commissioned by Governor General of Bengal, Warren Hastings. I will argue that this is important in terms of understanding how these earlier ideas about Indian religion became accommodated within the more obviously political project of British colonialism. Yet, I will also emphasise that Halhed and Wilkins approached the interpretation of the Indian texts and concepts with which they were dealing by building on the conceptual framework already established by the independent projects of Holwell and Dow. The basis of the framework, I will argue, was contemporary European religious heterodoxy, with all four writers approaching the

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p.108.

interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ from a perspective that can loosely be described as deist. This philosophic interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ will be shown to have had a lasting impact, not only on writings about Indian religion and discourses on colonialism, but also on British religious heterodoxies, the work of the philosophes, and German Idealism.

This study will thus consist of an examination of the relevant political and intellectual climates in which the work of Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins was produced, as well a detailed appreciation of their engagement with particular ideas and sources. It will also offer an assessment of their significance and impact. It will take the structure of three case-studies, beginning with Holwell, then Dow, whose work had received far less detailed scholarly attention, particularly as significant in their own right. This will be followed by a consideration of Halhed and Wilkins, together, in order to demonstrate that these already well known protégés of Warren Hastings, governor-general, were in fact the inheritors of a discourse already established by Holwell and Dow. The following introduction will provide an overview of various contexts in which I will consider their work throughout the thesis, as well as the relevant historiographical discussions on which this study will have an impact. Firstly I introduce how other scholars have previously understood these writers. In the second section I clarify my approach to deism and religious heterodoxy in the Enlightenment. Following this I present the account of their work in relation to the Company. Finally, I discuss the methods and sources used in this thesis, as well as provide an outline of the following chapters and their contents.
The Writers and a Deist Interpretation of Hinduism

Prior to this study these earlier writers have received little historiographical attention, their scholarship having been eclipsed in quality by their Orientalist successors. Indeed William Jones, and his founding of an ‘Asiatick Society of Bengal’ in 1784, are often considered definitive of eighteenth-century British understandings of ‘Hinduism’. This is true of scholars across the interpretive divide of post-colonial studies, with Said describing Jones as the ‘undisputed founder’ of Orientalism, and those tending towards a more apologetic agenda invoking Jones as the embodiment of what some have termed the ‘new Orientalism’. This latter approach pin-points the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century as the site of a ‘new Orientalism’, or ‘Oriental Renaissance’, in which Indological scholarship was born out of British and Indian encounters. This thesis does not dispute the placement of Jones as the primary representative of a certain kind of Orientalism; indeed it holds that his approach to ‘Hinduism’ was distinct from the philosophic interpretation on a number of counts. It does, however, object to the historiographical reduction of these earlier British authors to mere precursors. Even where Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins have been grouped together before, it has been under the banner of preparing the way for the Asiatick Society. In contrast to this prevailing historiographic trend, I shall argue that their approach was distinctive and important in its own right, both in the ways that these

---

19 In answer to Said’s claim that Jones’s ambition to obtain a perfect knowledge of India as complicit with Imperialism, Franklin quips, ‘Perhaps polemical post-colonialism might admit there can be no destruction of prejudice without understanding that it springs from knowledge’, in, ‘Orientalist Jones’, p.19.
21 Marshall’s The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century (1970), is a collection of excerpts from the work of all four writers, and Hastings, which ends with several chapters of text taken from Jones.
authors defined their own terms, and because of the impact that their thought had on contemporary intellectual culture.

As the following review of Dow’s *History of Hindostan* shows, the work of East India Company writers was considered at the time to be a significant and new contribution to European knowledge:

‘…though India hath been much spoken of in ancient and modern ages, its real internal history hath hitherto been very imperfectly known, and still more imperfectly its philosophical and religious system. The curious and the learned will, however, have the pleasure and advantage of obtaining a fuller acquaintance with these things, in consequence of the great connections which the English have lately had with the East Indies, and the vast dominion they have acquired in that country. Several writers have favoured us with some account of the Indian affairs…’

Indeed, Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins each claimed to have delved into the mysteries of the mischaracterised ‘Gentoo’ religion to an unprecedented degree. Significantly, this was a description with which many of their contemporaries agreed.

Holwell was hailed by Moses Mendelssohn, an important thinker for both the German and Jewish Enlightenments, as the first author ‘to see through the eyes of a native Brahmin’. Dow was similarly highly regarded by Voltaire, who cited him as an authority in a number of works. The work of Halhed and Wilkins followed in the two decades after, and were hailed as the first authentic and substantial translations of Brahminical

---

scriptures into English, marking them as important contributions to European
knowledge.\textsuperscript{25}

Holwell was the first of the four to publish, his \textit{Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Provinces of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan} appearing in three volumes during the years 1765-71.\textsuperscript{26} Holwell’s central position was that Hinduism, in its ancient form, contained all of the essential truths of monotheistic belief. Alexander Dow (1735-1779) also operated independently from official Company patronage and similarly described \textit{Hindoo} religion as monotheistic. His work, \textit{The History of Hindostan} was published in two volumes (1768-1772) and contained several appended essays featuring a discussion of the country’s culture and religious traditions.\textsuperscript{27} In contrast, the projects of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed and Charles Wilkins fell under the direct patronage of Governor-General Warren Hastings. It was at the request of Hastings that Halhed produced \textit{A Code of Gentoo Laws} (1776), which was a digest of religious ordinances compiled from various sources, rendered into Persian by a panel of pandit scholars, and subsequently by Halhed into English.\textsuperscript{28} Ensuring the British publication of Charles Wilkins’s \textit{The Bhāgavāṭ-Geētā, or Dialogues of Krēēshnă and Ārjŏōn} (1785) was also the design of Hastings.\textsuperscript{29} However, the prefaces and introductions that Halhed and Wilkins prepared for these literary contributions expressed a number of personal convictions which placed ‘Hindoo’ religion in the context of European religious dissent and heterodoxy.

As well as admirers, because of the religiously liberal conclusions of their studies, these authors also had their critics. Their approach to ‘Hinduism’ was one with which

\begin{flushright}
Charles Grant, three terms Director of the East India Company’s Board of Governors
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{28} Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, \textit{A Code of Gentoo Laws; or Ordinations of the Pundits}, (London, 1776).
\textsuperscript{29} Charles Wilkins, \textit{The Bhāgavāṭ-Geētā, or Dialogues of Krēēshnă and Ārjŏōn}, (London, 1785).
(1794, 1805 and 1816), did not agree. In response to Dow’s claim that they worshipped the same ‘Supreme Being’ he wrote:

‘It is doubtless very pleasing to discover the recognition of this grand principle, the foundation of all true religion, even under an immense mass of falsehood and superstition; but some persons seem to have thought, that in ascertaining the existence of this principle in the writings of the Hindoos, or in the opinions of their learned men, they had substantially vindicated and established the religious character of that people; making little account of their idolatry, which as practised by the Brahmans, they represent to be no more than a symbolical worship of the divine attributes…’

In fact Grant and his circle were anxious to make the opposite case to Dow, Holwell, Halhed and Wilkins. While the British were extending their influence in India, there had been no attempt to institute a missionary campaign. Yet, with the revival of Evangelical Christianity towards the latter half of the century there were more and more calls for what one sermon titled *The Duty of attempting the Propagation of the Gospel among our Mahometan and Gentoo Subjects.* In 1792, in order to convince the Company that a Christian mission in India was an immediate necessity, Grant published a lengthy document designed to prove the moral depravity of the ‘Hindoos’. In it he chastised what he termed ‘European apologists’ for presenting a skewed picture of the ‘Hindoo’ religion. An unrelenting advocate of the evangelical movement, belonging both to the Scottish Society for the Promotion of Christianity in the Highlands and Islands and the so-called ‘Clapham Sect’ of evangelical reformers and abolitionists, Grant saw the Hindoos as practising nothing short of ‘gross idolatry’.

---

writers like Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins were only made possible, according to Grant, because their proponents leaned to ‘so latitudinarian an opinion, an opinion which falls below even the creed of deism’ that such ‘falsities’ were consistent with their generally heterodox account of religious truth.34

Grant’s belief that these writers were so heterodox as to be ‘below even the creed of deism’ corresponds with their treatment by several historians of colonialism and South Asia, who have suggested that they possessed ‘deist leanings’.35 For example, in the introduction to the an anthology of extracts from their work, Marshall describes Holwell and Dow as ‘writing from a deist point of view’.36 German Indologist, Wilhelm Halbfass adopted the same position in his celebrated ‘philosophical essay’ Indien und Europa (1981). In it Halbfass describes a ‘deistic motif’ as running through the early history of Indology.37 In all of these cases, though, very little beyond the odd quotation is given to support this claim. There has simply been no sustained attempt to explain what exactly about their work was ‘deist’ and what that would mean in the context of eighteenth century thought. Without this clarification these thinkers become distorted, reduced to the simplistic notion that they offered a more ‘sympathetic’ approach to Indian religion. Their religious heterodoxy becomes conflated with the sympathetic reading of Indian religion advanced by William Jones, whose work was so supportive of Christian primacy that it was welcomed by several Christian apologists.38 Rather than presenting their views

34 Grant, Observations, p.139.
38 In 1788 Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, republished some of Jones’s work on Hinduism, adding a note that Jones had proven (contra Halhed) that Hindu traditions confirmed the Biblical Flood: Sermons on Public Occasions, and Tracts on Religious Subjects, (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon Printer to the University, 1788), p.221.
as a coherent and superficially ‘deist’ body of thought, I trace the interaction of each
writer specific religious controversies and debates. In doing so I will capture the
intellectual complexity of their thought and therefore present a historically rich case for
the argument that theirs was a ‘philosophic’ and not merely ‘sympathetic’ interpretation
of ‘Hinduism’.

In doing so, the thesis will build on a growing body of work within intellectual
history which maintains that religious thought remained central to intellectual life in the
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, despite the association of this period with
secularisation and modernity.39 Histories of British encounters with India in the
eighteenth century have, by contrast, tended to focus on the history of empire, or the
formation of Orientalism as an academic discipline, leaving the religious thinking that
shaped these approaches largely untouched.40 This thesis will redress this, to present a
new intellectual history of British interactions with Indian culture in the eighteenth
century, which argues for the importance of European religious debates.

Enlightenment and Deism

Questions relating to the relationship between the Enlightenment and religion have
proven to be an important site of historiographical debate. Those positing
Enlightenment as a fundamental critique of the rationality and the coherence of religious
epistemologies, such as Jonathan Israel’s notion of an exclusively ‘radical Enlightenment’,
limit this association to expressions of atheist and Spinozist metaphysics.41 Others have

39 See for example, The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy, 1600-1750, (Cambridge: Cambridge
40 See Raymond Schwab, The Oriental Renaissance, Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1800, (New
York: Columbia University Press, 1984) as an example of the latter.
suggested that the Enlightenment had identifiable religious origins in both Protestant heterodoxy and Catholic counter-reformation movements, particularly in the formation of theories about the social role of religion and toleration. This view of a ‘religious Enlightenment’ accurately points to how many of those figures associated with the Enlightenment retained and argued for particular forms of faith and religious belief. Isabel Rivers has, for example, demonstrated how many conceptual shifts in British philosophy were related to theological disputes on the nature of humanity, reason and divinity, all of which stemmed from theological propositions.

In the eighteenth century the efforts of Latitudinarians to reduce the number of ‘essential’ Christian beliefs shifted, beyond internal theological rancour, towards a more critical consideration of Christianity in a global context. As mentioned at the beginning, scholars have recognised the importance of Picart and Bernard’s Religious Ceremonies of the World (1723-1737) in articulating the idea that religion was an anthropologically determined category, rather than an absolute expression of divine truth. I will show that as the discovery of Eastern religions became a crucial vehicle for these debates, the authors considered in this study had a direct impact on these critical discourses. Diderot’s contribution to the 1774 edition of Histoire des deux Indes, for example, argued that the creation story of the ‘Gentoux’ (Gentoos) was no less fantastical than the biblical one, allowing the philosophe to launch an attack on revealed religion in general. Diderot’s source for this was Halhed’s Code of Gentoo Laws. Comparative critiques like these helped to foster an attitude whereby all religions were subject to similar historical

---

45 Hunt, Jacob, Mijnhardt, The Book that changed Europe, p.271.
processes, and the primacy of Christian teaching was increasingly put to question. All four writers invoked this trend by declaring an attitude of detached impartiality as the methodological starting point of their enquiries, which often led them to draw out the similarities, both sublime and vulgar, between the Christian and ‘Gentoo’ traditions.

In the course of the thesis, I will also, however, demonstrate how these writers pushed beyond this anthropological project in comparative religion, towards a ‘philosophic’ understanding of ‘Hinduism’ which based its claims to authority in the interpretation of texts. This was located in their relationship with what a historian of English deism has described as, ‘Primitive Religion and the Priestcraft Hypothesis’.47 This theory posited the idea that the original, pristine and universal religion of reason was gradually lost to humanity, largely because of the interested machinations of ‘priests’ who sought the consolidation of their unique social status through the promotion of esoteric religion.48 Among Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins there was a consistent differentiation between the original religion of India and its corrupt modern manifestations, which were a product of priest sponsored superstition. Halhed, for example, lamented the ‘priest-rid mis’ry of the blinded throng’, and longed for a return to the ‘intellectual fire’ of Bhagavad Gītā, recently translated by Wilkins, which he saw as ‘containing the most ancient and pure religious principles of the Hindoos.”49 While some of these highly Protestant concepts were present in the works previous to theirs, what set these authors apart were their claims to have discovered the original religion of the Gentoo in the texts of the ancient Brahmins. Halhed’s pithy words were not simply a reflection on the corruption of contemporary Gentoo practices, but also a reference to the

49 Halhed’s response to Charles Wilkins’s translation of the Bhagavadgītā, see Rocher, Orientalism, Poetry and the Millennium, p.124.
hitherto unknown contents of the Bhagavad Gītā. How they supported those claims and what they purported to be the contents of those texts will be the subject of the following chapters.

This discussion also takes place against the backdrop of a revival of scholarly interest in the roles that atheism and deism played in the intellectual formation of the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{50} This has led to important questions about how we can understand religious concepts and labels, such as ‘radical’ or ‘deist’. Critics of the widespread use of such terminologies have pointed to a methodological failure to understand how these terms were used at the time.\textsuperscript{51} With this revision many have argued that in the eighteenth century, such were the shades of deism, the term could amount to anything from radical heresy to simply designating a moralistic theism that would not have been unpalatable to most liberal Christians.\textsuperscript{52} Such challenges have consequently prompted historians to talk of ‘multiple deisms and diverse heterodoxies’, rather than deism as a simple signifier.\textsuperscript{53} Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins were certainly deist according to a minimal set of identifying criteria. Historians have generally agreed, for example, that deism was associated with the view that superstition and clerical influence were barriers to human progress.\textsuperscript{54} This is something that all four authors use to explain their account of contemporary “Hinduism” as a corrupt version of its original. Likewise, they all cast varying degrees of doubt on the providential role of God, another agreed hallmark of

\textsuperscript{50}See Wayne Hudson, Diego Lucci, Jeffery R. Wrigelsworth (eds.) Atheism and Deism Revalued, Heterodox Religious Identities in Britain, 1650-1800, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) & Robertson, Mortimer (eds), The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy, 1600-1750.


\textsuperscript{52}Hudson, Lucci, Wrigelsworth “Introduction”, Atheism and Deism Revalued, pp.6-7.


deism approximately defined. Yet, these broad strokes of association do not do credit to the full scope of religiously orientated discussions in their work. While Holwell was deeply concerned with theodicy, for example, Halhed forwarded a sceptical account of religion as a historically contingent phenomenon. Recognising that scholars have criticised the explanatory weight with which the term deism has sometimes been imbued, then, I will set out a clear definition of how this term can be understood specifically in the late eighteenth century and to what extent it can describe the work of these East India Company authors. The resulting argument will be that while deism is a useful umbrella term for describing the main issues that shaped their work, it is also important to recognise that they all developed their own idiosyncratic theologies. As an alternative, I will outline to the complex role that European religious discourses played in their interpretation of Indian religion.

This line of inquiry also requires an additional level of conceptual clarification. Considering their work the product of European religious discourses necessarily leads us to consider the existing debate as to whether ‘Hinduism’ is a construct, the foundations of which were laid out in the work of European orientalists. This scholarly position suggests that the term ‘Hinduism’, although adopted and adapted by ‘Hindus’, was nevertheless rooted in a Western concept of ‘religion’. According to this line of argument, British Orientalism played a leading part in this process, not least in the priority it attached to scripture and the idea that the Hindu religion formed the basis of Indian civilization. Indeed, all the authors in this study have been recognised as having a degree of influence on the development of the term ‘Hinduism’, as a signifier of a unified

---

religion that is native to India. In this thesis I adopt the position, alongside scholars like Lorenzen, that this history was far more complex. As Lorenzen has pointed out, Hindu religion as expressed in the theological and devotional practices surrounding the Bhagavad Gītā and other texts acquired a sharper self-conscious identity much earlier. In a similar vein, I will demonstrate that many of these authors were picking up on contemporary debates and innovations among pundit scholars, as much as they were in the business of inventing certain mythologies. When I discuss these authors’ ‘construction’ of ‘Hinduism’, therefore, I am describing their role in the manufacture of a particular European view of Indian religion in a specific period. To clarify this I will use the eighteenth-century terms ‘Hindoo’ and ‘Gentoo’, rather than ‘Hindu’ and ‘Hinduism’, except for where a point is being made about this wider history.

The argument that the image of ‘the religion of the Gentoos’ painted by these authors was the product of idiosyncratic intellectual mythologies is not the same as the claim that these and other European Orientalists ‘invented’ the modern concept of ‘Hinduism.’ It does, however, call to attention the actual degree of ‘invention’ in their work, which ranges from misreading to deliberate forgery. Holwell’s claim to have been translating original manuscripts, for example, will be shown to be particularly dubious. Dow’s supposed translation of original manuscripts is built on similarly suspect claims. Although Halhed and Wilkins worked more closely with authentic sources, the stages of reinterpretation that these went through also betray a certain degree of invention. If our assessment was predicated on the basis that their works were important contributions to Indology as a scholarly discipline then the idea that elements of their work were fabrications would have a devastating impact. Yet, the starting point for this study is located in a different claim: that all four authors intentionally presented a version of

58 Will Sweetman, Mapping Hinduism, p.56-57.
Indian religion that spoke to European intellectual culture and debate. More specifically, it takes the idea that these writers expressed opinions that were deist and asks exactly what that means in context, in order to understand the version of Hindu religion that emerged as a result. Starting from this point, the significance of the inventive parts of their work is what they reveal about those intellectual origins.

The Company

In the two decades that the work of these writers appeared (1760-1790) the East India Company underwent a dramatic transformation from a commercial enterprise to an administrative government. The subject of a rich historiography, this metamorphosis has nevertheless largely been viewed as a matter of practical politics, leaving its ideological foundations largely unexamined. While the ideology of empire came to be addressed with the advent of post-colonial studies, such histories have still tended to frame this period in terms of its consequences rather than intellectual origins. More recently, though, there have been attempts to investigate the intellectual history of the East India Company and its place in contemporary discourses about empire and expansion. Robert Travers, for example, has offered an important discussion of the East India Company’s search for legitimacy in the remnants of Mughal power in the province of Bengal. Similarly, Philip J. Stern’s *The Company-State* charts the long history of the Company’s concern with sovereignty back to Early Modern political discourse. While the thesis presented here is not intended as an intellectual history of the Company, it does have an intimate relationship with that project. The work of authors like Stern and Travers provide an

---

important historiographical starting point for our inquiry into how the discussion of Indian religion presented by Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins related to the political context in which they were operating. In turn, the central argument that religious heterodoxy was an integral part of British encounters with Indian culture in this period presents an important set of implications for the development of this emerging historiographical field.

The period considered in this thesis (1760-1790) contains two broad epochs in the evolution of the British presence in India. The first is the conflict and resolution surrounding the 1757 battle of Plassey. The decisive encounter had been waged and won in response to the resistance of the Mughal governor of Bengal, Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah, who had attacked and captured the Company’s base in Calcutta. Having asserted itself militarily the Company colluded with and installed as the new nawab, the demoted army leader, Mir Jafar. Robert Clive, the Colonel credited with the victory at Plassey, went on to institute the system since described as ‘dual government’ whereby the Company secured fiscal dominance but was able to abandon administrative responsibilities to the Nawab.63 The following decade was a time of crisis in British Bengal. Extorting revenues resulted in a general decline in trade, as well as a devastating set of local famines.64 It is against this backdrop that the work of Holwell and Dow was produced and received. They were both critical of these developments, but from different perspectives.

The second shift in power is important for understanding the relative positions of Halhed and Wilkins, both of whom were directly engaged in the business of legitimising the new administration. It was on a tide of hostile public opinion that the

---

question of the British presence in India became a matter for parliamentary debate. The resulting Regulating Act of 1773 resolved that both the British government and the Company’s Board of Directors would together appoint a governor-general, and a Council of Bengal, which had exclusive authority over all British territory in India. It was incumbent on this post to ensure that the Company’s operations were to the benefit of Britain, and the Company’s stakeholders. It was into this role that Warren Hastings stepped, keen to affirm his commitment to ending the abuses that had both drained the Company’s profits, and ruined its public image. How he chose to legitimise this project involved Halhed and Wilkins, whose work was commissioned by Hastings.

The four authors have consequently been dealt with differently. Holwell and Dow have received little scholarly attention, and where they have it has been in support of more general points about the nature of the Company, the historical construction of ‘Hinduism’ or the history of Orientalism. In contrast, the work of Halhed and Wilkins has rarely been considered outside of their specific political context in relation to Hastings. This lack of comprehensive attention is somewhat a product of narratives that see these authors (Wilkins less so) as primitive precursors to the more scholarly Indology of Jones. This study will shift this chronology. I will argue for the importance of the more obscure and ad hoc productions of Holwell and Dow in shaping contemporary attitudes towards Indian religion, pointing to the need for a reassessment of both Halhed and Wilkins in light of what came before them, rather than the hindsight which sees them as leading to Jones. Consequently, I will argue that as well as belonging to

---

Hastings’s administrative project, the personal conjectures expressed within the work of Halhed and Wilkins were much more closely related to the ideas expressed in Holwell and Dow’s work than has previously been recognised.

In doing so, the thesis also addresses a more complex problem in the historiography. As noted above, researchers have tended to attribute this ‘deist point of view’ to some notion of a shared project among these men, often expressed as a ‘sympathetic’ approach to Indian culture and religion. Further to this, the notion of a sympathetic approach to Indian religion has become loosely aligned with colonial interests, according to the general maxim of post-colonial studies that the internal contradictions of the Enlightenment exposed themselves to sinister effect in empire. Siraj Ahmed has, for example, suggested that ‘Company officials turned the scholarly discipline that deists had devised as a form of critique within Europe into a form of propaganda in the colony’. While this is certainly true of the production of Orientalist knowledge at the turn of the century, when the Company became an official arm of the British government in India, it rather obscures the complexities of this relationship in the period prior. On the one hand it presupposes a conflict between colonialism and the critical culture of the Enlightenment that was really never so clearly cut. On the other hand, it ignores the potential that deist interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ had for those who did in fact seek to advance some form of critique of political colonialism.

It must be emphasised that in the position adopted in this thesis it not the same as that of historians forwarding an apologetic of early colonialism by arguing that cross-cultural exchange was the defining characteristic of European interactions with foreign

---

69 The intellectual origins of this being Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (London: Verso, 1997 [New York, 1944]). See for example Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove, 1963), which argues that European humanism paradoxically provided the framework for dehumanising the colonial subject.
70 Ahmed,*The Stillbirth Capital*, p.169.
societies. Such an approach is captured by the suggestion that Indian scholars contributed to a ‘Bengal Renaissance’ as a result of interactions with the British, which negates the more instrumental nature of Orientalist research. Instead it is my argument that while intellectual and political Orientalism certainly had increasingly intertwined histories, these early approaches to Indian religion and philosophy demonstrate that this is not the only way to understand these encounters and their contemporary bearing. Instead, as the following chapters will demonstrate, the work of these writers had an important impact on the Enlightenment and that consequently, although inflecting colonial ideologies was one of the outcomes of their work, this was neither a straightforward exchange nor a direct consequence of their approach.

Method and Structure

I have chosen to focus my inquiry on the work of Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins for several reasons. They present the sharpest examples of the intersection between deism and British interpretations of ‘Hinduism’, as well as what I have called the construction of ‘philosophic’ approach to ‘Hinduism’. Moreover, as East India Company employees they also place our discussion directly in the context of the Enlightenment grappling with empire. They have only been grouped together so explicitly once before, with extracts of their work appearing in an anthology introduced by P.J Marshall in *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (1970). Yet, none of the scholars repeating the claim that appears in Marshall’s introduction, that Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins were

---

united by deism, has offered a corresponding analysis of their work. This strikes me as a significant gap in historical understanding of the British intellectual culture in the late eighteenth-century. As such this thesis will present a thorough investigation of the work, ideas and sources of each author.

This approach has necessitated careful and comprehensive reading of their works and their intellectual milieu. The sources used are all literary in nature, starting with the printed publications of these authors and the publications of other writers that they cited or with whom their work was closely affiliated. These have generally been read in their original form, accessed via digitised archives. Likewise, analysis of the reception that each author’s contribution received necessitated the exploration of contemporary journals, literary magazines and pamphlets through similar resources. This thesis also presents contextual information taken from letters in the East India Company records, in the form of official documentation, and the private correspondence of Company servants, usually as a part of manuscript collections in the British Library or in published works. Consequently, I have worked to build a comprehensive picture of the intellectual context in which the ideas of these authors were conceived and communicated by selecting relevant evidence from a collection of contemporary literature, political discourse, religious pamphlets and personal interactions. Finally, some consideration of the Indian ideas and sources that these authors will have encountered has occasionally demanded consultation of some important Hindu texts in translation, supported by specialist secondary literature on the interpretation of these texts.

The close analysis of these sources has proved particularly significant in the case of Holwell and Dow, neither of whom has received much scholarly attention in their own right. As mentioned previously, their work has mostly been called upon as less proficient counterpoints to the achievements of figures like William Jones. Where they
have been explored in more detail, it is often still in the service of a grander narrative, such as Urs App’s assessment of Holwell as one case-study in a total of eight diverse figures of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, exploring the origins of Orientalism.4 App’s analysis will be discussed in more detail in chapter two, but it suffices to observe here that Holwell’s relation to other Company employees is not explored. It is as a result of this lack of specific analysis of their work in context, and of the argument that Halhed and Wilkins are better understood in light of their work, that this thesis is weighted towards Holwell and Dow.

Following this introduction the thesis consists of five chapters, the central three of which concern Holwell, Dow, then Halhed and Wilkins together, in close detail. This will be followed by a fifth chapter considering the impact of their work, and a short conclusion. The first chapter will begin by setting out the intellectual and the political backdrop to the work of these writers, with a particular emphasis on the religious policies of the East India Company. In order to appreciate what was original in their work, and its contemporary resonance, I will also provide a general overview of the existing state of knowledge of ‘Hinduism’ prior to the period covered by the thesis. This opening chapter will also provide some detail on the political career of each figure, in order to foreground later discussions about how their interpretations of Indian religion either fell into or digressed from certain colonial ideologies. Related to this it will touch on the role of knowledge about Indian religion in the Company’s construction of administrative legitimacy, which will prove an important facet in the following analysis of Halhed and Wilkins.

Holwell will be the first author to be discussed in detail. The impact of his personal theology on his account of Gentoo religion will be the subject of the chapter two.

In it I will present a detailed analysis of Holwell’s intellectual context and sources. In the case of Dow I will likewise explore the particular nature and influences on his interpretation of Indian religion. This will take place in chapter three. Next, in chapter four, the work of Halhed and Wilkins will be considered in together. This is because the purpose of the chapter is to focus on reassessing their work in light of our understanding of Holwell and Dow. Consequently this chapter will pin-point specifically those areas of their work that could be described as deist, how this related to the discourses established before them, and what this means for understanding of the Company. Finally, in the fifth and final chapter, the thesis will go on to demonstrate that it was because of the religiously heterodox content of these works that they had a particular resonance for other intellectual projects, such as Enlightenment critiques of religion and empire, German Idealism and nineteenth-century British radical culture. This will first be via a focus on how their work was received in Britain, in relation to Company politics, and then more generally through the lens of what Sankar Muthu has described as anti-imperialist discourses in the long-eighteenth century. It will then turn to its impact on some significant figures associated with the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire.

At the centre of this thesis, then, is the claim that these British interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ instigated an important shift in the way that Indian theology and philosophy was understood in eighteenth-century Europe. Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins established their authority on a different basis from that of the preceding genres of eye-witness ‘ethnographic’ or ‘anthropological’, accounts, towards a construction of Indian religion based on the claim that they had penetrated the original truths of the religion according to scholarly research. It will argue that this new ‘philosophic’ interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ was both based in and shaped Enlightenment intellectual culture, to the extent that by the turn of the century it had firmly cemented its place in not only the

thought of prominent figures associated with the Enlightenment, but also in its various intellectual off-shoots.
Chapter One: The Company, Politics and Religion

In Europe the idea of a unified, ancient, monotheistic and native religion of India was developed in two particular, and sometimes conflicting, intellectual and political discourses. Towards the last two decades of the eighteenth century it became intertwined with the ideological foundations of an expanding East India Company in need of a legitimising theory of government. In this sense knowledge of Indian religion played into claims that the Company had imposed an ‘enlightened’ government, respectful of native traditions. But firstly, and with a much longer history, it had delivered an important example to those wishing to challenge the assumed supremacy of Christian orthodoxy in favour of a more universal and minimalist concept of religion. This chapter will provide an exposition of both, an understanding of which will be necessary for the detailed analysis that will follow. The first section will outline the developments that the East India Company underwent in this period, and the situation of Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins within them. This will include an account of how Indian religion was understood by the Company in the period running up to and covered by this thesis. It will then turn to consider the history of European approaches to Eastern religions, outlining the pre-existing intellectual framework for the discovery of Indian religion, and the ways in which their work marked a shift towards what I have described as a philosophic approach to Hinduism. This will be followed by a more specific account of deism in the eighteenth century, and how understanding the work of these authors as interacting with associated religious heterodoxies positions them in relation to a philosophic approach.
The Political Backdrop

‘A State in the disguise of a Merchant’ was Edmund Burke’s summary of the East India Company as it stood at the time of the Impeachment trial of Warren Hastings (1788-1795). Indeed, during the course of the eighteenth century the East India Company developed from a network of trading out-posts to possessing many of the attributes of a sovereign and territorial power. In 1765 the Company was officially granted the right to Diwani, that is, the right to collect taxes in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. With this came public criticism and concern for the rights of native subjects. Religion had an important role throughout this transformation, sometimes justifying Company policy and sometimes providing the foundation for criticism of it. Since its inception some had assumed that it was the Company’s moral duty to utilise its trade mission for the purpose of saving souls. In particular, the period from 1770 onwards saw mounting pressure from Evangelicals for the Company to pursue a missionary policy. For others, though, religious toleration was an important principle of enlightened government. Dow, for example, was an articulate supporter of this position. Most Company officials held on to the pragmatic idea that non-interference in native religions and institutions was the best means of achieving stability and tranquillity. What this looked like and how it was justified was, however, subject to variation. The works of Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins were instrumental in constructing the various ideological avenues for the justification, as well as criticism, of Company policy and rule.

As Burke’s assertion that the Company was ‘a State in disguise as a Merchant’ suggested, it was not just Hastings but the Company itself that was under scrutiny at the

---

4 Penelope Carson, *The East India Company and Religion*, p.4, p.15.
time of his trial. The proceedings became a sensation and newspaper columns were crowded with transcripts of the various speeches, as well as with letters submitted by a scandalised public. At the heart of the affair was the question of legitimacy. The gradual conquest of Bengal produced a set of circumstances beyond the Company’s original capacity and remit. As the anonymous author of the pamphlet *Reflections on the Present State of our Indian Affairs* (1764) pointed out to the public: the East India Company had ‘been changed contrary to the intention of its institution’. Rather than ‘living like merchants under the protection of the prince in whose dominions they resided’ they had become ‘sovereigns of those very princes’ to the extent that ‘they hold in more absolute vassalage, than ever did the monarch of France the meanest of his feudatories.’

While for some, that these conquests were successful was a positive affirmation of Britain’s global significance, for others it raised important moral and ethical questions about the role of the Company in India and the impact of its returning wealthy plunders on the political culture of Britain.

The British presence in India had indeed begun as a commercial enterprise. The Royal Charter of 1600 had given the English East India Company an effective monopoly on British trade with India. It operated through a series of complex relationships with powerful officials and dynasties within the fragmented Mughal Empire, the gradual disintegration of which was both aided and exploited by the Company’s interference. The conversion of the Company from trading enterprise to political power has largely been attributed to the actions of Robert Clive, who in the period 1748-1763 rapidly

---

7 See for example, Adam Anderson, *An historical and chronological deduction of the origin of commerce, from the earliest accounts to the present time. Containing an history of the great commercial interests of the British Empire*, (London, 1764).
expanded the Company’s territory. From his arrival in India in 1756 to his departure five years later, he led the Company from a position of defeat at the hands of the Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah, who had recaptured Calcutta and the Company’s Fort, to eventual dominance in the sub-continent. Clive retaliated at the battle of Plassey on 23rd June 1757, and Siraj-ud-Daulah was roundly defeated and replaced with the puppet Nawab: Mir Jafar. In all but name the Company had usurped imperial authority and sovereignty over the region. Clive’s victories were controversial and despite their seeming success, the following decade confirmed his critics’ misgivings when widespread extortion resulted in a general decline in trade, as well as a devastating set of local famines. While many regarded Clive as a patriotic hero, just as vocal were those who accused him of acting like the popular archetype of the Oriental despot. Indeed, it was the astonishing amounts of private wealth accumulated by Clive and his faction, and suspicion at the means by which it had been achieved, that brought the conditions in India to public attention. So pervasive was this perception that men associated with it acquired their own label of ‘nabob’: a word deriving from an Indian title of rank which generally came to describe those who ‘obtained their fortunes by grievously oppressing the natives of India’. Even those whose agenda it was to downplay the idea agreed that Clive was ‘a real and genuine English Nabob’.

---

12 Anna Clark, *Scandal*, p.86.
13 Joseph Price, *The saddle put on the right horse; or, An enquiry into the reason why certain persons have been denominated nabobs; With an arrangement of those gentlemen into their proper classes, of real, spurious, reputed, or mushroom, nabob* (London, 1783), p.1.
The legitimacy of the British presence in India became a matter for parliamentary debate, as well as public opinion. The questions that were raised included whether the Company was constitutionally capable of holding and governing territory, whether it was possible for a foreign company to establish a system of laws in ancient and civilized polities such as India, and, whether a British government in India would increase or decrease the despotism it had experienced under Clive’s version of the Company. Yet, after the Company agreed to pay the Government an annual subsidy of £400,000 and promised to correct the abuses of which it had been accused, Parliament made no specific recommendations. In the following years, though, in addition to evidence of corrupt practices, increased military expenditure meant that the resulting reduction in the Company’s revenues added an important economic imperative to resolving questions of jurisdiction and legitimacy. The resulting Regulating Act of 1773 resolved that both the British government and the Company’s Board of Directors would together appoint a Governor-General, and a council of Bengal, which had exclusive authority over all British territory in India. It was incumbent on this post to ensure that the Company’s operations were to the benefit of Britain, and the Company’s stakeholders. It was into this role that Warren Hastings stepped, keen to affirm his commitment to ending the abuses that had both drained the Company’s profits, and ruined its public image.

*Holwell and Dow both had a complex relationship with these developments, much of which was aired through the pages of various publications, reviews and replies. They were both intimately involved in the political aspirations of the Company, but they were also its critics. In contrast, Halhed and Wilkins were Hastings’s protégés. The production

of their work on Indian religion was the defining condition of their involvement in the politics of the Company. Yet, whether that relationship operated vice versa remains arguable. This thesis will show that their work was concerned with much more than the legitimisation of Hastings’s policies.

Holwell’s political involvement in the Company was particularly fraught. Despite his position as chief surgeon of the Company’s hospital in Calcutta he actively sought an appointment in the administration of the Company, by persuading the Board of Directors that his plans for reform would raise funds. He was eventually appointed zamindar in 1752 (a revenue-collecting role that had existed in the company since 1698) and was placed twelfth in the Fort William council, with the stipulation that he rise no higher. Holwell duly raised revenues and the restriction on his promotion was removed.17 Disaster would soon follow, however, when in June 1756 the Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah, attacked Fort William. Senior officials abandoned the Fort, leaving Holwell in charge. What followed was to be the subject of Holwell’s literary debut, A Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen, and Others, who were suffocated in the BLACK-HOLE (1758).18 This highly embellished narrative described the imprisonment and death of those who were taken captive once the Fort finally fell. Considered by many, both at the time and subsequently, to be replete with exaggerations and inconsistencies, the narrative nevertheless helped make the Black Hole an important symbol of the barbarity of the Muslim Mughal regime against the British and remained so until it was finally eclipsed by the 1857 “Sepoy Mutiny”.19

18 Full Title: A Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen, and Others, who were suffocated in the BLACK-HOLE in FORT-WILLIAM, at CALCUTTA in the Kingdom of BENGAL in the Night succeeding the 20th Day of June, 1756 (1758).
After Clive recaptured Calcutta in January 1757 a small faction gathered around Holwell, which included the chairman of the Company, and he was appointed to fourth place in the council and governor by fourfold rotation. In another turn of events, though, the election of directors in April 1758 meant that his supporters lost power and Holwell was reduced to ninth place in the council. When Clive resigned the governorship in January 1760 Holwell succeeded him for just six months, during which time he was involved in an intrigue that aimed to persuade the new and unpopular Nawab, Mir Jafar, to surrender power to his son-in-law, Mir Kasim, while retaining his title. The scheme was implemented by Holwell’s successor, Henry Vansittart, in October 1760 with the result that Mir Jafar resigned completely and Mir Kasim became Nawab. Many regarded Holwell’s role in this coup to be financially motivated, to the extent that he felt it necessary to publish a defence of his conduct in India, titled *An address to the proprietors of East India Stock*. This was published alongside friends’ letters and his account of the *Black Hole*, in a collection titled *India Tracts* (1764).

While an assessment of Holwell’s conduct is beyond the scope of this study, what must be noted here, though, is the proximity of our author to the internal machinations of the Company at a time when its territory and ambition expanded exponentially beyond the remit of a trading company. His attempts at personal vindication can be read as both a confused apology and a critique of empire, which itself reflected the chaotic discourses among the British public as it tried to grapple with the ideological consequences of British expansion in the region. On the one hand, his vivid recollection of the cruelty endured by the British in the *Black Hole* served as a powerful imputation of

---

Mughal barbarism upon which enlightened British administration could be justified.23 Yet, on the other, Holwell was deeply critical of his superiors in their mismanagement of the situation, as well as their subsequent revenge, with one reviewer of Holwell’s tracts caustically remarking ‘Mr Holwell’s manner of judging the battle of Plassey reminds us of one of the observations of the French on the English conquests at Agincourt’.24 In fact, throughout the account of Black Hole Holwell invoked the same principles of contemplation and detachment that he later praises in the Gentoo religion, as a superior moral status.25 This by no means amounts to the claim that Holwell was not a colonialist. Elsewhere he enthusiastically advised schemes for the benefit and advancement of the Company. It does, however, alert us to the consideration that Holwell did not understand this process as linear or by any means uncritically.

Dow’s career was in the Company’s militia, though he too had more political ambitions. In 1766, at that time at the rank of Captain, he participated in the officers' association to protest against Clive's measure to abolish the double field allowance. Probably as a consequence of his involvement in this affair, Dow found himself relieved of duty and back in Britain in 1768. In March 1772 the Directors, after cleaning the slates of many other officers involved in the officers' protest, decided to restore Dow to the rank he would have held in Bengal (Lieutenant-Colonel), had he never participated. In 1775 he was appointed Commissary-General, an administrative post taking care of the military stores of all the factories and stations of the Company’s Bengal establishment.

His subsequent ambitions for promotion were short-lived as his health deteriorated and on 31 July 1779, Dow died at Bhagalpur, aged forty-three.  

Dow’s History of Hindostan was widely seen as a direct attack on Clive, especially when, in the third volume of 1772, it included the additional dissertation, An enquiry into the state of Bengal; With a Plan for restoring that Kingdom to its former Prosperity and Splendor. Yet, the crime of the Company under Clive was not, according to Dow, to presume dominion, but rather to have pursued it such a way that ‘in the space of six years, half the great cities of an opulent kingdom were rendered desolate’. Dow was an open advocate of conquest of India, suggesting even that British control could be won ‘by right of arms’ and by just ‘a handful of regular troops’. Yet, this was not an uncritical endorsement of the Company’s ambitions. Dow was explicit in distancing himself from ‘some of [his] countrymen’, claiming himself to be among those ‘roused into attention, with regard to a subject that concerns the welfare of the state’ and therefore was addressing his suggestions for the restoration of Bengal to those who ‘shew an inclination to be informed, as well as willingness to correct mistakes and redress grievances’. Part of the answer he supplied to these grievances was a policy of religious tolerance, which emulated the Golden Age of the Mughal government under Akbar, whom he described as an enlightened ruler owing to his dual system of laws for Muslim and Hindoo subjects. Like Holwell, though these reflections did not dictate the expression of his

---

27 Dirks, The Scandal of Empire, p.54.
32 Dow, The History of Hindostan, (1772), pxxxix.
research into Indian religious concepts, they very literally appeared alongside them as
dissertations in the same volume.

In the case of Halhed and Wilkins, the relationship between their work and
Company politics was more formal. Unlike Holwell and Dow, whose works were
composed at times when their position in the Company was out of favour, both Halhed’s
_Code_ and Wilkins’s _Gīēţā_ were products of the direct patronage of Warren Hastings, and
were composed in support of his governorship. This relationship with their patron was
loyal and long-lasting. When he returned to London Halhed became a pamphleteer and
published an anonymous _Narrative_ defending Hastings’s policies (1779), and a set of
letters under the pseudonym ‘Detector’ that opposed the reports of the House of
Commons select committee, Fox’s East India Bill, and Burke’s charges against Hastings
(1782–3). It has also been suggested that Wilkins left India and the Company directly
because of the departure of Hastings, only returning in 1800 as librarian, an office
established for the care of its collection of manuscripts. The relationship between the
Company and the works produced by these writers cannot, therefore, be explained
without exploring the role of Warren Hastings as Governor-General and his self-
consciously ‘orientalist’ policies. And yet, the particular interpretations of ‘Hinduism’
advanced in those works cannot be explained solely by these circumstances, requiring us
to look beyond the Company and towards the religious debates of Europe. This will be
explored in more detail in chapter four.

---

The Religious Policies of the East India Company

One of the questions facing the Company after it assumed administrative control of Bengal was how to treat matters of religion. This had long been a source of contention, but had so far been of a more indirect nature. The 1698 charter that was granted to the new East India Company contained a clause that the ministers of each garrison ‘were to learn the Portugueze and Hindoo languages, to enable them to instruct the Gentoo &c in the Christian religion’. Roughly a century later (1793) William Wilberforce attempted to introduce a ‘pious clause’ into the Company’s Charter, a measure that he regarded as essential to promoting ‘the Interests and Happiness of the Inhabitants of the British domains in India’. Despite this continuity of intention from one faction, there were other, more influential, members of the Company who pursued an opposite policy. For many it was imperative that the Company should avoid both the trouble and the costs that Christianization would incur. Despite the 1698 Clause, the Court of Directors did not write despatches to India regarding the Christian terms of the charter until 1712. They had also successfully altered its wording to better suit their interests by replacing the demand that all Gentoo be instructed in Christianity with one that called for instruction of only those Gentoo that were ‘servants or slaves of the Company’s’. The Company also utilised its power to refuse licenses to reside in its territories to effectively disbar missionaries. When the Company reached a position whereby it had effectively seized control of the region, these differences in approach required much more explicit justification.

40 Penelope Carson, The East India Company and Religion, p.23.
Wilberforce’s presentation of the matter as a question of public ‘happiness’ was not unique.\(^{41}\) In this period the concept of public happiness became central to debates over who best represented the welfare of Britain’s colonial subjects.\(^{42}\) The 1781 Select Committee, set up to enquire into the affairs of the Company, included in its remit a consideration of ‘how the British Possessions in The East Indies may be held and governed with the greatest Security and Advantage to this Country, and by what Means the Happiness of the Native Inhabitants may best be promoted’.\(^{43}\) Evangelicals like Wilberforce regarded the eternal happiness of the immortal soul a priority over material happiness. For others, though, happiness meant leaving Indian institutions intact as far as possible.\(^{44}\) Holwell represented an early formulation of this thinking. In the dedication to the second volume of his *Interesting Historical Events*, Holwell states his intention in writing about the customs of the *Gentoos* was to ‘rescue the originally untainted manners, and religious worship of a very ancient people from gross misrepresentation’.\(^{45}\) That this misrepresentation resulted in practical miscarriages of justice is expressed later in the volume (1767), when Holwell describes the rescuing of women from the controversial practice of what he terms ‘voluntary sacrifice’ (the self-immolation of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands) as an ‘outrage’ and recounts how the *Gentoos* considered it ‘an atrocious, and wicked violation of their sacred rights and privileges’.\(^{46}\) Roughly a decade later Edmund Burke echoed a similar sentiment when he and the jurist William Jones, who was to become a renowned Orientalist, drafted a bill which included the


\(^{43}\) *Journals of the House of Commons*, 38 (31 October 1780–10 October 1782), 600.

\(^{44}\) Penelope Carson, *The East India Company and Religion*, p.126.

\(^{45}\) Holwell, “Dedication”, *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.ii (1767).

stipulation that the British Government ensure for the inhabitants of India, ‘enjoyment of all their ancient laws, usages, rights and privileges’.  

Within the Company, the reasons for adopting this position were of course as pragmatic as they were ideological. A clear example was the acknowledgement that the East India Company’s military might was heavily dependent on sepoy troops for the majority of the eighteenth century. Fearing disaffection, a consideration that would foreshadow the events of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, administrators were not prepared to interfere with Indian religions. Hastings’s predecessor, Lord Cornwallis, in a letter to the President of the Board of Control, stressed the need for good officers, ‘perfect’ in the appropriate Indian language, who would give ‘a minute attention to the customs and religious prejudices of the sepoys’, because ‘you need not be told how dangerous a disaffection in our native troops would be to our existence in this country’.  

We can certainly see this approach as a moment in the Company’s history, at the height of which were the ‘Orientalist’ policies of Warren Hastings. Hastings’s administrative ideology was essentially underpinned by Montesquieu’s legal geography, dictating that only where the demands of natural justice were at odds with custom should indigenous practice (including religious law) be overruled. This principle was most clearly articulated in Clause XXIII of Hastings’s new 1772 regulations, which stipulated that ‘the Laws of the Koran with respect to the Mahometans, and those of the Shaster with respect to the Gentoos shall be invariably adhered to’.  

The historical separation between the Islam of the Mughals and India’s religious others was thus the central feature of a British administrative system which regarded all

---

48 As quoted in Penelope Carson, *The East India Company and Religion*, p.23.
non-Muslims as *Hindoo*. There were various unforeseen outcomes of this policy. It alienated and extracted Indian Christians from the system of native laws. By subsuming all other religions under the non-Muslim category it also made the ‘Gentoo’ majority seem even larger. In fact, the most significant and certainly intended impact of the Judicial Plan was to discontinue the official monopoly that Muslim law had in the civil courts. Indeed, more generally, eighteenth-century British sympathies tended to be on the side of ‘Hindoos’, as a category apart from Muslims. This was in part for political reasons: the great villain in the Company’s recent history was the muslim ruler Siraj-ud-Daulah, who had attacked and captured Fort William. In more general cultural terms, although there were alternative depictions of the Muslims in the Enlightenment, the Ottoman Turk often stood as the archetypical *Mohammedan*, and the Ottoman empire the seat of tyranny and barbarism.

Eighteenth-century anti-muslim sentiment was based in a certain set of assumptions about Islam that pervaded the intellectual and political culture of the period. On the one hand were critiques of the religion itself: both its doctrines and its historical manifestations. On the other, was the theoretical alignment of Islamic polities with the concept of Oriental or Asian despotism. None of the four writers discuss this first approach in any detail, aside for implicitly including Islam on their generalised comments about the universal features of religion. Dow elaborated his view of Islam slightly more, when in his 1772 *Dissertation Considering the Origin and Nature of Despotism in Hindostan*, he

---

considers those elements of the Qur’an that encouraged ‘voluptuousness’. Though this was less of a discussion of Islamic theology, and more a consideration of the Qur’an as a legal document, the assumptions behind which formed the basis of the second generally accepted trope, that Muslim polities are necessarily despotism. The pervasiveness of this idea is captured in the fact that in the first direct translation of the Qur’an into English (1734), the description that its translator, George Sale, attributes to Muhammad most frequently is that of ‘legislator’. Dow similarly refers to Muhammad as ‘the legislator’. Nevertheless both Holwell and Dow question this relationship between Islam and despotism in relation to the Mughal empire, both emphasising the degree to which Gentoo laws were left intact under their government. Interestingly, reflecting the turn towards enlisting these tropes in support of Hastings, Halhed and Wilkins have little to say on the matter, except in terms of enlisting the trope of Asian despotism so as to make a claim for the comparative enlightened quality of British government in the region. A striking example of this appears in Halhed’s 1773 poem, *The Bramin and the Ganges*, in which the river goddess urges a melancholy Brahmin, suffering under Muslim tyranny, to embrace the enlightened rule of the British.

More accurate information about the theological contents of Islam had percolated into Europe via translations of the Qur’an into European languages. After Latin the first translation was into French in 1647, which was then translated into English in 1649, before Sale’s direct translation from Arabic to English. The Qur’an was then directly translated into English, by George Sale, in 1734. In the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries one of the most common approaches to Islam revolved around the idea that the prophet Mohammed was an imposter.\textsuperscript{64} This is most clearly expressed in Voltaire’s play, \textit{Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophète} (1742), which was later translated into English as \textit{Mabomet, The Imposter} (1744). In it Voltaire cast the religious leader as a charlatan, who incited his town into revolt and subjugated his by the sword, on a ruthless quest for dominion.\textsuperscript{65} This was a common trope, but as scholars such as Ziad Elmarsafy have pointed out, these caricatures were drawn upon in the service of a much broader discourse about the nature of religious belief in general.\textsuperscript{66} Voltaire’s engagement with Islam was usually united with his tireless criticism of religious dogmatism and intolerance. It was therefore, rarely considered in its own right but as a vehicle by which to make a general point, the critical target of which was nearly always implicitly European Christendom. In a dedicatory letter to Frederick the Great, Voltaire acknowledged that the play \textit{Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophète} was not an accurate historical representation of the prophet’s life, but an artistic invention which allowed him to represent ‘the most awful actions of fanaticism’ on the stage.\textsuperscript{67}

This equation of Muslim religion with religious fanaticism served to support the second sphere of criticism, the idea that Islam was a historical mechanism by which despotism came to be the dominant political model in the Middle East. Though it has much older roots,\textsuperscript{68} in the eighteenth century, Montesquieu’s thesis, that despotism was the essential characteristic of all Asian governments, had set the paradigm for the debate.\textsuperscript{69} In Britain, Gibbon painted a portrait of Islam that was intolerant and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{64} Harvey, \textit{The French Enlightenment and its Others}, pp.18-19.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Michael Curtis, \textit{Orientalism and Islam}, p.35.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Elmarsafy, \textit{The Enlightenment Qur’an}, p.81.
\item \textsuperscript{67} As quoted in Harvey, \textit{The French Enlightenment and its Others}, p.72.
\end{itemize}
conducive to despotism. In particular, he emphasised the perceived luxury and sensuality of its exotic Eastern kingdoms.\textsuperscript{70} The French philosophe Volney (1757-1820), originally Constantin François de Chasseboeuf, pursued a sweeping generalization in which all of Asia was buried in an intellectual dark age, with a particular emphasis on the barbarity of the Turks and the tyrannical tribalism of the Arabs.\textsuperscript{71} Contrary to Montesquieu, Volney argued that it was religion and style of government that determined the character of a people, rather than climate and geography. The question of despotism in central Asia was not to be solved by such essential characteristics, but through a historical analysis of the development of Islam.\textsuperscript{72} Yet again, though, these depictions of Islam must be seen within the broader discourse; unflattering portrayals of the tyrannous Sultan of the Ottoman Empire were, very often, barely implicit criticism of autocratic France. There were also more sympathetic interpretations from people who had come into direct contact with the Ottoman Empire. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, renowned letter writer and resident in Turkey from 1716-18, argued that the information in Britain was biased and designed by religious commentators to traduce Islam.\textsuperscript{73}

These foundations would form some of the starting points for the discussions advanced by Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins. The principle of enlightened toleration was the basic assumption that underlined their approach to ‘the religion of the Gentoos’. Similarly, the conceptual separation between the native ‘Hindoos’ and their Muslim rulers in terms of religion would provide the framework for their understanding of ancient versus contemporary ‘Hinduism’ as a matter of degeneration. Within this, though, they each expressed differing attitudes. Dow, for example, greatly admired the Mughal government and saw within it a blue-print for enlightened treatment of the ‘Hindoo

\textsuperscript{71} Harvey, The French Enlightenment and its Others, p.59.
\textsuperscript{72} Harvey, The French Enlightenment and its Others, pp.38-39.
\textsuperscript{73} Michael Curtis, Orientalism and Islam, p.62.
religion”. In contrast, Halhed depicted a romanticised narrative of it in which the morally virtuous *Gentoos* had suffered under their *Mohammedan* oppressors.

**Europe, India and Deism**

The term ‘Hindu’ is generally thought to derive from the Sanskrit ‘Sindhu’, meaning river in general and the River Indus in particular. This passed into other usages through the Persian word ‘Hindu’ and other cognate terms, such as the Greek ‘Indos’, to denote the people and the way of life that existed in the geographical area surrounding the Indus.⁷⁴ It is debated as to whether it drew on any native precedent, but it is generally agreed that the resulting terminologies of Hindustan and Hindu were geographical and vaguely cultural terms that did not designate a specific religious affiliation. By contrast *Gento* was a derivative of the Portuguese word *gentio*, meaning ‘gentile’, and was therefore invested with religious connotations from the beginning of its application to the discussion of Indian religion.⁷⁵ While it is unclear how the terms *Hindoo* and *Gentoo* became interchangeable, the role of European colonialism in unifying the notion of native inhabitants with a homogenous and equally native religion has been considered an important factor. Broadly speaking, scholars taking this stance have attributed the term’s transformation from an ethnic cultural meaning to a religious one to both the negative exclusion of Muslims, and the positive identification of a unified Hindu religion, native to India.⁷⁶

---


Certainly, European interactions with India were always as much about religion as about trade. Not long after the Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama opened the road to India in 1498 the founder of the Jesuits and early missionary, Saint Francis Xavier, followed in 1541. The Jesuit presence in India was continued by his successor, Roberto de Nobili, who was the first to really develop an understanding of Indian religious concepts. Yet, in terms of published works, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were dominated by the tales of returning voyagers, regaling odd and obscene customs attached to even more confounding religious beliefs. The discoveries of the Jesuit missionaries eventually reached the public in the first years of the eighteenth century, when French Jesuit missionaries began to collate information about Indian languages and religious beliefs to be published as the *Lettres édifiantes* in 1733.

Although the Jesuits were the first Europeans to have recorded any meaningful appreciation of Indian religion, by the time the *Lettres* were published they were in competition with an array of works by lay travellers and Protestant missionaries. These accounts were largely confined to what could be roughly described as an anthropological or ethnographic approach, in that their main insight into Indian religion was eye-witness observation and experience of customs and practices. In fact many seventeenth-century travel writers remarked on the difficulty of attaining more significant knowledge on account of both the barriers of language and the secrecy of the Brahmins. Italian Pietro della Valle, who travelled in and around the regions of Surat and Goa in the early 1620s, emphasised that the difficulty of obtaining information about local religious beliefs was often due to the fact that trade was conducted in Persian, which limited their capacity to

---

communicate outside the confines of business. He also stressed that the Indians with whom he came into contact were ‘unlearned’ and so limited in their own knowledge of theological concepts. As we shall see in the following chapter, all four of the writers considered in this study explicitly cited their ability to communicate with the ‘learned’ Brahmins, and their access to ancient texts, as the basis for the idea that they had penetrated the philosophical and theological tenets at the core of the religion, rather than the external ceremonies of its practitioners.

As well as the more minor accounts of travel writers, several Protestant ministers offered their own judgements on the ‘Gentile’ religion of India. Henry Lord, the chaplain of the East India Company (1624-1630), reported on what he termed the ‘the Banian religion’, which Sweetman describes Lord taking from the wide use of ‘Banian’ among Europeans to describe the merchant Vāṇiā caste, and applying it to religious practices associated with both Hindu and Jain traditions. Lord’s Display of two forraigne sects (1630) was still very much confined to a description of certain ritual practices, mediated through a Christian apologist agenda. So idolatrous were the practices the followers of the ‘Banian’ religion, according to Lord, that in the opening to the Display he accused them of ‘rebelliously and schismatically violating the divine law of the dread Majesty of Heaven’. In a similar vein, but with a much wider impact, was the work of Dutch minister Baldaeus. His True and exact description of the most celebrated East India coast of Malabar and Coromandel was published in 1672 and was almost entirely derivative of earlier sources. Nevertheless, True and exact description was a literary success. According to Rubies, its impact was enhanced by the antiquarian pretensions of its author and by

---

80 Sweetman, Mapping Hinduism, p.75. Valle’s account was only published posthumously in 1663, and was followed with French and English translations in 1664.
81 Sweetman, Mapping Hinduism, p.75.
83 Sweetman, Mapping Hinduism, p.90.
the rich engravings featuring the different avatars of Vishnu. Popular though these works may have been, they were still very much confined to the description of various Hindoo customs. The antiquarian knowledge of Baldaeus merely added speculation to the possible theological origins of those practices, resulting in the hypothesis that they had in some way descended to India from the doctrines from Ancient Egypt or the Near East.

As we shall see, the likes of Holwell and Dow consciously set themselves up in opposition to these ideas. Moreover, as the forthcoming chapters will demonstrate, that many of these earlier authors were members of some shade of priesthood was taken by Holwell and Dow to be enough evidence to condemn their accounts as fallacious.

Rubies has correctly pointed out that the potential for Indian religion, and Eastern religion in general, to present a challenge to orthodox biblical interpretations of history had already been exploited by some authors in the seventeenth century. The French edition of Abraham Rogerius’s Porte Ouverte, published in Amsterdam in 1670, had hinted at these implications. Rogerius was also a Dutch minister, in the employ of the Dutch East India Company in the 1630s. In the original edition, published in Leiden in 1651, Rogerius had suggested that Indian idolatry was comparable not only to ancient paganism, but also to corrupted Jewish and Christian rituals and doctrines. The French translation, annotated by an anonymous editor, contained additional notes which built on this theme to suggest that the core of the religion, lost to its vulgar practitioners, was in fact monotheistic.

François Bernier’s Voyages, first published in Paris in 1671, approached Indian religion in a similar manner. While Bernier dismissed Indian religious doctrines as superstitious, this was not necessarily on the theological basis that they

---

84 Rubies, “From Christian Apologetics to Deism”, p.109.
contradicted Christian orthodoxy. Rather, he posited a general critique of the irrational components of religious belief, leading Rubies to conclude that Bernier’s arguments ‘could potentially be directed against Christianity no less than Gentilism’. ⁸⁷

The works of Rogerius and Bernier form the basis of Rubies’s description of the ‘comparative libertine anthropology of religion’ that he sees as shaping attitudes to Hinduism in the early Enlightenment. That observation of eastern religions became an important device for those advancing critiques of traditional religion is an important point. Yet there are two issues left uncovered by Rubies’s jump from ‘libertine’ readings of Indian practices to the ‘arrival of British Orientalists such as William Jones’. ⁸⁸ The first is the question of how and where this comparative device shifted from a focus on irrationality and superstition as a universal basis for critique, to the idea that Indian religion could be regarded as analogous in terms of rationality. It was the notion that ‘Hinduism’ was rational and monotheistic that was deployed by Voltaire in his assault on established religion. Secondly, as we shall see, the transition from ‘anthropological’ comparison to the scholarly Indology of Jones misses out an important stage in which authority was more tentatively located in linguistic ability and the discovery of texts. While Rogerius, Bernier and even Bernard’s Religious Ceremonies of the World relied on the testimonies of others, and relayed the observed religious rites and customs of the Brahmins and their followers, the accounts of Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins presented what they claimed to be the theological and philosophical core of a religion that was unified, monotheistic, ancient and native to India. ⁸⁹

The authority of this interpretation was constructed on the claim of each author to have achieved a unique insight into Indian religious thought and texts on the basis of

---

⁸⁷ Rubies, “From Christian Apologetics to Deism”, p.111.
⁸⁸ Rubies, “From Christian Apologetics to Deism”, p.108.
linguistic skill and contact with Brahmins. Though their effect on the public was powerful, these claims varied in authenticity. They all were known to have a proficient knowledge of Persian, which was the main administrative language of the Mughal empire and so an important tool for those seeking advancement in the East India Company. The first English to Persian dictionary did not, however, appear until 1777, after the publication of the Code. This makes it difficult to trace their decisions in translation beyond local knowledge.\(^90\) This is similarly the case for Bengali, elements of which appear in the transliterations of Indian terminology presented by both Holwell and Dow. Bengali was the dialect language of the Bengal region, and therefore acquired by some Company employees in order to better conduct local affairs, though it was a less common language to learn than Persian.\(^91\) The first detailed study was in fact produced by Halhed, whose A Grammar of the Bengal Language was composed in 1778.\(^92\) Halhed was the first of these authors to make any strides in discovering Sanskrit, producing a glossery of terms in the Code, but it was only Wilkins who ever mastered it.\(^93\)

For these reasons, and because of their deliberate ambiguity in the construction of their claims, it is difficult to trace the origins of Holwell and Dow’s sources and linguistic decisions. In each chapter I will suggest what the languages and texts they were using most likely were, but it is clear that both Holwell and Dow deliberately made this element of their work obscure. Nevertheless, their claims to unique insight were accepted by their audiences, and as such produced a significant moment in the European interpretation of ‘Hinduism’. The intellectual basis of this approach was rooted in

---

\(^90\) The first dictionary was produced by John Richardson, A Dictionary, Persian, Arabic, and English, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1777).
\(^92\) N.B. Halhed, A Code of Gentoo Laws; or Ordinations of the Pundits, (London, 1776).
\(^93\) N.B. Halhed, A Grammar of the Bengal Language, (Bengal, 1778).
eighteenth-century religious concepts and debates, the outline of which will be explored in the following section.

*Perhaps counter-intuitively, the philosophical basis of Jesuit understandings of Asian religious thought, interpreted through the concepts of ‘natural light’ provided an important conceptual template for those seeking to use Eastern religion to challenge religious orthodoxy in the Enlightenment.*

The theology of Thomas Aquinas, which was central to both the Jesuits and a broader culture of Christian Humanism, summarised that the possibility of knowledge of God rests on an understanding of human nature according to the Aristotelian definition of our capacity to reason. In this conceptual paradigm alien religious cultures were judged on the degree to which they demonstrated evidence of natural religion, according to reason, without the benefit of divine revelation. That is, ‘natural religion’, or the ‘religion of nature’, was understood as the religion people can arrive at through natural means alone, without supernatural revelation. This was often expressed as the ability of pre-Christian society to recognise and adhere to some basic moral precepts. In Thomas More’s fictionalised pagan society of *Utopia*, for example, the native inhabitants ‘believe that after this life vices will be punished and virtue rewarded’ despite having received no Christian teaching. In another example Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit missionary in China, saw Confucianism as an important expression of natural religion on the basis that it ‘contains a doctrine of reward for good

---

94 Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p.54.
done and punishment for evil. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though, these examples of moral compatibility took an unintended turn by providing the conceptual foundations for a religious critique. Enlightenment thinkers increasingly cited the universality of these precepts in order to undermine the ultimate authority accorded to Christian orthodoxy.

This was precipitated by the emergence of ‘free-thinking’ religious criticism in Europe. In England Herbert of Cherbury published De veritate (On Truth) in 1624, which clearly set out five simple ‘articles’ to a universal and minimal religion: a belief in God, the duty to honour God, moral worship in the form of virtue, the pain of sin, and finally, a belief in an after-life that included punishment for evil and reward for goodness.

Following in this tradition writers often associated with ‘English deism’, such as Toland and Tindal, constructed historical narrative in which contemporary ‘religion’ appears the corrupt shadow of an original monotheistic faith already revealed to Confucius, Zoroaster, Socrates, and Plato. Studies of these ‘deistical’ writers have thus pointed to their significance in developing the radical intellectual culture of the Enlightenment. Moreover, and most relevant here, their promotion of critical biblical hermeneutics is seen to have prompted an alternative history and anthropology of positive religion.

This was the inherited intellectual milieu that produced the conceptual parameters in which their interpretation of Gentoo religion, as a unified, original and natural religion, was formed and received.

100 A focal point of this transition was the Rights controversy, see Jonathan Israel, Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.558-559.
The discovery and interpretation of Indian religion in the eighteenth century was, consequently, related to debates about the nature and origins of religious belief. China was the original focal point of these debates, with Confucianism being considered by the early Enlightenment rationalists a clear example of a simple moral philosophy, unencumbered by esoteric and mystical theology. Leibniz even floated the idea of introducing Chinese missionaries to Europe in order to instruct its inhabitants on the natural theology and ‘practical philosophy’ of Confucius.\textsuperscript{104} In addition, despite his later position that India was the homeland of religion in its most ancient and purest form, Voltaire’s initial interest in Eastern theology was also rooted in China.\textsuperscript{105} With the expansion of the European presence in India, however, accounts of similarly sophisticated religious philosophies began to seep into the intellectual culture of the Enlightenment. These accounts tended to make the distinction, predicated on the conception of natural religion associated with the English deists, between the ancient and original beliefs that had been preserved by learned elites, and the superstitious practices of the masses.\textsuperscript{106} This was a distinction that was heavily exploited by Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins in order to establish an interpretation of philosophical ‘Hinduism’ that could be separated from the seemingly irrational customs of the contemporary Hindoos.

The Company’s emphasis on native languages as a gateway to important knowledge had a significant impact on the particular development of these ideas. Coupled with a European basis towards the authority of text, those inquiring into the nature of Indian religious institutions tended to see scripture as the ultimate standard by which to judge and determine the nature of the religion. It was this presumption that

\textsuperscript{106} \textit{The Great Map of Mankind}, p.104.
allowed the strong division, present in the work of all four writers considered in this thesis, between the original, pure and ‘high’ philosophical religion of the ancients, and the ‘low’, superstitious and largely practice-based faith of the vulgar. Thus, for those investigating native beliefs with the background of a classical education, like Halhed, their knowledge of Indian religion was usually foregrounded by the Greek conception of the Indians as the gymnosophists, or ‘naked philosophers’.

Aligned with this was the discovery that Gentoo thought posited the existence of a Golden Age and a narrative of gradual deterioration to the present age (kali yuga), which was the most depraved and dissolute. This complemented a thematic strand in Enlightenment critiques of religion, which saw it as a corrupt human institution that obscured the simple and rational ideas of natural religious belief. This has been summarised by Halbfass in his essays on India and Europe, as the belief that ‘Religion in general is derived and has degenerated from, the pure natural revelation of which the Indians were the first possessors.' This idea of an original and rational religion is perhaps best illustrated at this point by Halhed’s poem, which responded to Wilkins’s proof that Hindoo religion was philosophical with the translation of the Bhāgavat-Gītā:

“Om! Veeshnu! Brahm! Or by whatever name
Primeval Reshees have thy power ador’d:
They worship’d thee, they knew thee still the same,
One great eternal, undivided lord!
Tho’ now, in these worn days, obscur’d thy light,
(Worn days, alas, and crazy wane of time!)

Tho’ priest-craft’s puppets cheat man’s bigot sight.

---

With hell-born mockeries of things sublime.

Ages have been, when thy refulgent beam

Shone with full vigour on the mental gaze:

When doting superstition dar’d not dream,

And folly’s phantoms perish’d in thy rays.”

Halhed’s rendering of the idea that the various Indian deities were one ‘undivided lord’, but that this was a truth obscured by priestcraft, succinctly captures the themes of original purity and decline. These ideas are present in work of all four writers studied in this thesis, and are often what underpin the assertion that they were deist and that they thus approached the interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ from a deist perspective. Yet, the idea that most religions were at their origin monotheistic existed throughout various strands of Christian thought, and is therefore only deist in the same way that William Jones has been described as having ‘deist leanings’ for expressing a sympathetic interpretation of Indian religion. Yet, as this thesis will show, these authors positioned these ideas in contest with Christian primacy and often exhibited other more radical strands of heterodoxy along side them.

As previously noted, the term ‘deism’ has been the subject of disagreement among scholars of this period. These divisions are partly expressed in a conceptual separation between what has been termed radical and moderate deism. According to Jonathan Israel, the attitude and aim of radical deism was the destabilisation of religious belief by denying the existence of a providential God, the possibility of miracles, and of

---


111 Rubies, “From Christian Apologetics to Deism”, p.118.

divinely ordained social order. In contrast, moderate deism, associated with the twin aims of challenging religious superstition and establishing the principle of religious toleration, ruled out divine intervention in particular events (particular providence) and instead presented a benign providence in the form of the laws of nature. Others have seen this division as one between radical atheistic deists and self-confessed ‘Christian deists’, who belonged to a specifically English cultural milieu. Self-avowed Christian deists described their belief that ‘Christianity is not a new religion, but is the old, uncorrupted religion of nature and reason, delivered and taught in the most rational and easy way.’ Some historians have dismissed the idea of Christian deism as an ‘apparent oxymoron,’ saying a thinker only labelled himself a Christian deist as ‘a tactical move to deter accusations of heresy.’ While dissimulation to circumvent blasphemy laws was certainly a feature of Enlightenment freethinking, there is ample evidence of an increasingly popular and more moderate deism, which presented itself as compatible with Christian teaching towards the end of the eighteenth century.

The following chapters will explore how to position Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins within this discussion. Broadly speaking, though, their work and their personal beliefs would fall closest to the moderate deism described by Israel. Often their language echoes the sentiments of those who rejected the supernatural elements of religion in favour of a rational belief in a creator God according to the ‘the argument from design’. This position was commonly rooted in the Newtonian physico-theology propagated by

Samuel Clarke and others, which held that God’s intervention in the world operated through the laws of nature.\[^{119}\] There is, however, significant deviation among them. Left unexamined, the description ‘moderate deism’ would obscure the specifics of their discussion. Holwell, for example, exhibited a particularly idiosyncratic definition of God’s presence in the world that included a fusion with the Indian concept of the avatar (avatāra). Halhed, by contrast, pursues a more fundamentally sceptical approach to the basis of religious belief that echoes elements of David Hume’s infamous attack on the concept of natural religion.\[^{120}\] Yet, while these important nuances existed amongst them, what this detailed appreciation of their engagement with these various theological concepts and discourses serves to show, is that we can understand them to have shaped an approach to Indian religion that was ‘philosophic’ in quality. That is, their application of European Enlightenment intellectual culture to their interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ led them to consider it in philosophical and theological terms, the result of which was the claim that its doctrines contained many similar, or in fact superior, ideas and precepts.

The writers considered in this study were all Company servants, and certainly the political fluctuations of this emerging colonial power shaped the conditions for their work. Yet, in understanding why these writers focused on what they perceived to be the theological and philosophical foundations of Indian religion, our analysis turns to their position in the history of the relationship between religious heterodoxy and comparative religion. It was their engagement with European religious debates that resulted in the stylistically ‘philosophic’ interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ advanced by all four writers.

Enlightenment and Orientalism

This chapter has outlined two contexts required to understand the emergence of the idea of a unified, ancient, monotheistic and native religion of India: the political development of the East India Company; and the long history of comparative religion in its relationship with Enlightenment religious heterodoxy. It follows, then, that the exploration of four Company servants who wrote about ‘Hinduism’ should be able to tell us something regarding the contentious question of the relationship between Orientalism and colonialism. For some this relationship is a straightforward one.121 It has been widely recognised by scholars that the need for the Company to publicly justify its position and policies made Orientalist knowledge, particularly of religion, an increasingly important commodity. This, along with the development of various bureaucratic procedures, archives and records, is an important feature in the historiography of the concept of ‘state building’.122 Yet, as well as collecting information on the more practical aspects of colonised lands, these instrumental encounters led to the categorisation of unfamiliar epistemological spaces of theology and philosophy.

How the presentation of these discoveries into a philosophic interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ fits into the relationship between colonialism and orientalism is less clear. On the one hand it is evident that it supported the East India Company’s colonial aspirations. In particular the stark line of demarcation drawn between the philosophical Hindoos and the despotic Mahometans laid the foundations for the claim that only an enlightened British government could save the former. All four authors communicated this idea to an extent; Halhed most clearly when he poetically compared the replacement of the Mughals by the British as swapping from ‘the rod of powr’ to ‘The rule of

reason’. On the other hand, as we shall see in chapter five, the perception of India’s history as one replete with philosophical greatness made the arbitrary imposition of the East India Company and its commercial interests seem even more preposterous. In fact, the line between these two positions was not nearly as clear as some have supposed. Uday Mehta has, for example, suggested that the British ‘were insistent on denying the fact that India had a history of its own’, or that the history of India was only one ‘long record of despotism’. In contrast to this, Mehta argues, Burke’s critique of Warren Hastings posited India’s rich history and culture as a counter-argument to the arbitrary imposition of the Company’s power. Yet, as the cases of Halhed and Wilkins illustrate, the position of Hastings was not as simple as his defence in the impeachment presented it. Burke’s impassioned defence of ‘Mahomedan Government’ as ‘a Government of Law’ was not that dissimilar to Hastings’s similar invocation of the Code of Gentoo Laws to justify the continued autonomy of the East India Company in Bengal. Burke was rightly pointing to a weakness in Hastings’s defence, but rather than a fundamental separation in attitudes to Indian history this instance points to the divergent purposes to which Orientalist knowledge could be put.

Furthermore, it is worth noting a historiographical clarification of this debate. When scholars discuss anti-colonial or anti-imperial thought in the eighteenth century, they are referring to a very different set of conceptual parameters to those associated with the terms today. Many of the questions revolving around colonial legitimacy were essentially understood as matters of trade and commerce. In England Adam Smith’s

---

125 Mehta, “Edmund Burke on Empire”, p.179.
Wealth of Nations criticised colonialism precisely on the basis that it confused commercial interest with the duties of sovereignty, resulting in colonial governments which ‘regard the character of a sovereign as but an appendix to that of a merchant’.\footnote{127} Smith’s rebuke of the ‘plunderers of India’ was not a critique of the idea of colonial government, but an assertion of the idea that when sovereignty was merely a means to a commercial end it results only in the misery of its subjects.\footnote{128} As we have seen, in the same period, broader criticisms of the Company’s conduct were launched in British political discourse, a fact Dow noted in 1772 by commenting that the public, previously characterised by a ‘phlegmatic indifference’, had become ‘rouzed [sic] to attention’.\footnote{129} This discourse was also centred on the Company’s transgression of its original boundaries to a degree of excess, and not the notion that Bengal should be subject to some degree of British control.\footnote{130} As we have seen Holwell and Dow were no exception, each advancing similar critiques of the Company’s excesses.

Yet, as the second part of this chapter has sought to highlight, their discussion of ‘Hinduism’ existed in a much longer history of European interactions with Eastern religions for the purposes of destabilising certain orthodoxies. Their philosophic interpretations of Hinduism provided some of the foundations for a different set of justifications and critiques of empire beyond the bounds of commerce and trade. An analysis of their work in this light adds a different dimension to the question regarding the relationship between Orientalism and colonialism. There is no doubt that Halhed and Wilkins produced much of their work in support of Hastings’s administration. Yet, those elements of their discussions that touched on the same themes expressed by Holwell and

\footnote{130} Greene, Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism, p.154.
Dow produced a number of intellectual off-shoots that complicate the idea that this was their only legacy. The following chapters, and in particular chapter five, will demonstrate that deist interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ were amendable to a variety of interpretations without the justification of a certain style of government.

**Conclusion**

The writing of John Zephaniah Holwell and Alexander Dow represents an important development in the way that British encounters with what they identified as the religion native to India came to be framed and understood. They were the first British writers to engage with complex religious concepts, and forward a case for the sophistication and originality of Brahminical philosophy. The works of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed and Charles Wilkins provide an important example of the relationship between the Company and the evolution of these discourses. Both writers were principally engaged to translate various texts in the service of Warren Hastings's administrative policies. And yet, neither shied away from offering their own interpretations of Indian religion, the nature of which often went beyond the confines of policy and into the murky world of religious heterodoxy. Much of this built directly on the ideas and suppositions of Holwell and Dow, who encountered these texts as answers to much broader and characteristically Enlightenment-centred questions about religion, civilization and human reason. The following chapters will set out in detail how these ideas were applied to the interpretation of Indian religion. Following this, chapter five will return to a consideration of their wider contextual significance.
Chapter Two: Holwell’s ‘Religion of the Gentoos’

John Zephaniah Holwell was described by Edmund Burke as having provided the best account ‘of the religion of the Gentoos both in its original simplicity and in its present corruption’. Holwell was instrumental in presenting to European audiences the idea of a unified and ancient religious doctrine native to India. He offered his discoveries over the course of three volumes, each instalment making bolder statements about the significance of Gentoo doctrines than the last. In the first few pages of the first volume of Interesting Historical Events (1765) Holwell defended the religion, which he saw as having been tarnished by ‘imperfect and unjust’ accounts. In the second volume (1767) he declared the religion’s ‘principle tenets’ to be ‘satisfactory, conclusive and rational’. Finally, in the third volume (1771), Holwell set out what he believed to be the significance of ‘Gentoo Bible’, or what he termed the Shastah, for resolving some of the obscurities and problems within Christian theology.

In responding to Holwell’s claims, a contributor to the highly influential Critical Review took particular exception to Holwell’s enthusiastic endorsement of the Shastah’s contents:

‘After the specimens we have given of this production, it is almost superfluous to add, that it contains a system of religious doctrines, so extravagant and chimerical, as can be imposed only upon a people sunk in the grossest ignorance and credulity. We can pardon the uncultivated Gentoos for their blind veneration of the Shastah; but the weakness of a contemporary British author, who

---

maintains the authenticity of that spurious code of revelation, admits of no apology.\textsuperscript{5}

Yet, four years prior to this damning indictment another reviewer, responding to the first instalment of Holwell’s account of the ‘religious tenets of the Gentoo’, claimed that Holwell’s discussion ‘could not fail to be acceptable to all who have any curiosity relating to the subject’.\textsuperscript{6} This divergence in opinion reflects the radical swing from Holwell’s liberal interpretation of the \textit{Gentoo} religion in 1767, to what he described as his ‘Christian Deist’ conclusions in 1771.\textsuperscript{7} What Holwell meant by Christian deism requires some careful interpretation. The following chapter will therefore provide an explanation, through a detailed account of Holwell’s thought in context.

Holwell’s religiously heterodox interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ is at the core of this thesis, since his account would establish the ideas that would also run thematically throughout the works of Dow, Halhed and Wilkins. This chapter explores Holwell’s European sources, as well as his developing belief system and the role of \textit{Gentoo} theology within it. It will first introduce Holwell and what he claimed to be the \textit{Gentoo}’s primary and most original religious text, the \textit{Shastah of Bramah}. It will then move on to explore the way in which Holwell established the authority of these claims. The proceeding sections will focus on the main theological concepts around which Holwell’s discussion of the \textit{Gentoo} doctrines were orientated. These, in order, are the narrative of decline, the doctrine of metempsychosis (or transmigration of souls), theodicy and, finally, Christian deism.

\textsuperscript{7} J. Z. Holwell, \textit{Interesting Historical Events Relative to the Province of Bengal}, vol.iii, (London, 1771) p.91.
The *Gentoo Shastah*

The house built by Holwell upon his permant return to England, Castle Hall in Steynton (Pembrokeshire), was said to have been built in the ‘Hindu style’.\(^8\) Accompanying this detail was a rumour that there was a pagoda, designed for religious worship, at the far end of the estate.\(^9\) The house is no longer standing and the purpose of its outhouses, unverifiable, yet the sense of mystery and religious subversion surrounding Castle Hall, even if invented, are an appropriate epitaph to the life and work of Holwell (1711-1798). In many ways we can see Holwell as a member of the British establishment: he was for a short time the Governor of Calcutta; his account of the *Black Hole of Calcutta* was so widely read that it eventually became what Chatterjee has described as one of the most enduring myths of Empire;\(^10\) and, finally, he was also made a member of the Royal Society, after publishing a treatise on Small Pox inoculation.\(^11\) Seemingly in contradiction with this image, though, were both the contents of some of his works and the reaction that they received. As mentioned above, Howell’s final volume of *Interesting Historical Events* displayed ideas which offended and even outraged some. One Reviewer jokingly hoped that Holwell might be a satirist, sarcastically suggesting that ‘Mr. Holwell has evidently had an eye to the *Annus Mirabilis* of Dr. Swift’.\(^12\)

Holwell, who began his career as a ships’ surgeon on the East India Company’s ‘Indiaman’, had presented a new style and approach to Indian religion in this history of British writing. In the seventeenth century ‘Hinduism’ was usually compared to the idolatrous gentiles of the Old Testament, or, on account of reports of a belief in

---

reincarnation, as early precursors to Pythagorean ideas about the revolution of the soul through various forms and matter. Similarly, though reports from the Jesuits and German-Danish Lutherans appeared in the early eighteenth century, British accounts of ‘Hinduism’ were sparse and did not move beyond comparisons with European pagan idolatry.  

Not long before Holwell, John Henry Grose, also a servant of the Company, had published A Voyage to the East Indies (1757), which contained detailed descriptions of eighteenth-century India. What made Holwell’s account very different was a divergence in attitude to Indian theology that eventually led many to accuse Howell of having become seduced by eastern religion. Where Grose defined ‘Gentoos’ as ‘Native Indians, who remain in a state of idolatry’, Holwell presented a rational religion, the tenets of which were ‘short, pure, simple and uniform’.

Holwell’s discussion of Gentoo theology came inside a much broader study of Indian history, through a succession of Mughal emperors and a recent account of Bengal, titled Interesting Historical Events, which came in three volumes (1765, 1767 and 1771). Writers like Grose had, according to Holwell, misrepresented the Gentos because of a general ignorance of the true contents of its scriptures. It was up to him, therefore, to rescue them from such ‘gross misrepresentation’ by presenting to his readers the ‘original’ doctrines of the ancient Bramins through a short translation from a mysterious manuscript, named the Shastah. The ‘religion of the Gentoo’s’ was presented by Holwell as separable from the ‘complicated modes of worship’ that travellers such as Grose had encountered through an interpretation of this ancient manuscript. It is this self-styled

---

16 Grose, A Voyage to the East Indies, p.xi.
mission ‘to rescue distant nations from the gross misconceptions entertained of them’\textsuperscript{18} that have led some to align Holwell with a critical objection to Said’s Orientalist paradigm, on the basis that his work was motivated not by imperialist ideology, but an appreciation of Indian culture.\textsuperscript{19} Yet, this conceptual division falls foul of Holwell’s deliberate ambiguity. Holwell was indeed deeply fascinated by and complimentary of Indian (particularly ancient) culture. This did not, however, mean that he was not also deliberately pursuing a different agenda. In fact, the authenticity of what Holwell presented as evidence that previous accounts had been misconceptions points to a whole other form of misrepresentation. In short, the Shastab was not a genuine Indian text.

Holwell claimed to have access to the first and most original of three Gentoo scriptures, which were supposedly the core of the religion. This was the Chartab Bhyde Shastab of Brumah, which he dated to 3,100 B.C.E. He told his readers that he had spent ‘eighteen months hard labour’ translating the Gentoo Shastab, but that both the valuable manuscript and the translation he had laboured over for so long were lost in the sack of Calcutta of 1756. Miraculously, however, he was apparently able to recover ‘some manuscripts’ by an ‘unforeseen and extraordinary event’, the details of which are not explained in any of the three volumes of Interesting Historical Events. What is finally presented to readers is apparently Holwell’s second attempt at conveying the contents of the Shastab, based on these recovered fragments. It is not clear whether the fruit of his ‘researches’ was a product of direct translation from an original manuscript, pandit instruction or a Persian translation of a Sanskrit text.\textsuperscript{20} These layers of deliberate obfuscation have thus unsurprisingly been described by scholars as ‘rather dubious’.

\textsuperscript{18} John Zephaniah Holwell, Interesting Historical Events relating to the Provinces of Bengal, vol.i, (1765), p.9.
\textsuperscript{20} Holwell, Interesting Historical Events, vol.i, p. 3-4.
‘murky’ and ‘distorted’. While some have attempted to suggest that Holwell’s *Shastab of Bramab* may have been referring to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*; aside from the title, the two texts share few similarities. This is not to say that Holwell did not own antique Indian manuscripts. In fact, the Company did compensate him for those lost in the sack of Calcutta. Yet, the *Shastab*, as described by Holwell, certainly never existed.

What this means for an analysis of his ideas poses an interesting set of considerations. Accepting that Holwell’s *Gentoo* religion was an invention, albeit imbued with some elements of Indian religion and philosophy, removes the problem of authenticity. The question of why Holwell chose to present it in that form, however, remains pertinent. Most obvious is the recognition that Holwell’s invention of the *Shastab* sits in relation to a situation where religion as a category was largely confined by European paradigms relating to doctrine and scripture. If we are to understand Holwell in terms of his impact on the development of ideas about ‘Hinduism’ then we must understand his emphasis on the importance of the *Shastab* as an authoritative basis for defining ‘true’ *Gentoo* doctrine as part of what Balagangadhara defines as the textual bias in European conceptions of religion. The fact that Holwell’s discovery was referred to as a discovery of the ‘Gentoo bible’ or ‘Gentoo Scriptures’ is a clear example of this.

Another important question to which the forgery of the *Shastab* leads us is that of motive. Urs App, for example, uses Holwell to demonstrate his over-arching thesis about the significance of ‘Ur-texts’ in the development of Orientalist discourse. In fact, App’s treatment of Holwell appears to be the first attempt at any sustained study of his work,

---

23 Holwell says this in *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.i, p.3. The Restitution Fund created in 1757 to compensate losses sustained in the sack of Calcutta is listed in *Fort William: India House correspondence and other contemporary papers relating thereto (foreign, political, and secret)*, (National Archives of India, 1962), p.25.
outside those discussing the impact of his account of the ‘Black Hole’ in a *Genuine Narrative*. In it App’s use of Holwell falls in line with scholarship on the role of ‘ancient theology’ in Europe’s history of ideas, which charts the role of misdated texts in supporting certain strands of Christian apologetic thinking. In essence App suggests that in Holwell’s case the creation of the *Shastab* was a simple means to an end, which was the propagation of a Christian ‘reformist ideology’. App bases this discussion on Holwell’s confession that he had become ‘a thorough convert’ to the hypotheses of Jacob Ilive, a self-styled neo-Gnostic prophet of eighteenth-century London. As we will see, Ilive certainly had an impact on the shape of Holwell’s thought, but he was by no means the only influence that Holwell drew on to create the *Shastab*. As for the idea that Holwell was advocating a Christian reformism, a deeper appreciation of Holwell’s engagement with a range of religiously heterodox European sources shows this to be an insufficient description. The idea that Holwell fabricated the *Shastab* to compliment a certain religious agenda is, however, an important one. Understanding Holwell’s journey from introducing the *Gentoo* religion in 1767 to his proclamation that he was interpreting it as a Christian deist in 1771 is the key to appreciating that agenda.

Scholars have pointed to forgery becoming something of a phenomenon in eighteenth-century Britain. In the period 1700-1800 some thirty-six statutes dealt with a multitude of documentary forgeries. Indeed, Holwell was contemporary to some of the most famous literary forgeries in the history of English literature: Chatterton’s Rowley

---

26 The only other chapter length discussion of Holwell considers him in the history of vegetarianism, in Tristram Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution*.
29 *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.iii, (1771), p.143.
Poems, and James McPherson’s ‘Ossian Hoax’. Both incidents saw the invention of an antiquarian and original text in order to communicate a certain set of ideas. Closer to Holwell was the Ezour Vedam, supposedly a French translation of one of the Vedas discovered by Sir Alexander Jonhston in Pondicherry. The Ezour Vedam was given and introduced to Europe by Voltaire from 1760 onwards, but not long afterwards doubts about its authenticity began to surface, by which time Voltaire had moved on to Holwell’s Shastab as his principal source on India. While there are many explanations to why forgery became so prominent in this period, of particular use for understanding Holwell are the ideas associated with writers like Ian Haywood, which regard forgeries as ‘subversive artefacts, levers to prise apart fracture-points in ideological systems’. Similarly, Greg Clingham presented forgeries as subversive inventions intended to make space for alternative narratives in history. In the case of the famous forgeries of Macpherson and Chatterton, their deliberately fictionalized historical narratives were designed to make alternative imagined national communities, not unlike Holwell’s ancient and native Gentoos. Holwell’s Shastab certainly had subversive content. As we shall see in the following sections of this chapter, as well as consistently challenging religious complacency and biases, Holwell forwards an alternative explanation of human suffering and free will, both of which demand a different understanding of the earth’s history and man’s place within it.

There were two immediate practical outcomes of Holwell’s forgery, firstly, the claim to an original and therefore uncorrupted text, and secondly, the construction of an alternate authority to other texts based on the supposed originality of the Shastab.

Holwell needed to position his account in a market place of competing authority and in

---

35 Clingham, Making History, pp.36-37.
particular competition with a different text, the *Viedam* (Veda). According to Holwell, the original *Chartab Bhade Shastab of Bramab* was followed by three other texts. The next text, the *Chatah Bhade of Bramah* did not appear until 2100 B.C.E, followed in another five hundred years (1600 B.C.E.) by the *Aughtorrah Bhade Shastab*. The latter two were dismissed by Holwell since, although central to modern worship, they were corrupt innovations of the first. In the case of the *Aughtorrah Bhade* the original *Shastab* was ‘alluded to only’. Finally, according to Holwell there was one more text, so chronologically distant from the other three that Holwell refers to its creation as a schism. This was the *Viedam* (Veda). Ironically considered one of the most ancient and important texts associated with Hinduism, it is given by Holwell as an example of religious corruption.

Holwell’s desire to separate his textual authority from that of the Vedas, (*Viedam*) becomes more significant when we view it in context. The notion that the Veda/s constituted the religious scripture of India, in a model analogous to Europe and the Bible, had circulated European intellectual culture since the seventeenth century.\(^\text{38}\) Abraham Roger’s hugely popular *A Door Open’d to the Knowledge of Occult Paganism* (1651)\(^\text{39}\) identified the ‘Vedam’ as ‘the Heathens’ Law-book’ as well as the source of unity among the ‘Bramines’\(^\text{40}\). In the early eighteenth century some awareness of the idea that several Vedic traditions existed was communicated to Europe via the Jesuit Lettres.\(^\text{41}\) In addition, as we have already seen, Holwell’s work was of course contemporary to the ‘French Veda’, the *Ezour Vedam*, which although not published in its entirety until 1781, was widely known through the work of Voltaire. In forwarding an alternate text, the


\(^{39}\) Roger, *De Open-Deure tot het Verborgen Haydendom Ofte Waerachtigh vertoogh van het Leven ende Zenden*, (Leiden: Françoys Hackes, 1651).

\(^{40}\) Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism*, p.100.

Shastah, Holwell distanced himself from all the connotations associated with the Vedas in order to establish an alternative source of authority for his entirely new discovery. As Holwell put it, ‘in place of drinking at the fountain head’ like he had, these other authors had merely ‘swallowed the muddy streams which flowed from’ the later scriptures. Although its crudity this approach was an apparent success, with Voltaire accepting Holwell’s claim by repeating that ‘The Shastah is older than the Veda’.43

Holwell’s connection to the other authors in this study thus begins with his emphasis on the importance of linguistic expertise and the authority of original texts, which were claims that they all repeated. Whereas previous authors had relied upon ‘unconnected scraps and bits’ Holwell offered a ‘complete translation’ of important Gentoo manuscripts. Moreover, a basic colloquial grasp of the local language was not adequate; the outsider must also be able to ‘sufficiently trace the etymology of their words and phrases’. Rather contradictorily, the main targets of his criticism were those ‘Popish authors’ who had in fact mastered a number of Indian dialects well before many other intrepid adventurers. Furthermore, a quick analysis of the terminology used by Holwell to explain the various Shastabs demonstrates his own creativity with Indian languages. Taking the first text as an example (the Chartab Bhade Shastah), Trautmann has explained that in Sanskrit this would read something like Catur Veda Śāstra, which presents an odd combination of two distinct types of Sanskrit literature: the Veda and Śāstra. Moreover, Holwell also misunderstood that Bhade and Viedam are transliterations of the same word, the first from Bengali and the second from Tamil.47

43 As translated by Kate Marsh, India in the French Imagination, p.117-118. This comment appeared in Voltaire’s ‘Philosophie de l’Histoire’, which became the introduction of to the Essai sur les moeurs in 1769.  
47 Trautmann, Aryans and British India, pp.68-69.
Yet, although Holwell did have critics, as we shall see in chapter five, the actual authenticity of his initial account was generally not in question. Knowledge of India at this time was sufficiently limited for Holwell’s vague linguistic authority to be convincing. Even those deeply critical of Holwell’s conclusions admired his discoveries. The Scottish poet William Julius Mickle, for example, dismissed Holwell’s enthusiasm for Gentoo tenets as a predictable cliché, like ‘every liberal mind, who has conversed with the world’ Holwell had become seduced by the mystical East. 48 Despite this, though, Mickle still summarised that of the existing studies of Indian religion, ‘Mr. Holwell’s account, upon the whole, is the most authentic’. 49 In another twist of irony, Holwell’s claims about language and textual authority also made his construction of Gentoo religion seem more authentic precisely on the basis that afforded him a certain degree of objectivity. Despite the layers of confusion and dishonesty, Holwell’s Gentoo religion appeared relatively untainted by European biases precisely because the Shastab and his access to it produced a format in which he was simply communicating ideas that had existed long before, in the recesses of extreme antiquity.

This was an advantage of claiming to have access to an original text that Holwell was keen to exploit. He explicitly differentiated himself from the ‘prejudices’ of ‘authors of almost all ages’, claiming instead to have approached the Gentoo doctrines impartially. Thus, in contrast to their prejudiced accounts, which were ‘fallacious and unsatisfactory to an inquisitive searcher of truth’, Holwell set out to rescue the Gentooos from misunderstanding. 50 The first and most obvious targets in this polemic were the ‘Popish authors’ that preceded him. Holwell capitalised on popular anti-Catholic sentiment by summarily dismissing the Jesuit authors on the basis that their own religious orientation

was ‘more idolatrous than the system they travelled so far to stigmatize’. This criticism was not, however, reserved for Catholics alone. Holwell applied equally damming dismissals of other forms of religiously coloured prejudice, such as the work of a Dutch minister, Phillipus Baldaeus (1632-1671). Holwell accused Baldaeus, who had spent time in and written about the region of Malabar, of having produced ‘a monster that shocks reason and probability’ in his communication of the Gentoo doctrines. According to Holwell it was in fact only the ‘mistaken zeal of a Christian divine’ that could excuse the ‘specimen’ that Baldaeus had produced. In contrast Holwell deliberately constructed the persona of a detached observer in order to construct a version of Indian religion that matches his vision of an ancient, natural and doctrinally simple religion of reason. This is made most evident to readers in his treatment of the controversial practice of sati or suttee, the self-immolation of widows on the funeral piers of their deceased husbands. He implored his readers to ‘view it (as we should every other action) without prejudice’, by dispensing with the tendency to regard things through the lens of ‘our own tenets and customs…to the injury of others’.

In conclusion, Holwell invented the Shastab and with it a unique claim to authority and on that basis was able to construct his particular account of ‘Hinduism’. To this an important caveat must be added. As we shall see in the following section of this chapter, Holwell’s Shastab, though invented, was heavily rooted in his engagement with Indian terminology, concepts and places, and that paying credit to this is an important part of understanding his particularly idiosyncratic account of its importance.

---

52 Holwell, Interesting Historical Events, vol.ii., pp.33-34.
The Fall of the Delinquent Angels: a Narrative of Decline

This section serves to introduce some of the key features of Holwell’s Shastab, with a particular emphasis on those aspects of his interpretation that have led others to consider him a deist author. In the first instance this stems from some basic propositions from Holwell that the Gentoo religion was essentially monotheistic, originally pure and that it had been corrupted by priestcraft. More broadly it stems from what could be described as his ‘universalist’ position that all different approaches to the Deity should be regarded as ‘divine worship’ and that people of other religions upon encountering different practices should ‘revere it still’. Holwell, who was educated in the city of Rotterdam, which was often considered by contemporaries to be the very example of religious toleration in the eighteenth century, thus argued that open-mindedness in matters of religion would cause us all to be ‘inspired with that benevolence of our species’ to tolerate, appreciate and admire the religions of other cultures. These elements of Holwell’s work were the most conventionally deist in the moderate sense, as it lapped over with a general latitudinarianism. As we shall see this is an accurate designation up to a point; however these were just the foundations of a much more complex set of extrapolations that Holwell constructed through his unique encounter with Indian religion thought.

One of the bases for the claim that Holwell was a deist is his description of Hinduism as essentially monotheistic. As discussed above, prior to Holwell’s work, the most common description of Gentoo religion, outside of heathenism, was that of idolatry

54 Holwell, Interesting Historical Events, vol.1, (1765), pp.8-9.
56 Holwell, Interesting Historical Events, vol.1 (1765), pp.8-10.
and polytheism. This also remained a contemporary criticism for those less enamoured with foreign religious practices. Holwell’s insistence that monotheism was at the core of the Gentoo religion was not made subtle in the Shastah; the very first line of the supposed translation began with the declaration that ‘God is ONE’. In a footnote Holwell explains that this statement was a translation of the word ‘Ekhummesha’, which he claimed was literally translated as ‘the one that ever was’ and therefore becomes ‘the eternal one’ throughout his translation of this supposed ancient text.

Where Holwell has got this word from is unclear. A similar phrase, ekam esa meaning ‘this one’ or ‘the one is this’ can be found in the Upanishads. Certainly, had Holwell been working with pandits, they would have been very aware of this kind of vocabulary. As mentioned, there is no substantial evidence, nor any direct claim that Holwell could grasp Sanskrit. Yet the root of the word is essential to a whole host of Sanskrit terms related to singularity or unity, deriving from Eka, simply meaning ‘one’. A short list serves as illustration of this: Ekatva, meaning unity or oneness; Ekantavada, referring to monism; Ekeyana, meaning union of thoughts and often referred to as meaning monotheism. Certainly, many of these terms hold connotations of theological significance. For example, the term Ekarasa, primarily meaning homogeneous/uniform or ‘of one essence’, is sometimes used to refer to or denote Brahma and is an important concept in the Upanisads. Ekamevadvitiyam meaning ‘one alone’, or ‘without a second’ is also a Sanskrit term often serving as shorthand for Brahma. It is a conflation of these

last two terms that it seems Holwell might be stabbing at, perhaps in a clumsy transliteration of oral instruction rather than textual translation. Given his use of this word, we are led to the conclusion that Holwell mapped an Upanisadic monism - one which held that all living things are elements of a single universal being, often called \textit{brahman} - onto his own construction of a monotheistic \textit{Gentoo} religion.\footnote{Wendy Doniger, \textit{On Hinduism}, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.12-13.}

It was not the summary of Holwell’s argument, nor indeed the supposed contents of the \textit{Shastab}, that the original religion of the \textit{Gentoos} was monotheistic. Underlying Holwell’s project ‘to rescue distant nations from the gross conceptions entertained of them by the multitude’ was the basic principle that all religions have a basis in both natural and rational religion, and that all were equally vulnerable to corruption. This allowed him, along with the example of the \textit{Shastab} to separate between high and low religion, between the reasonable doctrines of the original Brahmins and the corrupted and superstitious practices of the vulgar, who were easily led astray by priestcraft. As discussed in the previous chapter, this was a trope that was not exclusive, but was common to deism and religious heterodoxies. Holwell’s own discussion of the \textit{Gentoo} religion thus aligned itself with more deistical accounts of religious decline which tended to emphasise the role of priestcraft in propelling the processes of degeneration. Holwell’s construction of the terminology of ‘the \textit{Gentoo} religion’ supported this separation between high and low religion as a matter of corruption. For example, Holwell referred to the \textit{Gentoo} language as being Sanskrit, not the Bengali spoken by contemporary inhabitants in Calcutta.\footnote{Holwell, \textit{Interesting Historical Events}, vol.ii, (1767), p.5.} Similarly, Holwell also differentiated between general Gentoo beliefs and the ‘doctrines’ or ‘tenets’ of the ‘Brahmins’ when discussing the particularly ancient and more philosophically complex aspects of the religion.\footnote{Holwell, \textit{Interesting Historical Events}, vol.ii, (1767), pp.7-8.}
In fact, according to Holwell the exclusive use of ‘the Sanscrit character’ for religious matters was an invention of priestcraft, introduced by certain sects of Bramins at the same time ‘they first began to veil in mysteries, the simple doctrines of Bramah.’ This deliberate obsfuscation continued with the creation of the Aughtorrah Bhade, in which the pure Gentoo tenets were ‘enveloped in impenetrable obscurity, allegory and fable’ with the result of completely excluding the laity from that original knowledge. From that point onwards ‘superstition, the sure support of priestcraft, to fast possession of the people’.  

So different are the original and its corruption, that should his study encompass, as Holwell suggests rhetorically, ‘the whole of their modern ceremonials, and complicated modes of worship; the labour would be without end’. In contrast, the ancient tenets of the original Gentoo religion are defined as ‘short, pure, simple and uniform’. 

In order to more immediately illustrate the corrupting effects of general religious decline Holwell even provided a physical example of the purer elements of the original Gentoo religion in the shape of the city of ‘Bisnapore’ (Bishnupur). Bishnupur had been for almost one thousand years the capital of the Hindu Malla kings of Mallabhum and was a relatively independent kingdom in the time of Holwell’s declared visit. For Holwell, this region was untouched in a way that the regions under Mughal control had not been and thus represented an example of ‘the only vestiges of the beauty, purity, piety, regularity, equity and strictness of the ancient Indostan government’. Some have singled out Holwell’s account of ‘Bisnapore’ as being a clear example of his general dishonesty. Most of them have, however, been led to this passage via Voltaire, who mentioned Holwell’s description in the service of a similar claim that some areas of India

---

70 Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.i (1776), pp.198-201.
had retained ‘the purity of its ancient morality’.\textsuperscript{71} Voltaire himself expressed some
incredulity, accusing Holwell of ‘some exaggeration’. Yet this was the result of a printing
mistake which presented Holwell as claiming that it took sixty to days to cross the
territory, when in fact in the original Holwell stated that it took ‘sixteen’ days\textsuperscript{72}. Aside
from this mistake on the part of Voltaire there is very little to call dishonest in the rest of
Holwell’s description and, interestingly, it provides an example of where his ideas were
born of an engagement with Indian culture. In this period Bishnupur was a distinctly
Hindu settlement. Holwell’s remarks that “There are in this precinct, no less than three
hundred and sixty considerable Pagodas or places of public worship; erected by this
Rajah and his ancestors’ were in fact an accurate description of the famously unique and
striking architecture of the city.\textsuperscript{73} Bishnupur is famous for its prominent terracotta
temples, constructed in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, of which there are
more than in any other city in West Bengal.\textsuperscript{74} In fact, Holwell’s emphasis on the distinctly
‘Gentoo’ character of the city would not be an inconceivable perception. A much
emphasised aspect of the city’s history is that Gopal Singh, who ruled Bishnupur from
1730-1745, was considered to be deeply religious and committed to the worship of
Vishnu. His concern for the spiritual well-being of his subjects was channelled into the
commissioning of public temples and festivals.\textsuperscript{75} That Holwell perceived there to have
been something particularly unique about this province, which for him was evidence of
its faithfulness to ancient doctrine, is not implausible but in fact understandable in this
context.

\textsuperscript{71} Holwell, \textit{Interesting Historical Events}, vol.i (1776), p.212.
\textsuperscript{72} Urs App, \textit{The Birth of Orientalism}, p.301.
\textsuperscript{73} Holwell, \textit{Interesting Historical Events}, vol.i (1766), p.199.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{International Dictionary of Historic Places}, pp.136-138.
\textsuperscript{75} Holwell, \textit{Interesting Historical Events}, vol.i (1766), p.136. And, Binod Sankar Das, \textit{Changing Profile of the
Geographical examples of Gentoo worship had another important role in demonstrating Holwell’s narrative of purity and decline. In contrast to ‘Bisnapore’ Holwell painted the Southern regions of ‘Indostan’ as most deeply entrenched in superstition. As was mentioned in a previous section, Holwell also sets up the authority of the Shastah, including its formulations of varying fidelity to the original, in direct competition with the Viedam. As well as wiping the slate clean for his own interpretation of Gentoo religion, this distinction was also related to the theme of doctrinal purity and corruption. After drawing a stark contrast between the ‘purity and chaste manners of the Shastah with the great absurdities and impurities of the Viedam’, Holwell went on to claim that the ‘Gentoos of the Mallabar and Cormandel coasts’ followed the Vediam.\(^76\) Whereas, ‘Gentoos of the provinces of Bengal; and by all the Gentoo of the rest of India, commonly called India proper’ were followers of the Shastah.\(^77\) Holwell’s decision to emphasise this division is of course intertwined with Holwell’s desire to establish an authoritative source outside of the previous productions of religiously motivated authors such as Baldaeus, who had written about Malabar, and the Jesuits in the south of India. These critiques of prejudiced authors neatly meshed into Holwell’s own grandnarrative of decline as a result of priestcraf as a universal phenomenon. Holwell thus paints an absurd picture in which the idolatrous Catholics are learning about Gentoo religion from the equally idolatrous and superstitious followers of the Viedam. Holwell was thus able to attack the impression given by the Jesuits, because it is based on ‘hearsay from Hindoos, probably as ignorant as themselves.’\(^78\)

More important for Holwell’s argument though, was the universal application of this paradigm. Holwell was not interested in the specific conditions that led to this particular corruption of Gentoo religion; instead, he intended to make a case for its

\(^77\) Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.i., (1765), p.11.
significance for understanding religious truth in the abstract. Thus, Holwell reminded his
readers, in this process of decline ‘the Gentoo are not singular’ and instead he poses the
idea that ‘the original text of every theological system, has, we presume, from a similar
cause, unhappily undergone the same fate.’ This is where the more subversive quality of
Holwell’s work takes form. Not only was this narrative of decline universal, so were the
forms of superstition in which it was manifested. Obvious enough for most British
authors were the parallels between popular anti-Catholic sentiment and the superstition
of the idolatrous Gentoo. Yet, this critique extended further still, to a general distaste for
the ‘intemperate zeal of religious vanity’ across the confessional divide. This, argued
Holwell, was not a historical problem, but a contemporary ‘fashion’ which led to the
unwarranted depreciation of other religions, and destroyed ‘the peace and tranquillity of
their poor fellow Christians’. Holwell’s deism was an expression of the idea that original
natural religion was universally rational, but that its corruption through superstition and
zeal was, similarly, universal.

When we turn to the contents of Holwell’s Shastab, though, his application of a
narrative of decline went much further than the simple label of deism would suggest.
Conventionally enough, it was present in Holwell’s grand-narrative of the religion, which
strayed from the purity of the original Shastab to an eventual schism and the production
of the Viedam. Yet, it was also the narrative within the Shastab; the purpose of which was
to convey how this earth was created for the punishment of once pure ‘delinquent
angels’. According to Holwell, this Eastern Paradise Lost was the central truth of the
Shastab, communicated from God to the ‘Legislator’ Bramah. It revealed that ‘the Eternal
One’ had created angelic beings in the order of Birmah, Bistnoo, Sieb (Brahmā, Viṣṇu,
Śiva), and then Maisasoor. Holwell’s Maisasoor was taken from the ‘buffalo demon’ figure

81 Holwell, Interesting Historical Events, vol.ii (1767) p.20.
Mahiśāsura who had used his gradually accumulated power to commit atrocities and who was most commonly depicted being defeated by the goddess Druga (a manifestation of the combined powers of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva). In Holwell’s account Maisasoor instigated a rebellion among the lower deities, the Debtah-Logue (devatāloka). In response to this failed coup, the ‘Eternal One’ condemned them to eternal punishment. With the intervention of Bistnoo, this was altered to offer the prospect of returning to grace by earning salvation through successive states of existence, transmigrating through eighty-eight different forms, the last two stages of which were Gboji (cow) and Mhurd (man). It was in this final stage that the soul must show itself to be truly reformed in order to gain entry to the ladder of fifteen planets, or “Boboons” (navagraha) until finally reaching heaven. According to this narrative, since its creation, the earth has been in a state of decline, in which the consumption of animal flesh and moral corruption has led these fallen spirits even further from their celestial origins.

Holwell’s account of what we would more commonly understand to be the concept of reincarnation was thus a mixture of Indian religion and Christian mythology. Holwell seems to have a rudimentary grasp of some Indian ideas about reincarnation. While it is a complex and varied aspect of Hindu theologies, the idea of rebirth is a central tenet to many key texts familiar to the Brahmins, who were the most likely source for those broadly correct aspects of Holwell’s knowledge. Yet, although featuring a cast of ‘Hindu’ deities, Holwell’s angelic fall seems more likely to have been based on various Christian mythologies. The first was most obviously the work of John Milton, who Howell of course accuses of having copied the idea of a heavenly rebellion from the

---

83 Holwell, Interesting Historical Events, vol.ii, (1767), pp.35-60.
Brahmins, via Greek and Roman ‘Sages’, with ‘extravagance of genius and invention’. Urs App has further suggested that Howell copied the idea that the Brahmin’s texts contained an account of fallen angels from Portuguese author, Diogo do Couto’s *Decada Quinta da Asia* (1612). App claims that Couto’s report of his travels ‘was used by Holwell who could handle Portuguese’. Yet, App gives no evidence for either statement, except the apparent correspondence of the idea that there was an angelic rebellion. It seems unlikely, even if Holwell could grasp Portuguese (he nowhere claims to), since this was not an important source in the eighteenth century. Later on in his work Holwell also directly referenced Jacob Ilive, who had declared that ‘Man is an Apostle Angel and a Body’ and Earth was ‘Hell, the Place inferior to Heaven’. As we shall see, though, there were several more immediate sources for Holwell’s ideas, with the notion of a ‘pre-existent lapse’ of human souls in heaven as fundamental to his reinterpretation of many Christian concepts in the light of his *Gentoos* discoveries.

**The Doctrine of Metempsychosis**

Holwell’s treatment of the “Doctrine of Metempsychosis” is the crux in understanding his work. Despite not appearing until the third volume, published in 1771, its inclusion in the full title of 1765 demonstrates Holwell’s intention to produce a *Dissertation on the Metempsychosis* from the outset:

*Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Provinces of Bengal, and the Empire of Hindostan. With a seasonable hint and persuasive to the Honorable The Court of Directors of the East India Company as also The Mythology and Cosmogony, Facts and Festivals of the Gentoos, Followers of the SHASTAH. And A Dissertation on the METEMPSYCHOSIS, commonly, though erroneously, called the PYTHAGOREAN Doctrine.*

---

Yet, Holwell’s conclusions about the implications of this ‘doctrine’ for a European religious landscape are not fully elaborated until the third and final volume of *Interesting Historical Events*, which was published much later in 1771. This delay was very likely attributable to its extraordinary content, analysis of which we will come to soon enough. Yet, Holwell still had plenty to say about the significance of metempsychosis in the book before (1767).

Metempsychosis, a term taken from Greek philosophy, refers to the movement of the soul between bodies after physical death. Among most European sources the metempsychosis expressed in Eastern religions was relegated to the realm of mysticism. In contrast, discussions of ‘transmigration’ as expressed in classical philosophy were designated ancient allegories for the principles of natural philosophy. In one of Holwell’s sources, an *Essay of Transmigration, in Defense of Pythagoras: Or a Discourse of Natural Philosophy* (1692), for example, an Aristotelian distinction between the Rational Soul and the Sensitive (or Vegetative) Spirit allows its author, Bulstrode Whitelock, to conclude that Pythagoras was simply referring to the redistribution of the Sensitive spirit into other material forms through the death of the body.88 This is echoed in Toland’s rationalist vindication of Pythagoras, who according to this account ‘did not believe the Transmigration which has made [him] so famous to Posterity’, since, ‘he meant no more than the eternal Revolution of all Forms in Matter’.89 Thus, when Holwell stated that ‘Pythagoras took the doctrine of Metempsychosis, from the Bramins’, he was entirely reversing this trope.90 While most seventeenth and eighteenth-century commentators had inferred that Indian ideas about reincarnation were derivative of Classical concepts, Holwell attempted to convince his readers that the opposite was true.

---

As well as a matter of natural philosophy, other attempts to separate classical accounts of metempsychosis from Eastern mysticism cast the former as a didactic tool, used to inculcate moral virtues. Whitelock suggests, for example, that Plato’s moral pedagogy of punishment for effeminate men by way of transmigration into the body of a woman, or lascivious people into swine etc., is a story of “good Design” born of moral necessity. Such “pious lies” are transferred into social customs in the West, whereas they become literal errors in the East.\textsuperscript{91} Again, Holwell reverses this paradigm, claiming instead that the literal truth of the \textit{Shastab} was corrupted by the Greeks, ‘Persian and Egyptian Magi’, who obscured its original tenets with the ‘unintelligible jargon of divinity’.\textsuperscript{92} In contrast, the original doctrine, as conceived of by the Brahmins, was ‘simple and sublime’.\textsuperscript{93} The spread and eventual obscurity of the doctrine of Metempsychosis thus features as a parallel narrative of decline, outside India, to that of the Gentoo religion within. Just as the simplicity of the \textit{Shastab} was gradually corrupted, the essential truth of metempsychosis, once known to humanity, was eventually lost due to the priest-craft of the Egyptian Magi.

When using the term metempsychosis Holwell is invoking not just the idea of transmigrating souls but also the creation story with which it is aligned. For Holwell, the \textit{Shastab}'s key purpose was to communicate to humanity that:

‘mortal bodies were prepared by God, for rebel angels, in which they were for space to be imprisoned, and subject to natural and moral evils, more or less painful in proportion to their original guilt, and through which they were doomed to transmigrate under eighty-nine different forms, the last into that of man’.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{92} Yang, “Gross Metempsychosis and Eastern Soul”, pp.27-28.
\textsuperscript{93} Interesting Historical Events, vol.ii, (1767), p.60.
\textsuperscript{94} Interesting Historical Events, vol.ii (1767) p.62.
Having set this out, Holwell confidently states that his readers ‘are now possessed for the first time of a faithful account of the metempsychosis of the Bramins - commonly called the transmigration of souls’. Holwell’s account of what we would more readily recognise as reincarnation was thus rooted in the idea that human suffering existed in proportion to the guilt accorded to their role in Maisasoor’s angelic rebellion. Though more tentative at this stage, Holwell still made some bold claims for the ability of Metempsychosis, and the creation story which it accompanies, to solve some of the unanswered questions in Christian theology before the eventual appearance of the ‘Dissertation on Metempsychosis’ in 1771. The theological conundrum it could supposedly answer was, as Holwell posed it: ‘Whence the origin and existence of moral evil?’

To this question, Holwell argued, the doctrine of metempsychosis provided an answer that more ‘satisfactory, conclusive, and rational’ than any he had come accross. This he reasoned accordingly; if original sin was committed by rebellious angels, prior to the creation of humanity, and their position on earth is determined in ‘proportion to their original guilt’, then souls do not enter the world as innocents and God is absolved of charges of unjust punishment. Holwell set this statement up in contrast to the argument of an unnamed author who had sought to explain that ‘God would have made all things perfect, but that there was in matter an evil bias’ and so it was his materials and not God that was to blame. This was in fact a direct quote, taken from a particularly unpopular work: Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil (1756) by Soame Jenyns. Heavily criticised by Samuel Johnson in the Literary Magazine, for its presentation of a superficial set of solutions to a complex theological problem, Jenyns’s work was made

---

95 Interesting Historical Events, vol.ii (1767) p.65.
notorious for its clumsy handling of the optimistic philosophy of suffering, usually associated with Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man* (1733-4) and roundly critiqued in Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759). By also censuring Jenyns, Holwell aligned himself with the authoritative side of a relatively contemporary debate (despite obviously subverting that too), as well as positioning his theory as an alternative.

It is also important to note how Holwell’s recitation of the Doctrine of Metempsychosis in this second volume of *Interesting Historical Events* (1767) does have some interesting and not insignificant resemblances to elements of some Hindu traditions. In particular his attachment to the idea that a Fall was the origin of evil is an obvious focal point for those wishing to establish a connection between Christian and Hindu beliefs. Doniger O’Flaherty has suggested that Christian versions of similar mythologies were thus very easily fused and accommodated into later Hindu beliefs about ‘the Fall’. Referring specifically to Holwell’s account, Doniger O’Flaherty suggests that he extrapolated from Hindu beliefs that demons were cast out of heaven and sent to the earth. In Holwell’s narrative Śiva (Sieb) drives them out, which corresponds with some typical patterns in some Hindu mythologies. Indeed, Holwell was touching upon an important discussion within Hindu theology itself, which also sought an origin of evil in the beginning of human action, while at the same time insisting on a cycle of rebirth. Holwell was possibly able to simplify these ideas into a general understanding of *karma* as free will and the origin of evil, thereby connecting a crude understanding of reincarnation with some notion of an original Fall.

---


101 For discussion of Karma and Free will see *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, pp.19-20.
Holwell’s full discussion of Metempsychosis did not appear until the final volume of *Interesting Historical Events*, published in 1771. It is at this point that Holwell’s thought takes a decidedly heterodox turn. The complete title of the dissertation included the suggestion that it would feature “an occasional comparison between them [the doctrine of the Gentoo] and the Christian Doctrines”. This was, however, somewhat of a misnomer since this ‘occasional comparison’ actually spanned most of the two hundred and twenty seven page volume. Among the deeply controversial ideas presented in the text was that Christianity was not simply compatible with early Gentoo doctrines, but in fact derivative of them. Holwell suggested that the doctrines ‘preached first by Bramah’ were the same as those preached ‘afterwards by Christ’. That is, for Holwell, what was true in the simple Christianity of Christ had already been part of the original tenets of the Bramins and that therefore, ‘it is not violence to faith, if we believe that Birmah and Christ is one and the same individual celestial being’. Furthermore, Holwell suggested that this one celestial being had, in the style of a Hindu avatar, ‘appeared at different periods of time, in distant parts of the earth, under various mortal forms’ to deliver the primitive truths of religion. Similarly the warlike archangel Michael was Shiva, and Gabriel was the benevolent Vishnu and together, these divine beings had made the original Trinity.  

Thus, in a clever twist of rhetoric Holwell suggested that it was therefore ‘by the mouth of Christ (styled Birmah by the easterns)’ that God delivered to creation the moral guides for their restoration.

The equation of Christ and Birmah is not simply significant because of its potential connotations of blasphemy, but also for its more vital connection with a number of debates about the nature of the material body and the soul. It is on the one

---

103 Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.iii.(London, 1771), pp.72-73
104 Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.iii (1771) p.80.
hand the ultimate expression of Holwell’s universalism, and on the other, the logical consequence of his adherence to a certain set of contemporary heterodoxies. For Holwell, this belief in ‘the transmigration of souls’ not only explains how there are several Hindu incarnations of different divine beings, ‘in such ways as Elijah and St. John the Baptist’ are ‘one and the same spirit, from the intimation of the prophet Malachi’, but also solved several other theological problems, principal of which was the question of human and animal suffering. While this has much less to do with how Holwell’s approach to ‘Hinduism’ was read and received in the eighteenth century, the majority of responses to which were based on his 1767 account, the following section will consider the 1771 *Dissertation* in detail both because of what it tells us about how Holwell decided to construct the *Shastah* in 1767 and what it tells us about his own religious beliefs and attitudes in relation to the interpretation of ‘Hindusim’. What needs to be stressed as important here though, is the fundamental departure that Holwell’s 1767 interpretation of the doctrine of metempsychosis presented from already existing ideas about Indian philosophy and theology. While most took these ‘Pythagorean’ aspects of Brahmin thought to be derivative, it was Holwell’s ‘belief and conclusion’ that ‘the original tenets of Brahma are most ancient; that they are truly original, and not copied from any other system of theology, that had ever been promulged to, or obtruded upon the belief of mankind’.  

### Theodicy

In the *Dissertation on Metempsychosis* Holwell reaffirms the creation story outlined in the previous volume, but this time as a summary with much of the specific ‘Indianized’ terminology removed. As Holwell himself put it, after having ‘floated on the materials’

---

106 Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.iii. (1771), p.82.

left to him after the wreck of Calcutta, he was ready to ‘launch out into the ocean of hypothesis and speculation’. Instead of reciting the Shastah, as in the last volume, Holwell instead supplies a list what he sees as being the ‘Primitive Truths’, common to all religion. These include the fairly conventional belief in ‘the being of a God’, as well as the not so conventional rebellion of angelic beings, leading to the idea that ‘man is in a state of punishment and probation for a transgression committed in a prior state of existence’. Holwell’s primary commitment was, therefore, to the doctrine of Metempsychosis and not the Shastah, which goes unmentioned until page sixteen. The issue at stake was theodicy. Observing that ‘the goodness of God stands most evidently impeached in the wild supposition that he could possibly create a race of beings subjected to misery, without some cause of offence on their parts’ Holwell sets about finding a cause. He concludes that since no cause on earth can present itself, the cause must have been an ‘offence in some former state of the soul’s existence’.

From this starting precept the Dissertation details a complex engagement with a wide-array of authors who had also posed the possibility of transmigrating souls and pre-existent lapse as a potentially more satisfactory theodicy than the various confessional alternatives. Among these thinkers the ideas of Jacob Ilive begin to appear. Included by Herrick in his study of ‘the English Deists’, Ilive argued for a religion of reason, whilst also affirming the pre-existence of human souls and maintaining that earth was devised for their punishment. In line with more conventional deist thinking, Ilive also held that Christianity, as it was practised, was a corruption of early rational religious truths. The concept of imprisoned souls was not, however, an idea solely of Ilive’s invention. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a revival of Gnosticism’s focus on the cosmological origins of the world appealed to several different shades of radicals,

---

including those dabbling in theories of metempsychosis and referred to as
‘Pythagoreans’.111 As well as Ilive’s ideas, Holwell’s Dissertation consisted of a wide-
ranging discussion on metempsychosis and theodicy, in which he mentioned the
positions of Locke and Leibniz, as well as exploring in greater detail the ideas of various
theologians, such as Capel Berrow (1716–1782) and the Cambridge Platonists.112

The ideas of metempsychosis and pre-existence entered early Enlightenment
debates about the spirit through the various philosophical responses to Cartesian
dualism.113 The radical separation of spirit from matter opened up the possibility of a
conceptual return to classical notions about transmigration. Moreover, despite its
disruption of the Christian hierarchies of beings, this emphasis on the extra-terrestrial
existence of the soul meant that the doctrine of transmigration had a specific appeal for
some theologians.114 The Cambridge Platonists, most notably Ralph Cudworth (1617-
1688) and Henry Moore (1614–1687), were, like Holwell, brought to consider
transmigration as an aspect of theodicy. In particular, transmigration was posited as an
alternative to Calvinist conceptions of predestined election and the accompanying
perceptions of injustice that such a harsh doctrine inspired. Rather than a God who had
seemingly created humanity with the intention of condemning the majority to eternal
damnation, the Cambridge Platonists looked to the work of the early Platonist church
father, Origen, and suggested that the apparent inequalities and injustices of this present
life could be explained by his hypothesis of pre-existing souls.115 Moreover, while the
Cambridge Platonists generally stopped short of a full endorsement of transmigration as
a pattern of reincarnation, there were tentative suggestions that tended towards this.
Cudworth proposed that the souls of animals might also pre-exist. Joseph Glanvill

---

112 Holwell, Interesting Historical Events, vol.iii, (1771) p.78.
113 Peter Harrison, “Animal Souls, Metempsychosis, and Theodicy in Seventeenth-Century English
114 Chi-ming Yang, “Gross Metempsychosis and Eastern Soul”, p.16.
(1636–1680) suggested that the souls of deceased infants might await embodiment in another terrestrial vehicle. Others, more tangentially related to the Cambridge circle suggested that transmigration was possible since one life-time was too short an existence to achieve salvation. 116

So, while not advancing a theodicy of complete metempsychosis between human and animal souls, there was a recognition that revived Origenism, coupled with a theory of pre-existence, tended towards metempsychosis as the best possible explanation of why some of creation appeared to be, as Glanvill put it, ‘faultlessly miserable’. 117 Henry More and the Cambridge School of Christian Platonists regarded Descartes as an ally in the conflict against materialism, although they disliked his configuration of the ‘beast-machine’. Instead they posited a less extreme dualism that allowed for non-conscious operations that were not dictated by God but were nevertheless part of design. 118 This was sometimes combined with a belief in the piety of animals. This idea, originally reported by Pliny, who suggested that elephants demonstrated pious behaviours, was repeated by both Henry More and Montaigne in their discussions of natural history. 119

Into the eighteenth century this controversial, but not uncommon debate, was taken up by a number of theologians grappling with the role of animal suffering in Theodicy. Jesuit Father Guillaume Hyacinthe Bougeant’s Amusement philosophique sur le langage des bestes (173) set out, with mock seriousness, the view that animals were actually embodied demons. 120 According to Bougeant this explained both their suffering, which they deserved, and their apparent intelligence. He also added, most provocatively, that it was reasonable to believe that they reincarnated according to the Pythagorean and Indian

120 Guillaume Hyacinthe Bougeant, Amusement philosophique sur le langage des bestes (Paris, 1739).
systems. The joke was apparently lost on Bougeant’s colleagues and as well as being forced to retract a number of offending passages he was briefly exiled from Paris.

Voltaire later commented that Bougeant inadvertently ‘revives an article of the faith of the most ancient oriental priests’. Notably, this comment came in a passage of Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary* work which discussed ‘The Metempsychosis of the Brahmins’ the majority of which appears to have been taken from Holwell’s 1767 edition of *Interesting Historical Events*, made particularly clear by his direct reference to Holwell’s *Shastah* and the terms ‘Mhurd’ for man and ‘Onderah’ for Hell.\(^\text{121}\) Holwell will have been aware of Bougeant, with his thesis also exciting controversy in Britain, where it appeared in two separate translations.\(^\text{122}\)

Also among those discussing animal suffering, metempsychosis and theodicy in the eighteenth century were two of Holwell’s most discussed sources, mentioned in the same passage as Ilive, the Rev. Richard Dean and Capel Berrow. It was Holwell’s contention that these authors were stabbing at the general truth of *Shastah*, without realising it. The Rev. Richard Dean, Master of Middleton grammar school, wrote and published *An Essay on the future Life of Brute, Introduced with Observations upon Evil, its Nature and Origin*, shortly after Holwell’s first two volumes of *Interesting Historical Events* in 1768. That this work provoked interest and discussion in the eighteenth-century world of letters is testified to by Boswell’s recounting of a conversation on the matter with Dr Samuel Johnson in 1767.\(^\text{123}\) Dean was wrestling with a similar problem to Holwell, which was ‘the Nature and Origin of Evil’, and more specifically, the question as to why in this

---


\(^\text{122}\) Two London editions, printed for T. Cooper, appeared in 1739 and 1740, while another translation was published in Dublin, printed by Cor. Wynne, again in 1739.

context ‘dumb Animals are liable to infelicity as well as Men’.124 Dean’s solution was to deny the idea that animals were unintelligent beings, and instead make the case that they too had a claim to immortality. Distinguishing between the different approaches to Theodicy as Manichean, Leibnizean and ‘Modern’ (i.e. the work of thinkers like Jenyns), Middleton defines his own position as the belief that natural evil derives from moral evil, and that, therefore, animals were also suffering the consequences of the Fall.125 To this, Holwell adds ‘we wish he has said the angelic fall; possibly he meant it’.126 We can be fairly certain that he did not. Middleton had included a discussion of transmigration in the preface, describing it as a ‘witty invention’ and a ‘noble device’ that deterred the ancients from moral corruption, but he went no further.127 Nevertheless, Holwell goes on to conclude that had Dean known of the Bramins’ account of metempsychosis he would have surely embraced it, since it ‘alone rationally accounts for, and reconciles their existence as intelligent free agents doomed to misery’.128

Another of the works cited by Holwell in relation to theodicy and animal suffering was also authored by Anglican cleric, Capel Berrow (1715-82). Berrow’s A Pre-existent Lapse of Human Souls was a more strident endorsement of the theory of a heavenly rebellion, and consequently presents an intriguing insight into the extent to which such theological speculation was tolerated within the clergy, as long as it remained on the level of intellectual enquiry and not rhetorical polemic.129 The take of the Critical Review was that this inquiry was a display of learning and erudition more than anything else.130 Berrow explained to his readers that since God would not let ‘either sentient, or intelligent

---

126 Holwell, Interesting Historical Events, vol.iii, p.139.
128 Ibid, p.141.
beings suffer, merely for suffering sake’, all souls on earth must be the spirits who rebelled with apostate angels and were now reincarnating from the level of microbes up to humans on their long journey back to heaven.\textsuperscript{131} Deeply embedded in these ideas was the issue of theodicy and animal suffering. Holwell claims that it is with much relief that he encountered Berrow’s radical treatise, since ‘it confirms, from our own scriptures, many leading and essential points of the Metempsychosis, as the existence of angels, their rebellion, their expulsion from blessed abodes…’ and, essentially, Holwell’s entire theory of reincarnation.\textsuperscript{132} That Holwell was very heavily influenced by Berrow is undeniable, and points to the more widespread presence of ideas as much as those expressed by Ilive.

Holwell’s ideas about animal spirituality are also closely interconnected with contemporary discourses on the moral imperative of abstinence from meat. Indeed, the extent of Holwell’s own contribution to this discussion can be observed in the fact that later in the century the terms ‘Bramin’ and ‘Pythagorean’ were common designations for vegetarianism.\textsuperscript{133} To some extent this is a logical conclusion that stems from the Indian aspects of Holwell’s interests and sources. Holwell was not the only European commentator to have theorised that the vegetarianism of the Hindoos was a rational consequence of accepting a theology of transmigrating souls.\textsuperscript{134} As ever, though, Holwell chooses to put this in his own terms in relation to the Shastab and suggests that “Moisasoor”, the leader of the unholy rebellion conducted a truly Machiavellian manoeuvre by persuading the early priests that animal sacrifice was a way to shorten earthly punishment. Likewise, this Satan like figure introduced alcohol because the inebriation it induced encouraged the wilful murder of humanity’s fellow creatures. Thus

\textsuperscript{131} Capel Berrow, \textit{A Preexistent Lapse of Human Souls in a State of Pre-Existence, the Only Original Sin, And the Ground Work of the Gospel Dispensation}, (London, 1762), p.2.
\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Interesting Historical Events}, vol.iii, (1771) pp.37-38.
\textsuperscript{133} Chi-ming Yang, “Gross Metempsychosis and Eastern Soul”, p.18.
\textsuperscript{134} See, Tristram Stuart, \textit{The Bloodless Revolution; Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India}. 

98
Holwell describes the introduction of ‘these two first-rate vices’ as a ‘master-piece of politics’. 135

Contemporary advances in anatomy also framed Holwell’s understanding of the relationship between humans and animals. Most anatomists had confirmed human similarity to apes and other animals, which put physiology at the centre of the debate. Man was, evidently, partly animal. But what sort: herbivore or carnivore? A substantial sector of the scientific community concluded that in its original state, the human body was designed to be herbivorous - thus substantiating the scriptural evidence that primeval diet was fruit and vegetables. 136 On the basis of such findings and despite their rivalry, both René Descartes and his principal critic, Pierre Gassendi, agreed that vegetarianism could be the most suitable diet for humans. 137 That Holwell saw these theories as supporting his own is made clear when, in an additional essay that elaborated his commentary on Metempsychosis (1779), Holwell noted that eating meat was ‘in opposition to the natural and obvious construction of the mouth and digestive faculties of Mhurd (man)’. 138 In conjunction with this new science of man as a natural herbivore, numerous vegetarian doctors appeared all over Europe, transforming these scientific arguments into practical dietary prescriptions for patients believed to be ailing from over-consumption of flesh. 139

One very influential figure in this popular field is directly cited by Holwell throughout his work and was no doubt a formative influence of his on medical training, since his work was definitive of that epoch. George Cheyne’s Essay of Health and Long Life was published in 1724, went into multiple editions, and was still in print a century

138 Holwell, A review of the original principles of the ancient Brahmins, p.79.
later. According to Cheyne, God provided animal food after the Deluge only to shorten human life. Cheyne thus advocated the ‘vegetable diet’ as the most effective means of curing any major ailment.\textsuperscript{140} While this may seem removed from the question of theodicy, for Holwell and for Cheyne the imperatives placed on meat consumption were as much moral as scientific. Dr Cheyne firmly situated his conception of bodily health within a context of sin and redemption. According to Cheyne’s forceful invectives, health was the responsibility of the individual, and therefore contained within it a moral imperative. Those who over indulged themselves into sickness were guilty of crimes against God and nature.\textsuperscript{141} Throughout the \textit{Dissertation}, and in some parts of volume two of \textit{Interesting Historical Events}, Holwell also invoked causal relationship between morality and corruption and the consumption of animal flesh by pointing out its deleterious effects. For Holwell this connection was a matter of inflammation. The Devil (or “Moisasoor”) knew that meat consumption would ‘inflame and exalt the \textit{desires of the flesh}, above the rule and dominion of the \textit{spirit}'. For Holwell, then, the link between the ill effects of animal flesh on the body had direct consequences for the soul: this ‘inflamed state of the human body (from the continued accession of animal salts and juices, heated and fermented by the auxiliary force of spirituous liquors)’ had a direct causal relationship with the various vices, including ‘avarice, envy, hatred and malice’.\textsuperscript{142}

Holwell had encountered and written about such advice on a very practical level in India, when he observed that Indian physicians often prescribed vegetable diets to prepare patients for smallpox inoculation, a procedure that Holwell described in 1767, before it became standard practice in Europe.\textsuperscript{143} We can see from the resulting publication of \textit{An Account of the Manner of Inoculating for the Small Pox in the East Indies}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{142} Holwell, \textit{Interesting Historical Events}, vol.iii, (1771), p.161.
\bibitem{143} Asiatick Annual Register, (1800), pp.25-31.
\end{thebibliography}
(1767) that Holwell’s own ideas about vegetarianism shared a kinship with the practices he described in India. As Holwell explains in his treatise, certain foods are abstained from because they are thought to contain higher concentrations of nigoda and thus harm the body. This was a classical Jaina belief that souls which have committed extreme crimes in previous lives are incarnated into airborne microscopic nigoda, which parasitically colonise other living beings.144

There is one more association between animal suffering and transmigration that further connects Holwell and Cheyne. Holwell also took a great deal of inspiration from another admirer and friend of Dr Cheyne, Chevalier Andrew Michael Ramsay. Ramsay was known for an idiosyncratic blend of mysticism and deism, and was particularly infamous for his association with Cheyne’s Quietist guide, French mystic, Mme Guyon.145 Again, it is in this last dissertation, devoted to the topic of transmigration, that Holwell cites this source directly on at least two separate occasions.146 Like Holwell, Ramsay was convinced that the Greeks, Persians and Chaldaeans had all derived their philosophies from the Brahmins. Significantly, he had also come to the conclusion that the souls inhabiting the physical bodies of earth’s creatures were those of the rebellious angels, imprisoned here.147 Holwell’s similar arguments are thus a reinforcement of, rather than an imitation of, a widespread heterodoxy that looked for alternative explanations of existence against the increasingly historically unstable biblical account of creation.148 Moreover, as we have seen, he was not alone in looking to ideas about

metempsychosis to do this. Tied to this was the potential that a theory of pre-existence had in forging an alternative theodicy to more orthodox, and consequently restrictive, conceptions of predestination and sin.

What was particular to Holwell was an experience of Indian philosophy and religion, including his practical medical experiences, which could be and were interpreted to support these alternative ideas. Theories of spiritual and physical health and their relation to the consumption of meat reinforced for Holwell the idea that metempsychosis was a prominent religious doctrine in what was evidently a very ancient theology. Where we precisely situate Holwell in this convergence of ideas requires further examination of his specific Christology.

A ‘Christian Deist’

It is also in the Dissertation Metempsychosis that Holwell describes himself as a ‘CHRISTIAN DEIST’. Holwell’s statement comes in a section in which he defends himself against those who had ‘unjustly’ accused him ‘of Deism’. Such an accusation does not seem to have occurred in print, not, at least, in any of the notable reactions to Holwell’s work, and is perhaps an anticipation of the response to this final and most controversial volume. What Holwell means by this is complex; yet it has often been cited as straight-forward evidence of his ‘deism’ or taken for granted as a simple signifier of a recognisable theology. In this section the actual signification of the term will be elucidated through an analysis of the discussion surrounding it, as well as the contents and sources expounded in the rest of the Dissertation on Metempsychosis.

149 Holwell, Interesting Historical Events, vol.iii, (1771) p.91.
As discussed in chapter one, Christian deism has been used by historians, and by some of Holwell’s rough contemporaries, to denote a softening in the eighteenth century of the extreme separation between deism and orthodox belief that characterised the early radicalism of seventeenth-century scepticism. In his study of what he terms the ‘radical Enlightenment’, Jonathan Israel has described this ‘trend towards a “Christian deism”’ as a consequence of ‘rationalizing theology’ and as being ‘typical of the eighteenth century’. Separating the ‘radical’ from the ‘moderate’ or ‘Christian’ deists was a varying degree of commitment to certain doctrines, usually revolving around the role of God as a creator. Those considered radical are characterised by Israel according to their wholesale rejection of the doctrines of Providence and the immortality of the soul. In contrast, many such self-declared Christian deists strongly affirmed their belief in the divine origin of morality and the special role of Christ (if not his divinity). This is perhaps what writers mean when they casually refer to Holwell as a ‘Christian deist’. Further inspection of Holwell’s work, though, indicates that although it was certainly this kind of context that he was trying to invoke, what he actually meant when he described himself as a Christian deist was something quite different.

Holwell defends himself on the basis that he has as ‘indisputable right as Dr. Clarke and others, to extend and give a new signification to the word Deist’. While exactly what Holwell meant by Christian Deism is unclear, his reference to Samuel Clarke might provide an insight into how he would like his readers to approach it. Clarke was perhaps the principal promoter of Newtonianism in the eighteenth century, particularly according to a theological interpretation that saw Newton’s discoveries as an argument for natural

---

153 Jonathan Israel, Radical Enlightenment, p.471.
154 See for another example, Chi-ming Yang, “Gross Metempsychosis and Eastern Soul”, p.18.
The resulting philosophy, which infused the world of scientific discovery with the powerful assertion of a creator God and the laws of general providence (as opposed to his intervention in particular affairs), simultaneously appealed to ‘enlightened’ Christians and what Israel calls ‘moderate deists’. Holwell’s connection to this intellectual discourse goes beyond this one reference. Dr Cheyne, who, as we have seen, was an important source for Holwell’s work, was one of the writers associated with the new wave of Newtonianism precipitated by Clarke in the middle eighteenth century.

Though it is clear that Howell’s own scheme veers from Newtonian deism, his defence of Clarke’s reinterpretation of the term suggests that he too seems to think he has a valid scheme for reinterpreting religion in a way that is neither atheistic nor heretical. It is in such a way as Clarke, Holwell explains, that ‘a man may, with strict propriety, be an orthodox Christian Deist’. This was his reply to the pre-empted accusation that he, along with the provocative names of ‘Hobbes, Tindal, Bolingbroke and others’, was intending to ‘injure the root of Christianity’. Just like Clarke, Holwell answered, ‘our sole aim is to restore its purity and vigour.’ Holwell clearly saw himself as adhering to the principal tenets of the moderate deism described by Israel; that is, those who accepted the chief points of ‘natural religion’ and the idea of an ‘intelligent’ deity who had created the universe, maintained it, but was distant from it. As Holwell put it, the Christian Deist ‘may, consistently, have a firm faith in the unity of the Godhead, and in the pure and original doctrines of Christ.’ Indeed, phrased like this, Clarke’s natural religion does seem a perfect fit. When we remind ourselves, though, that Holwell had

---

159 Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.iii, (1771) p..70.
161 Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.iii, (1771) pp.91.
also just declared that Christ and Brima were ‘one and the same celestial being’, that picture becomes more complex.

Holwell’s ‘Christian Deism’ is, therefore, Christian in a restricted sense. To deduce where exactly Holwell draws the limits of this definition, it is necessary to examine the considerable portion of the Dissertation that he devotes to expounding a particular and idiosyncratic Christology. Holwell identified three positions regarding the status of Christ: that which determines Christ to be ‘God himself’, the position that regards Christ as ‘God and man’ and the last, which denies him any divinity whatsoever. After a section denying the equality of Christ with God, featuring extensive biblical quotation, we come to the third category defined by Holwell, the position that conceives of Christ as a ‘mere man, enlightened or inspired by God’. The great offence of this latter position is not, in Holwell’s eyes, the denial of the trinity, but the dismissal of ‘the pre-existent state of his soul or spirit.”

Consistent with his idiosyncratic style Holwell at once takes a particular position in the Christian doctrinal debate, which is certainly anti-Trinitarian, while simultaneously attaching to it a completely unconventional hypothesis. Neither Socinian nor Arian, Holwell instead denied Christ’s divinity on the grounds that not just Christ, but all humanity were once celestial beings.

The ontological pre-existence of Christ was already a feature of several different branches of Christology, but not in the sense that Holwell meant it. In dealing with a treatise targeted at the question of Christ’s divinity, Holwell laments that the author, Paul Cardale, ‘hurts the cause of Christianity’ by denying not only Christ’s divinity as traditionally conceived, but also his ‘original divinity’ by contesting his pre-existence. Holwell points out how in other respects he and Cardele agree: an interesting admission

---

since Cardale was a Socinian. Indeed, Holwell’s position was closer to anti-Trinitarian authors like Cardale than to Christian orthodoxy, but always with the additional caveat of metempsychosis. Holwell’s main target was not Cardale’s Socinianism, but his opinion on pre-existence. Referring to Cardale’s outright rejection of Christ’s pre-existence as a ‘stumble’ in an otherwise ‘learned’ book, Holwell suggests that if he would only give ‘an unprejudiced hearing, and full force to the doctrines of Metempsychosis…he will, we flatter ourselves, receive full conviction that his doubts and disbelief of the pre-existent state and original divinity of Christ, were ill-founded’.

In a similar manner, referring to the controversy surrounding Matthew Tindal’s *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730), Holwell proclaims the issue raised by Tindal—whether or not Christianity could claim to be as old as the creation—resolved. Tindal posed a radical challenge to religion based on revelation, and therefore biblical history, by positing that for Christianity to be true it must be coextensive with the truths that human Reason can separately conclude for itself, and that consequently must be ‘as old as the creation’. Holwell’s unique religious heterodoxy thus shines through when he concludes that ‘Christianity is, bona fide, as old as the creation’, because when what we mean by “Christianity” also incorporates the *Shastah*, a text which predates biblical chronology, then the origins of the truths it contains certainly seem to belong to the remotest antiquity of human reason. Holwell’s decision to single out Tindal is interesting in another sense. Much of the secondary literature surrounding deism and the Enlightenment suggests that Matthew Tindal described himself as a ‘Christian Deist’.

---

165 Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.iii, (1771) p.146.
167 Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.iii, (1771) p.78.
As Stephan Lalor points out, Tindal never wrote this,\textsuperscript{169} but nevertheless, Holwell will have been aware of this association as many contemporary commentators on Tindal plainly refer to him as a ‘Christian Deist’.\textsuperscript{170} By also describing himself a ‘Christian Deist’ Holwell was in no way intending to link himself to the ‘libertine and free-thinker’ Tindal, as he described him.\textsuperscript{171} Rather, by referencing him in this section, Holwell is keen to answer him to prove how far he truly is a “Christian” deist in endorsing the doctrine of Metempsychosis. Thus, Holwell is ‘deist’ insofar as he takes these categories of religion as defined by the like of Tindal and others, and then more moderately by ‘Mr Clarke’ and his circle, and responds to them with a Gentoo scheme.

The later thoughts of Holwell were undoubtedly highly idiosyncratic and increasingly eccentric. As much was noted by reviewers, who nearly all considered the contents of his ‘whimsical Dissertation on the Metempsychosis’ to be nothing short of bizarre.\textsuperscript{172} Nevertheless, this was the system of thought behind the 1767 discussion of metempsychosis, which did become an important part of the fabric of eighteenth-century intellectual culture. Voltaire, for example, had what Hawley has described as ‘an enthusiasm for Holwell’ that became ‘more and more marked each time he cited him’.\textsuperscript{173}

Yet, we know that Holwell intended to publish the \textit{Dissertation on the Doctrine of Metempsychosis} from the beginning, given its prominent placement in \textit{Interesting Historical Events}’ long title. Understanding Holwell’s conclusions, in 1771, that he was a Christian Deist, are thus vital to understanding the make-up and the appeal of his interpretation of the \textit{Gentoo} religion in 1767. For Holwell, the notion that the original tenets were ‘short,

\begin{flushright}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{169} Lalor, \textit{Matthew Tindal}, p.148.
\item \textsuperscript{170} See for example, Atkinson, Benjamin Andrewees, \textit{Christianity not older than the first Gospel-Promise. In answer to a book, entitled Christianity as old as the creation, &c}, (London, 1730), p.10.
\item \textsuperscript{171} Holwell, \textit{Interesting Historical Events}, vol.iii, (1771) p.78.
\item \textsuperscript{172} \textit{The Critical Review}, vol.31-32 (1771), p.131.
\end{itemize}
\end{flushright}
pure, simple and uniform’ was a product of an eighteenth century anti-Trinitarian position, couched in a particularly heterodox set of solutions to theodicy.

Conclusion

Once he had retired from the Company Holwell continued to write about religion and metempsychosis in a way that was increasingly idiosyncratic and obscure. His last work, *Dissertations on the origin, nature, and pursuits, of intelligent beings, and on divine providence, religion, and religious worship* (1786), presented to the public a proposal for ‘An essential Sketch for a more rational Form of Worship, and a New Liturgy’. This is Holwell’s clearest statement of his own particular brand of religious heterodoxy. He clearly rejected the doctrine of particular providence, i.e. God’s intervention in earthly affairs, siding with the ‘general providence’ of Clarke and others. He also concluded that ‘few parts of our established Liturgy are admissible in a rational worship of the Deity’ to make the argument that they were in need of urgent reform. Holwell’s proposed Liturgy thus consisted of short prayers and the occasional hymn, and is less than sixteen pages of large type long. Although the references to Indian religion, and *Birmah*, were removed, the doctrine of metempsychosis remained in mentions of the ‘great original transgression’ and the ‘present state of punishment’ featuring prominently. In fact, the only mention to the religion of the *Gentoos* in the entire *Dissertation* is one allusion to ‘the most ancient Scripture’, in answer to the question: ‘why, and to what purpose, God created intelligent beings’.

---

174 J.Z. Holwell, *Dissertations on the origin, nature, and pursuits, of intelligent beings, and on divine providence, religion, and religious worship*, (Bath, 1786).
175 Holwell, *Dissertations on the origin*, p.110.
177 Holwell, *Dissertations on the origin*, p.7.
It is unclear whether these final expressions of his religious views were a product of his encounters with Indian religion, or whether they determined those encounters from the beginning. Urs App argues that Holwell fabricated the Shastah to serve his own religious reformist zeal, particularly inspired by the prophecies of Jacob Ilive. And yet, the doctrine of metempsychosis did exist in India, in the form of reincarnation, the basics of which Holwell had a rudimentary grasp. While it is a complex and varied aspect of Hindu theologies, the idea of rebirth is a central tenet to many key texts familiar to the Brahmmins, who were the most likely source for those broadly correct aspects of Holwell’s knowledge.\(^{178}\) It seems more likely that Holwell’s encounters with Indian religion will have suggested, or at least elaborated and confirmed, the certain religious ideas that he attempts to intellectually develop in this third and final part of his three volume inquiry into India.

What was ‘deist’ in the thought of Holwell was his belief in an original and universal religion, which disavows the specifics of Christian revelation. The final Dissertation in Interesting Historical Events opens by echoing Montesquieu, with Holwell arguing that the number and variety of world religions could be explained by the fact that, owing to the impact of ‘various soils and climates’ on the ‘dispositions of mankind’, each ‘mode of revelation’ modelled by ‘the supreme Being’ also varies accordingly. This was further reinforced, believed Holwell, according to the evidence that while most nations diverge in their ‘exterior modes of worship’ there are some ‘fundamental points of every system, wherein they agree and process unanimous faith’.\(^{179}\) Yet, these ‘deist’ aspects are also given a distinct twist, specific to Holwell’s own scheme, elements of which were drawn from sources across the spectrum of seventeenth and eighteenth-century religious controversy.

\(^{178}\) Doniger O’Flaherty, *Karma and Rebirth.*
\(^{179}\) Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, vol.iii, (1771) pp.2-4.
While the particularly obscure direction that his ideas later took were not endorsed by most, Holwell’s early account of Indian religious scripture according to this universalist interpretation was, as we shall see in chapter five, still used as an authoritative source into the nineteenth century. His theories were still passionately endorsed by German philosopher and anthropologist Carl Josef Hieronymus Windischmann as late as 1832. Similarly, in 1826 Friedrich Schlosser, Professor of History at the University of Heidelberg, declared that “The best essay on the religion of Brahma is to be found in Holwell’s work.” Moreover, at the time of their publication, as we shall see, Holwell set the tone for a series of enquiries into Indian religion that followed a similar narrative of purity and decline. While scholarly standards did improve after Holwell’s seemingly pioneering efforts, his claims to authority on the basis of textual analysis and unprejudiced objectivity created a paradigm for understanding Indian religious thought, set apart from earlier and later dismissals of its religious tradition as mere idolatry. While the 1771 *Dissertation on Metempsychosis* reveals a lot about the intellectual context in which his interpretation of Gentoo religion was constructed, the 1767 discussion of the *Shastub* introduced European audiences to a ‘philosophic’ interpretation of the ‘satisfactory, conclusive and rational’ theology of the original Brahmans.

---

Chapter Three: Alexander Dow’s ‘Religion of the Hindoos’

Alexander Dow’s account of the Hindoo religion appeared in 1768 and provided British audiences with an unprecedented degree of insight into Brahminical philosophy and theology. Like Holwell, Dow operated independently, researching and publishing on Indian religion without the support of East India Company patronage. Also like Holwell, Dow stressed emphatically that the Hindoo religion was ancient, native to India, rational and enlightened. It was Dow’s overriding thesis that the Brahmans ‘invariably believe in the unity, eternity, omniscience and omnipotence of God’ and that ‘the polytheism of which they have been accused, is no more than the symbolical worship of the divine attributes’.¹ Similarly, Holwell’s claims to have moved away from the shallow observations of travel writers are echoed in Dow’s presentation of his work as a project designed to shed ‘a new light on the opinion of the Hindoos, upon the subject of religion and philosophical enquiry’.²

Dow’s discussion of the Hindoo religion was included in his translation of Muhammad Kasim Farishta’s (1560-1620) history of the Mughal Empire. Titled The History of Hindostan, the work went into three editions (1768, 1771 and 1792), and expanded from two volumes to three in 1792. Yet, despite its billing as a translation of Farishta, it was Dow’s additional Dissertation concerning the customs, manners, language, religion and philosophy of the Hindoos that received the greatest degree of attention. The account given in the Monthly Review, for example, was focused entirely on Dow’s summation of Hindoo doctrine, with only two of a total of ten full pages mentioning the translation of Farishta. The rest of the review focused instead on how Dow had ‘gained a more accurate knowledge of the religion and philosophy of the Brahmans, than any who have preceded

him’. It was solely the Dissertation that was immediately translated into French and published in Paris the following year (1769). It was also reproduced again, much later in 1772, in another French language study by the Swiss savant Jean-Rodolphe Sinner. Dow’s insights into the religion of the Brahmins were, therefore, the mostly widely received aspect of his work on India.

Despite this contemporary significance Dow has largely been overlooked in the literature. Some historians have written about Dow in reference to his military and political policies within the Company. Siraj Ahmed offers the most sustained discussion, suggesting that it was Dow’s imagining of the Mughal constitution that laid the foundation for certain discussions about colonial property rights in Bengal. There has been very little work, however, that considers Dow’s account of Hindoo religion, and where it is discussed is often as evidence of a general trend towards more sympathetic accounts of ‘Hinduism’, in relation to another Orientalist figures like William Jones. Consequently there has been no sustained and systematic study of his writing, and in particular, no consideration of his exact interpretation of Hindoo religion beyond the speculation that it is representative of the ‘deistic’ motif that is also associated with Holwell, Halhed and Wilkins. This chapter will fill this gap in our understanding by presenting a detailed account of Dow’s project.

Dow’s assessment of the origins of Hindoo religion was grounded in the language and concepts of eighteenth-century rational religion. For Dow and his sources rational

---

5 Johann Rudolphe Sinner, Essai sur les DOGMES de la METEMPSYCHOSE & du PURGATOIRE enseignés par les Bramins de l’Indostan (Berne, 1771).
religion held that true religion was consistent with reason. For some this meant a
wholesale rejection of those doctrines supported only by religious revelation. For others
this meant an attempt to accommodate Christian doctrine into the fold of rational
argument. While these concepts and terms were becoming increasingly accommodated
within the fold of liberal Anglicanism, Dow also expressed some more fundamentally
heterodox religious opinions across the three editions of *The History of Hindostan*. This
chapter will explore the ways in which Dow expressed and applied these ideas to his
account of the ‘religion and philosophy of the Hindoos’. It will argue that his decision to
focus on what he saw as the philosophical core of the religion, in order to illustrate its
rational character, demonstrates a significant turning point in determining a new
‘philosophic’ approach to the interpretation of ‘Hinduism’. It will begin with an account
of how Dow established his authority, his methodology and texts. It will then turn to a
specific account of his treatment of the two primary schools of thought that he argued
make up the *Hindoo* religion: the *Bedang* (Vedānta) and the *Neadrisen* (Nyāya). Finally, it
will consider Dow’s account in its immediate intellectual context, and how we can
understand his ‘philosophic’ approach to the interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ to be a
product of it.

**Scripture and Authority**

Central to refining our understanding of Dow is an assessment of his methodological
claims and sources. Dow appealed to a similar concept of ‘authority’ to that established
by Holwell, the basis of which was an explicit rejection of travel accounts and missionary

---


11 Knud Haakonsen, *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Cambridge:
literature on two points: their lack of objectivity and their insufficient grasp of native languages. While this was not an accurate or fair account of missionary literature in particular, it was a powerful assertion. Trautmann has, for example, described British engagement with Oriental languages as precipitating a ‘titanic shift of authority’ from seventeenth-century classics such as the Jesuit *Lettres édifiantes*. Yet, while Trautmann focuses on the eventual discovery of Sanskrit by Charles Wilkins, Holwell and Dow were the first British authors to make such claims and should therefore be seen as instrumental in developing this new authority. Indeed, Dow imitates Holwell’s dismissal of the existing literature by declaring it ‘fiction’, designating ‘modern travellers’ with a ‘talent for fable’ as the main culprits. He also, like Holwell, blamed religious prejudice, or what he called ‘common partiality’ for one’s religion. Finally, he underlined that these fallacies were the result of these authors’ ignorance of language and text, suggesting that they formed their judgements according only to ‘external ceremonies of the Hindoos’.

Yet, in another imitation of Holwell, Dow’s claim to unique authority on the basis of linguistic skill was not all it seemed. In the first instance Dow is forced to admit that he had not been able to master Sanskrit, although he did take a significant step in providing a key to the Sanskrit alphabet. Relaying how he had tried to master the language by hiring ‘a Pundit, from the University of Benaris, well versed in the Shanscrita’, Dow admits that he had insufficient time to master the ancient language. Instead Dow relied on Persian and what he described as ‘the vulgar tongue of the Hindoos’ (Bengali). Nevertheless he describes still being determined to pursue his enquiries, and so ‘procured some of the principal SHASTERS’, with the aim of informing himself ‘as much as possible, concerning the mythology and philosophy of the

---

Brahmins’. Dow claimed that it was from these texts that ‘his pundit’ advisor, who goes
unnamed, explained numerous passages, so ‘as to give him a general idea of the doctrine
which they contain’. While pundit instruction was to become an important part of the
history of Oriental scholarship, the reappraisal of which has become significant in
revisionist histories, this private appointment on the part of Dow was less usual at the
time. Indeed, most contemporary depictions of the Brahmins suggested that they were
secretive and mistrustful of European curiosity, including a reference by Dow to the
‘impenetrable veil of mystery with which the Brahmins industriously cover their religious
tenets’.

It seems that most of Dow’s insights into Indian religion have come from
informant sources, particularly when we look at the contents of the Shasters he claims to
have translated. This text, much like Holwell’s Shastah, is untraceable and certainly does
not bear a straightforward resemblance to anything belonging to the various traditions
associated with Hinduism. Moreover, Dow’s additional claim to have possessed and
deposited in the British Museum, a manuscript copy of what he called the Neadrisen
Shaster, has subsequently been proven to be false. The catalogue refers to Dow’s
‘erroneous description’ of the texts as instead being ‘A collection of Sanskrit MSS’ that
are ‘more or less fragmentary’. Dow may well not have known this, given his inability to
read the text in the original Sanskrit. Nevertheless, this still leaves the origins of the
translated excerpts unanswered for, suggesting that Dow’s Hindoo scriptures were as
much a construction as Holwell’s Shastah, despite their stronger correspondence with
actual Indian theological ideas.

17 Michael. S. Dodson, Orientalism, Empire and National Culture: India, 1770–1880. (Palgrave Macmillan,
Catalogued in the British Museum as Add. 4830; now in the British Library’s Oriental MSS collection as:
Add 4830. The collection of Sanskrit fragments bears the title, written in English, “The Neadrisen Shaster”
With ‘Alex Dow’ written next to it.
Like Holwell, Dow masked this construction by establishing his credentials as a detached observer, whose main motivation was to rescue the Hindus from the ‘very unfair account’ that had previously prejudiced European understanding. As part of this persuasive Dow admitted that ‘he for a long time, suffered himself to be carried down in this stream of popular prejudice.’ This he blamed on ‘the present decline of literature in Hindostan’ by invoking what would become a theme throughout the Dissertation: the separation of contemporary religious practices from their ancient and pure origins. Dow claimed that his prejudice had been altered by a chance encounter:

‘…conversing by accident, one day, with a noble and learned Brahmin, he [Dow] was not a little surprised to find him [the Brahmin] perfectly acquainted with those opinions, which, both in ancient and modern Europe, have employed the pens of the most celebrated moralists. This circumstance did not fail to excite his curiosity, and in the course of many subsequent conversations, he found that philosophy and the sciences had, in former ages, made a very considerable progress in the East.’

This fortuitous conversation with the Brahmin demonstrates both Dow’s linguistic skill and his privileged admittance through the ‘impenetrable veil of mystery’ which shielded Brahminical knowledge. Thus, in contrast to the twin errors of the missionary and travel writers, he is at once revealing himself to be both divested of the prejudices that animated their misinterpretations, and in possession of the necessary skills to penetrate beyond them.

Furthermore, Dow’s emphasis on the success of ‘philosophy and the sciences’ provides a revealing insight into the ways in which Enlightenment thought shaped his approach. The notion that ‘progress’ in the arts and sciences serves as the measure by which civilization must be assessed was an important feature of Enlightenment

historiography. As we shall see, Dow not only applied this to Hindoo religion and philosophy, but it was also the criterion of judgement he applied to the Mughal Empire, the decline of which Dow regarded himself an eye-witness. It was his assessment that the enlightened and religiously tolerant regime of Akbar represented the pinnacle of Mughal civilization, which had gradually become beset by the petty factionalism that the East India Company was now artfully exploiting. In the case of the Hindoo religion these marks of civilization were to be found in the religious and philosophical treatises of its ancient Golden Age. These were the three Sāstras, or ‘Shasters’; the Bedang Shaster, the Dirm Shaster, and the Neadirsen Shaster, considered by Dow to be the principle texts of the Hindoos.

Dow begins his exposition to these texts with an account of the Vedas, of which he says little is known because ‘they are covered with a veil of darkness by the Brahmins’. This rings true with what we know about already existing knowledge of the Vedas in Europe, as discussed in chapter one. Nevertheless he more or less accurately named them as the Rag Beda (Rigveda), the Sheham Beda (Samaveda), the Judge Beda (Yajurveda) and finally, the Obatar-bab Beda (Atharvaveda). His vague description of their contents, however, is less accurate. Dow swiftly brushed over this, though, by adding that their extreme antiquity made them obscure to even the Brahmins. He then quickly moved on to describe the ‘Shasters’, or śāstras, as containing the essentials of the Hindoo religion. Dow claimed that ‘Shaster’ literally signified ‘knowledge’ and that each book ‘treats of divinity and the sciences’. In this Dow was not too far off since śāstra does mean specialised or technical knowledge, and the different śāstras are philosophical.

texts which offer a more comprehensive and systematic exposition of the topics covered in a sūtra, (a particular type of text characterised by a set of aphorisms designed to condense a more complex set of concepts). Though there is some confusion in Dow’s terminology, since the ‘Bedang Shaster’ seems mostly likely to have derived from ‘Brahma sūtra’, which was, as Dow claims, associated with the Vedānta (Bedang) school.

Dow claimed that the Shasters were principle texts of two Hindoo theological traditions. These ‘two great religious sects’ were, according to Dow, ‘the followers of the doctrine of the BEDANG; and those who adhere to the principles of the NEADIRZIN’. This recognition of multiple religious treatises and separate traditions was by no means recognition of religious pluralism in India. The two ‘sects’ were differentiated not by core doctrines but by two different approaches to those doctrines, as expressed in a third text unifying text, the Dirm Shaster. This text was ‘common to both the grand sects of the Hindoos’, the central tenet of which was ‘the unity of the supreme being’. United by a belief in a singular divine creator, the two sects then merely differed in what Dow calls ‘their philosophy’:

‘In India, as well as in many other countries, there are two religious sects; the one look up to the divinity through the medium of reason and philosophy; while the others receive, as an article of their belief, every holy legend and allegory which have been transmitted down from antiquity.

Dow’s ‘two great religious sects’ are not just Indian, but represent a universal struggle between orthodox and rational religion. Dow’s reference to the division occurring ‘in many other countries’ invoked a universal division between those who ‘receive’ their

---

religion, in a manner akin to unquestioning faith in revelation, and those whose religion is a product of ‘reason and philosophy.’ When coupled with Dow’s statement, appearing in the final section of the *Dissertation*, that ‘whatever the external ceremonies of religion may be, the selfsame infinite Being is the object of universal adoration’ the universal application of this model is made all the more clear. Dow requires that his readers see the followers of the ‘Bedang’ as analogous to those who put their faith in revelation and tradition, and the ‘Neadirsin’ as those forging a more rational form of religious belief.32

In summary then, Dow’s *Dissertation* on the *Neadirsin* and the *Bedang* is constructed from a complex mixture of local knowledge, Brahminical tradition, untraceable texts and European religious concepts. Yet, this confused weaving of various sources and conjecture was skilfully presented as an unprejudiced account of genuine *Hindoo* scriptures. More importantly, it was received as such. One reviewer stated that Dow was better informed on Hinduism ‘than any preceding writer’.33 It was constructed in such a way not just to prove the genius of its author, but to press a particular interpretation of ‘Hinduism’. Far from the descriptions of various idolatries and ritual customs associated with previous accounts, Dow’s description of the *Hindoo* religion was a discussion on two different epistemological approaches to religious truth.

**Universal Religion and the ‘Dirm Shaster’**

As mentioned above Dow was insistent on the unification of the ‘two great religious sects’, the *Neadrizen* and the *Bedang*, through the doctrines of the *Dirm Shaster*. This was a conscious choice. Others had already recognised the possibility of seeing a great degree

of plurality in Indian religious practices. Another employee of the company, Alexander Hamilton, for example, made the observation in the early eighteenth century that Indian religion was made up of ‘above a hundred different Sects’. Similarly, the Jesuit *Lettres édifiantes* remarked on a number of distinct groups and traditions within the fabric of Indian religion, pointing out differences in beliefs about the soul and its relationship with God. In contrast, Dow supplied readers with an ‘extract’ from the unifying *Dirm Shaster*, which would supposedly throw ‘a clear light on the religious tenets, common to both the grand sects of the Hindoos’. The extract is presented as dialogue, with two interlocutors, Birmah, who Dow claimed to be representative of “Wisdom” and Narud, who represents “human reason”. In it both Birmah and Narud demonstrate the core doctrine of Dow’s Hindoo religion by agreeing on the unity and singularity of God.

As well as the agreed unity of God, the *Dirm Shaster* is used to illustrate another important principle, which is Dow’s overarching distinction between the learned and the vulgar. The dialogue itself is cast as a pedagogical tool, in which Narud questions Birmah about the nature of the divinity. In it the idea that a different approach regarding religion for the vulgar may be necessary is also expressed. In answer to Narud’s question “What is his likeness?” Birmah replies, ‘He hath no likeness: but to stamp some idea of him upon the minds of men, who cannot believe in an immaterial being, he is represented under various symbolical forms.’ At the heart of this distinction was a similar contradiction to that in the work of Holwell, which was that the natural, rational, original and untainted religion of India was preserved only through the elite knowledge of the learned Brahmans. This was a tension inherent in the Enlightenment too. Reason was a natural

---

faculty, yes, but it also operated as a verb. Discourse and ‘reasoning’ were often exercised through knowledge and education, the precise relationship between which was the subject of philosophical critique throughout the period. Dow explores this idea in the following statement:

“To attentive inquirers into the human mind, it will appear that common sense, upon the affairs of religion, is pretty equally divided among all nations. Revelation and Philosophy have, it is confessed, lopped off some of those superstitious excrescences and absurdities that naturally arise in weak minds, upon a subject so mysterious: but it is much to be doubted, whether the want of those necessary purifiers of religion, ever involved any nation in gross idolatry, as many ignorant zealots have pretended”.40

On the one hand Dow firmly establishes a relative universalism that sees ‘common sense’, for which we can read natural reason, as the basis for religious belief. On the other hand, he at least rhetorically disavows pure deism by attributing some credit to ‘Revelation and Philosophy’. Yet again, Revelation is coupled and equated with philosophy, not usually attributed the same infallibility as ‘the Word’. Moreover, the added qualification that the absolute necessity of revelation was a construct of ‘ignorant zealots’ further affirms his preference for a more minimalistic definition of religious truth.

This passing concession to revelation illustrates a pragmatic strand of thinking in Dow’s approach to religion. He appears to consider the ability of religious doctrine to counter ‘the absurdities that naturally arise in weak minds’ a matter of political utility. This was a common stance among deists, who considered the efficacy of religious teaching in checking the morals of the general public.41 From the above quotation it is

---

clear that Dow viewed religious belief as a product of natural reason, but he also saw the corruption of that faculty as a propensity of the vulgar. Through philosophy, though, these natural insights can be enhanced. It is on this basis that he establishes Brahmin learning as the location of the more ‘elevated’ ideas of Indian civilization.

This was not an unequivocal celebration of the Brahmins. Dow, like Holwell, makes a careful distinction between ‘learned Brahmins’, like the one with whom an accidental conversation led to his enquiries, and the ‘unlearned Brahmins’. While the former had helped to preserve the purest parts of the Hindoo doctrine, the latter were responsible for spreading misinformation about the religion. Thus, in a repetition of the narrative established by the English deists to explain the process of religious corruption, Dow blamed the loss of the pure and original tenets of the rational Hindoo religion on ‘the influence of superstition and priest-craft’. As evidence of active priestcraft in India, Dow discussed the notion of a Hindoo legal code. Arguing that although the Brahmins are not exempted from the laws they created, when it comes to capital punishment, ‘the influence of the Brahmins is so great and their characters as priests so sacred, that they escape in cases where no mercy would be shewn to the other tribes’.

In order to preserve the Brahmins as proponents of philosophical Hindoo religion, though, Dow reserved his harshest criticism for a different group of religious representatives. These were the ‘idle and pretended devotees’, the ‘Fakiers’. According to Lorenzen, the fakirs were religious mystics that largely modelled themselves on Hindu yogis and sannyasis. Dow will have understood them in the context of their relationship with the Company, where the fakirs who had the right to collect ‘contributions’ from

---

official offices under the Mughal system were seen as a nuisance and a financial drain on the business of revenue collection. In 1763, a report of ‘faquirs’ taking over Dacca and wrecking the Company’s factory reached Calcutta.\(^{48}\) Dow’s allegations thus consist of the fairly conventional claim that the fakirs were merely motivated by money, their pilgrimages laying ‘whole countries under contribution’. He also adds an element of the dramatic with the more unusual accusation that they seduced the wives of the vulgar with mystical promises, and thus ‘put on the character of sanctity, as a cloak for their pleasures’.\(^{49}\) This more sensational illustration of the susceptibility of the vulgar to priestcraft may have been a product of information regarding the division of ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ tantric methods, within which there was a view that sexual intercourse can be considered a ritual offering.\(^{50}\) Nevertheless, it seems more likely that Dow chose to frame these religious deviants according to the trope of sexual transgression, common to European anticlericalism since the reformation.\(^{51}\)

Like common sense, this manipulation of the vulgar was also universal. Dow’s statement ‘To attentive inquirers into the human mind, it will appear that common sense, upon the affairs of religion, is pretty equally divided among all nations’ appears to be an adaption of Descartes’ phrase ‘Good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed’.\(^{52}\) Through it Dow affirms a deistic approach to natural religion that the essential elements of religious belief are knowable through reason and therefore, universal. Yet, similarly, if ‘common sense, upon the affairs of religion’ is equally divided among nations, so is ignorance and superstition. Turning the common accusation that \textit{Hindoo} religion was simply characterised by superstition on its head, Dow points to the

parallels among Christian Europeans. Taking the idea that the ‘more ignorant Hindoos’ venerate subaltern divinities, for example, Dow argued that this was no different to the fact that some ‘Christians believe in Angels’.53 While Dow does stop short of making parallels with the Hindoo ‘allegorical account of creation, for the purpose of vulgar theology’ with anything Christian, the implication is clear when he reflects, just afterwards, that ‘the vulgar of any country’ do not require any aid to ‘corrupt their ideas’ on the subject of creation.54

While this might have established an equivalence between Christian and Hindoo religion in matters of superstition, for Dow, when it came to the more destructive crime of zealotry, the Christian had the potential to be much worse. In an expression of his Latitudinarian opinions Dow claimed:

The Hindoos: ‘chuse rather to make a mystery of their religion, than impose it upon the world, like the Mahommedans, with the sword, or by means of the stake, after the manner of some pious Christians’.55

This brazen equation of Christian zealots with the greatly disliked ‘Mahommedans’ would have had a great deal of rhetorical power. Elsewhere, Dow referred to Islam as a religion ‘peculiarly calculated for despotism.’56 For Dow, the tolerance of the Hindoos thus marked out the essential rationality of their core tenets, in contrast to which, the violent irrationality displayed by the history of Christianity posed an interesting provocation. This notion had become a commonplace polemic throughout the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly in response to Methodism.57 Picking up the concept from seventeenth and early eighteenth-century critics of Puritanism, such as

Locke, Swift and Shaftesbury, writers like Hume derided religious emotional excesses as contrary to the spirit of reasonable thought. This critique of religious enthusiasm often occurred in relation to the concept of religious toleration. Shaftesbury’s 1708 A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, for example, made an important distinction between piety and extravagance in religious expression. Shaftesbury maintained that while piety, also termed ‘serene’ or ‘reasonable enthusiasm’, was not in contradiction with a tolerant attitude, extravagant enthusiasm was a form of irrationality that lead only to violent fanaticism. According to Dow, even the more vulgar Hindoos expressed only a reasonable enthusiasm on the basis that ‘they allow that everyone may go to heaven his own way’.

In several respects Dow suggests, directly and indirectly, that both praise and criticism of religious culture is applicable to both Hindoo and Christian traditions. In doing so Dow was treating religion as a historical category, the fluctuating rationality of which is subject to the same mechanisms across the globe. The intellectual foundation of this approach was the deist or ‘free-thinking’ deconstruction of biblical history, which aimed at historically contextualising the development of Judaism and Christianity in the realm of the profane. In a less radical vein the publication of Religious Ceremonies of the World (1723-1737) marked the increasing legitimacy of scholarly enquiries into natural and revealed religion as anthropologically determined categories. What Dow did in the next part of the Dissertation on the Hindoos, however, was different. To this general discussion he added an unprecedented degree of insight into two traditions in Indian thought, both of which he presented as theologically and philosophically sophisticated.

---

The ‘Bedang’ and the ‘Neadirsin’

In his division between the *Bedang* and the *Neadirsin*, that is between those who ‘receive’ their religion and those who arrive at it through reason, Dow is referring to the Vedānta and Nyāya schools of Hindu philosophy.\(^6^3\) These are two of the recognised six orthodox schools of Brahminical philosophy. The Vedānta system is concerned with knowledge and insight and based its doctrines on interpretations of the final section of Vedic literature known as the *Upaniṣads*. Nyāya, on the other hand, means ‘that by which one is led to a conclusion’ or ‘correct reasoning’ and is often referred to as ‘the science of reasoning’ (*tarkaśātra*).\(^6^4\) The school is most well-known for its development of logical procedures as a means of establishing correct inferences.\(^6^5\) This section of the chapter will deal with Dow’s treatment of the Vedānta system, followed by an account of his understanding of Nyāya philosophy. It will argue that Dow presented these two schools of thought through the medium of eighteenth-century European terminology and concepts.

i. Vedānta/‘Bedang’

There are a number of Vedānta traditions, but all schools accept the classical *Upaniṣads*, the *Brahma Sūtra* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* as the foundations of their tradition. In the nineteenth century Vedānta became an important focal point of the intellectual interest and codification of Hinduism.\(^6^6\) But this was not the case at the time that Dow was writing, suggesting that his assessment that the ‘Bedang’ as ‘the most orthodox, as well as the most ancient’ was either a deliberate construction or a conclusion that he was led to

---


\(^6^5\) Richard King, *Indian Philosophy*, p.130.

by consultations with pundits of a particular tradition. Dow may have chosen it since, in the first instance, it was a prominent school of philosophy and theology. Vedānta is sometimes characterised as founded on a particular exegetical method, the emphasis of which is the acquisition of metaphysical knowledge. In the second instance, Dow had already informed his reader that his knowledge rested on the authority of a pundit instructor ‘from the university of Benaris’, suggesting an advisor well versed in Vedānta philosophy as one of the main branches of Indian metaphysics. Finally, if Dow’s interest was in establishing the principle that the Brahmans ‘invariably believe in the unity, eternity, omniscience and omnipotence of God’ then the Vedānta teachings would be an appropriate source. The first chapter of the Brahmaśūtra, what Dow mistakes for the ‘the Bedang Shaster’, does indeed establish a connection between certain texts and Brabman, variously thought of in Hinduism as being the essence of all being, the goal of enquiry and the source of the universe.

Dow cast the Bedang Shaster as a ‘philosophical catechism’, which explored several metaphysical concepts. Like the Dirm Shaster this text is presented by Dow as ‘a dialogue between Birmha, the Wisdom of the Divinity; and Narud or Reason, who is the son of Brimha’. The first topic considers the relationship of the trio, which includes the main interlocutors ‘Birmha’ (Brahma), ‘Shiba’ (Shiva) and ‘Bishen’ (Vishnu), with God. ‘Birmha’ instructs ‘Narud’, ‘do not imagine that I was creator of the world, independent of the divine mover, who is the great original essence, and creator of all things’. This ‘trinity’ of deities is thus rendered symbolical and subordinate to ‘the divine mover’, a term which Dow footnoted as ‘The supreme divinity’. To do this Dow emphasised the

---

68 Richard King, Indian Philosophy, p.53.
Vedānta idea of ‘Brahman’, a cosmic being, and rendered consummate the more familiar concept of a ‘supreme divinity’. While this dialogue reflects certain trends in theistic Hinduism, particularly in the Upanisads, Dow’s composition was designed to support his assertion that the three divinities represented ‘no more than the symbolical worship of the divine attributes’. In summarising the Dissertation Dow again demonstrates that pragmatic side of his religious thought, arguing that although the Brahmins affirm that God has no image, they consider ‘it is necessary to strike the gross ideas of man, with some emblems of God’s attributes’ should the vulgar lose their ‘sense of religion’. In other words, they are a construct designed for the education of the vulgar.

The next section of the text becomes more metaphysical in quality, providing an exposition to the Hindoo account of creation according to the ‘Bedang’. It is here that Dow presents an interpretation of Hindoo philosophy that would have great appeal for certain strands of European intellectual culture in the nineteenth century (see chapter five). He focused on the idea of a ‘Great Soul’. Through this he introduces, as fundamental to ‘the Bedang’, the Neoplatonic notion of the Intellect or nous, which had been adapted by Christian thinkers to explore the relationship between matter and spirit. Dow introduces the concept of the ‘Great Soul’ in response to ‘Narud’ asking the question: ‘What dost thou mean, O Father! by intellect!’. To this ‘Birmah’ answers: ‘it is a portion of the ‘GREAT SOUL of the universe, breathed into all creatures to animate them for a certain time’ and that after death ‘it animates other bodies, or returns like a drop into that unbounded ocean from which it first arose’. Dow, thus, loosely applies the Neo-Platonist terminology relating to complex ideas about the relationship between

74 Brockington, The Sacred Thread, p.54
the soul, the intellect and matter, to sublety introduce the idea of reincarnation. Recognising this in Dow is important, since the interpretation of ‘Hinduism’, and particularly Vedānta doctrines, as infused with Platonic terms has often been attributed to William Jones.

In summary, according to Dow, the ‘Bedang Shaster’, represented as the ‘most orthodox’ of the two sects, contained the Hindoo religion’s most metaphysical doctrines. Yet, this ‘most ancient doctrine’ was at its core a pure and rational religion. Despite its speculative quality, those elements of it that tended towards idolatrous polytheism were, when stripped back to their original meaning, ultimately symbolical only. Indeed, Dow supported this with some fairly accurate examples of ‘Hindu’ symbolism. For example, in the dialogue Dow casts ‘Birmha’ as ‘the first attribute of the supreme divinity’ and explains, in a footnote, that he is thus ‘figuratively represented’ as a god with four faces, whose complete vision is symbolic of wisdom. In this way Dow used fragments of ‘Hindu’ symbolism and the authority of Vedānta, one of the more ancient schools and one primarily dealing with questions about the nature of existence, to argue for the philosophical integrity of Hindoo ideas according to European conceptions of monotheism as a core principle of natural religion.

ii. Nyāya/‘Neadirsin’

Where the Vedānta school was concerned with metaphysical hermeneutics, Nyāya was primarily a school of epistemology, and, latterly, logic. Dow’s account of Nyāya philosophy was broadly faithful to the main principles and tenets of the school. Yet, the language in which Dow chose to express this similarity deliberately invoked eighteenth-

---

84 Brockington, The Sacred Thread, p.94.
century European intellectual concepts. In particular, Dow’s discussion infers several parallels between Nyāya philosophy and rational religion, with a particularly Newtonian slant. This is immediately evident in Dow’s discussion of how the Neadirsin Shaster came to be. As in the case of the ‘Bedang Shaster’ and the Brahmaśūtra it seems that Dow was referring to the “Nyāya Sūtras”. Indeed, he identified “Goutam” as its author, which was an accurate rendition of Akṣapāda Gautama or Gotama into Bengali dialect, who is indeed considered to be the founder of the Nyāya school (though not the creator of the Nyāya sutras, which have multiple authors).85

The foundational similarity between the Neadirsin and rational religion is first alluded to in Dow’s claim that ‘Goutam’, in contrast to the author of the Bedang, ‘does not begin to reason, a priori’. Instead, Dow suggests that the author of the Neadirsin Shaster ‘considers the present state of nature, and the intellectual faculties, as far as they can be investigated by human reason; and from thence he draws all his conclusions.’86 This established a clear parallel with Enlightenment epistemology of the natural sciences, which was in the eighteenth century, through the work of Samuel Clarke and others, increasingly applied in the service of the idea of rational religion.87 Indeed, Dow would not be the only one to draw the analogy, but was the first British author to do so, with Charles Wilkins, Jones and H.T. Colebrook all later expressing a similar fascination with the school of logic.88 Although, contrary to Dow, Jones favoured Vedānta over the school of logic, regarding it ‘a system wholly built on the purest devotion’ and one completely ‘removed from impiety.’89

At the apex of these points of synthesis is the subject of God as the creator. Initially Nyāya texts were reticent on the question of a divine being. Gautama, Dow’s author of the *Neadirsen Shaster*, introduced the notion of God only casually. But, a last great exponent of classical Nyāya was Udayana, writing in the late 10th century. One of his works is the first systematic account of Nyāya theism, aimed at vindicating the existence of God through philosophical reasoning. In the subsequent tradition the divine being is the efficient cause of the world (*nimitta-kāraṇa*), that is, the initiator of the creation of the universe. This Nyāya position is known as ‘the doctrine that the effect does not exist in the cause’ (*asat-kārya-vāda*) or, ‘the doctrine of new production (*ārambha-vāda*)’. In it causation involves a combination of three distinct types of causal factors: the inherent cause, the non-inherent cause, and the efficient cause. This final, efficient, cause refers to the agency that produces the effect from the first two causes. In the case of a cloth for example, the inherent cause is the thread, the non-inherent cause is a property that belongs to the inherent cause, which has only a mediated effect (e.g. the colour of the thread). Finally, in this example, the efficient cause would be the weaver of the cloth. Working to this analogy, the creation of the universe requires an efficient cause, i.e. an agency producing it, which was God (*īśvara*). Primarily created as a system of secular logic, Nyāya thus became an effective tool for disputing against contrary schools, and eventually for establishing an argument for God as an efficient cause for existence. The similarity of this to contemporary physico-theology, which propagated the idea that evidence-based arguments for God's existence can be derived from a study of the intricacies of the natural world through similarly inferential reasoning relating to the

---

90 Brockington, *The Sacred Thread*, p.95.
91 Brockington, *The Sacred Thread*, p.95.
92 King, *Indian Philosophy*, p.207.
93 King, *Indian Philosophy*, p.208.
concept of cause and effect, was marked by Dow’s comment that many ‘European Divines’ had advanced similar trains of reasoning.

Yet, while Dow clearly saw the potential in terms of supporting an argument for a universalistic concept of God, natural religion and reason, this was not a superficial enterprise. Dow relayed plenty of genuine Nyāya concepts. For example, the Nyāya Sūtra, outlines a five-membered argument or proof. The common example given to illustrate this in Nyāya teaching is: 1. The hill has fire; 2. Because it has smoke; 3.Since whatever has smoke has fire, like an oven; 4. This hill has smoke, which is associated with fire; 5. Therefore, this hill has fire. Dow has obviously been exposed directly to this analogy, since he gives exactly the same one when he explains the Nyāya understanding of ‘Onnuman’ (anumāna), or inferential reasoning. This, Dow explains, ‘is that faculty of the soul which enables us to conclude that things and circumstances exist, from an analogy to things, which had before fallen under the conception of our bodily senses: for instance, when we see smoak [sic], we conclude that it proceeds from a fire; when we see one end of a rope, we are persuaded it must have another.’ Furthermore, the relationship between this style of inference and formulation of an argument for the God as an efficient cause of the universe is made clear by the fact that the next paragraph follows: ‘By reason, continues Goutam, men perceive the existence of God’. Dow was, then, correctly representing a strand of Nyāya argumentation that one can infer God’s existence and status as a cause by an analogous set of inferences. Yet, he was also keenly aware of its relation to European theological arguments of a similar nature. Thus, according to Dow, ‘Goutam’ not only argued that we must arrive at our knowledge of God through reason, but also grappled with the ‘Newtonian’ position

---

94 These arguments were most notoriously advanced through the Boyle Lectures of the period. See, Katherine Calloway, *Natural Theology in the Scientific Revolution: God’s Scientists*, (Routledge, 2016 [2014]), p.26.
96 King, *Indian Philosophy*, pp.130-131.
propagated by the likes of Samuel Clarke that God’s providence was made manifest through the Laws of nature.\textsuperscript{99} Acknowledging that ‘Goutam, in another place, treats diffusely of providence and free will’ Dow nevertheless goes on to summarise the matter in a single paragraph:

‘He divides the action of man under three heads: The will of God, the power of man, and casual or accidental events. In explaining the first he maintains particular providence; in the second, the freedom of will in man; and in the third, the common course of things, according to the general laws of nature. With respect to providence, though he cannot deny the possibility of its existence, without divesting God of his omnipotence, he supposes that the deity never exerts that power, but that he remains in eternal rest, taking no concern, neither in human affairs, nor in the course of the operations of nature’.\textsuperscript{100}

The problem of denying God’s providence, while at the same time not impeaching his omnipotence, was a present one in Dow’s intellectual context. Goutam’s concession that it is possible that God retains the power to intervene in earthly affairs but that ‘the deity never exerts that power’ is similar to the Newtonian position articulated by Samuel Clarke, who, as we have seen in the previous chapter, used Newton’s theories to support a general counter-argument to the anti-teleological critique of final causes by distinguishing between general and special providence. General providence, God’s beneficent provision of fully sufficient and unvarying natural laws, as opposed to special providence, God’s extraordinary intervention, provided for the idea that Newton’s well-ordered universe represented the design of an intelligent creator without necessitating his constant intervention.\textsuperscript{101} This was a more complex matter in Nyāya philosophy. Gautama’s aphorism ‘God is the cause, because we find fruitlessness in the actions of men’ in the Nyāya Śūtra was the main site of subsequent debate on the correct

\textsuperscript{100} Dow, \textit{The History of Hindostan}, vol.1, (1768), p.lxv.
\textsuperscript{101} J.C.D Clark, “Providence, Predestination & Progress; or, did the Enlightenment fail?”, in \textit{Albion: A Quarterly Journal concerned with British studies}, vol.35, no.4, (Winter 2003), pp.559-589, p.576.
interpretation of providence and free will. On the whole though, most Nyāya thinkers argue that God limits his actions to those in accordance with the law of *karma* and that bad effects must therefore follow bad actions. Dow decision, therefore, to distinguish ‘particular providence’ from free will and the natural law is a faint reflection of this, whilst also being a direct imposition of the eighteenth-century division of ‘general’ and ‘particular’ providence.

Finally, Dow’s selective modelling of Nyāya concepts is also apparent in the way in which Dow choses to present their approach to certain features of *Hindoo* theological doctrine already covered in the *Bedang Shaster*. That is, in the case of the *Neadirsin*, Dow’s discussion of reincarnation is limited to a very scientific explanation of Goutam’s principles of matter. This is in stark contrast to Holwell, whose more theological and metaphysical interpretation places the transmigration of souls, or ‘metempsychosis’, at the centre of his synthesis of Christian and *Gentoo* religion, and in even starker contrast to those travel writers who had emphasised reincarnation as an example of Indian religion’s pagan nature. While Holwell discusses ‘Transmigrations of the fallen Angelic Spirits’, Dow introduces the topic in a much more subtle way:

‘Goutam supposes, with the author of the Bedang, that the soul after death, assumes a body of fire, air, and akash, [*Ākāśa*-space or ether] unless in the carnal body, it has been so purified by piety and virtue, that it retains no selfish inclinations. In that case it is absorbed into the GREAT SOUL OF NATURE, never more to reanimate flesh.’

That such an account was describing the *Hindoo* belief in transmigration could have been missed by the eighteenth-century reader, for whom knowledge of reincarnation was not

---

necessarily pre-existing. An account of returning to a body of ‘fire, air and akash’ sounds much more ambiguous than what it actually signifies, which was the return of the soul to the physical body of any animal. Dow subtlety presents the idea by transitioning from the paragraph above to explaining that all carnal bodies are created by a combination of the same elements:

“God” says Goutam, “at a certain season, endued these atoms, as we may call them, with Bishesh or plasticity, by virtue of which they arranged themselves into four gross elements, fire, air, water, and earth. These atoms being, from the beginning, formed by God into the seeds of all productions, Jive Attima [jīvātman], or the vital soul, associate with them, so that animals and plants of various kinds, were produced upon the face of the earth”

Dow thus chose to present the doctrine of reincarnation, a striking point of theological separation between Christian and Hindoo religious concepts, as a mere logical consequence of Goutam’s scientific theory, the language of which was not that dissimilar to the inherited intellectual rubric of natural philosophy, and in particular, ‘general physics’ as described by d’Alembert as ‘the metaphysics of bodies’. In fact, Dow’s account is partially faithful to the Nyāya tradition, with some proponents holding the position that the body is composed of earth, water and fire. Likewise, the concept of ‘Jive Attima’, for example, is a faithful reference to the concept of ‘jīvātman as the ‘embodied/living self’ or for Dow, ‘soul’. Again, what this reveals is the Dow had a good understanding of some of the foundational concepts of Brahminical philosophy, but that his presentation of his account as a direct source is misleading. Recognising this exposes a certain degree of manipulation and reinterpretation. In this case, it serves to

108 Bhattacharyya, Development of Nyaya Philosophy, p.66.
109 King, Indian Philosophy, p.108.
underplay an important point of doctrinal difference and reinforce the epistemological similarity of its intellectual methodology.

Dow’s account of Nyäya philosophy, then, was remarkably accurate. In fact, as such it possibly represents the most detailed and accurate account by a European writer. Dow is certainly the first of the British writers to give such a nuanced account. Yet, in terms of understanding what Dow is trying to do in the broader context of the Dissertation, the ‘Neadirsen’ plays a less straight-forward role. It seems that Dow calls on the Nyäya School by way of drawing a parallel to the ‘rational’ world of letters with which he clearly identifies himself, and moreover, chooses to do so in the language of eighteenth-century natural philosophy. This is not an end in itself, but an important facet to his interpretation of Brahminical concepts as relating to a universal and ‘rational’ religion. Thus, Dow declares, the Neadirsin holds that it is ‘by reason…that men perceive the existence of God’, but he could equally as much be referring to the type of minimal Christian deism with which he seems to align himself.¹¹⁰

For Dow, the Neadirsin were that ‘sect’ or category of the religious who ‘look up to the divinity through the medium of reason and philosophy’. This is indicated by Dow’s insistence that the author of their text, the Nedirsin Shaster, drew his conclusions from human reason and the ‘present state of nature’. From this starting point, Dow chose to express Nyäya thought through the language and concepts of European, and particularly Newtonian, conceptions of rational religion. That this particular comparison was on his mind is foreshadowed by an analogy made at the outset of the Dissertation, in which Dow suggested that trying to understand the religion and philosophy of the Hindoes by discussing it with ‘inferior tribes’, just as previous authors had done, would be

equivalent to asking a ‘Mahommedan in London…to form his opinion of Newtonian philosophy, from a conversation with an English carman.’

Dow in Context

Many of Dow’s broader reflections about the role of Hindoo religion in the history of India can be seen as belonging to a contemporary tendency to categorise societies according to the notions of civilization and progress. This was a particularly important feature in the social philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment, associated with thinkers like Adam Smith, David Hume, William Roberts and Adam Ferguson. Within this, religion had come to have an important place, particularly accounts of historical and contemporary Eastern religions, since comparative analysis was an important feature of the conjectural histories associated with this social philosophy. Dow, as we shall see, had some personal connections with those figures, as well as a deep interest in the history of the Mughal Empire. Situating his thought in that context crystallises the argument for interpreting his account of the Hindoo religion as a product of Enlightenment thinking, as well as encounters with Indian theological and philosophical concepts.

That Dow admired a deist attitude to religious matters is made clear through his treatment of the Mughal Empire in the rest of The History of Hindostan. Dow’s approach to religion was intimately tied up with his wider interests in the rise and fall of civilisations and governments. Dow began from the common eighteenth-century

---

assumption that all Asian governments were necessarily despotic, and the differences between them were a matter of degree. Dow developed this idea further, arguing that the different Asiatic religions resulted in different qualities of despotism. The most important distinction between the different types of Asian despotism was, for Dow, between original ‘tyranny’ of the laws of the prophet ‘Mahommed’, and the ‘humane despotism’ of the House of Timur (the Mughal rulers of India, prior to the arrival of the British), the religious character of which he considered to be deist. In fact, Dow characterised the Mughal Empire as a great civilization precisely because of the deism of its greatest ruler, Akbar, who had ruled from 1556-1605. According to Dow, Akbar’s strength was that he ‘was totally divested of those prejudices for his own religion’ that ‘men of inferior parts’ retain throughout their lives. Dow even avers that Akbar’s son was ‘brought up a deist under the tuition of his father, Akbar’ resulting in an equally enlightened and tolerant reign.

Four years after the Dissertation concerning the customs, manners, language, religion and philosophy of the Hindoos, Dow published a second edition of The History which included several new dissertations on the contemporary political situation in Bengal. In them Dow also approached the Hindoo religion in similarly ‘civic’ terms as elsewhere in the The History. He considers the everyday moral temperament of the Hindoos to be particularly suited to citizenship, under an enlightened, but nevertheless still despotic, government. While Muslim subjects were given to ‘voluptuousness’ and ‘luxury’, the Hindu was ‘mild, humane, obedient, and industrious’. Dow, who already considered the British to have...

117 Grewal, Muslim Rule in India, pp.19-20.
119 Dow, The History of Hindostan, (1772), pp.103-104.
achieved ‘an absolute conquest’ of the region, but who had only criticism for the ‘rapine’
policies of the Company that had achieved this, was anxious to make the case that Hindoo
civilization, which had come from the ‘remotest antiquity’, should be left intact.121 This
did not mean that Dow objected to the colonial project; he had already remarked that the
‘advantages of conquest’ for Britain were obvious.122 His insistence on the qualities of the
Hindoo subject, which were the direct consequence of their ancient religion, was,
however, always cited in relation to the absolute necessity of religiously tolerant
government, in line with the example of the deist Akbar. Moreover, when it came to the
self-government of Hindoos, Dow was not dismissive. He reserved some striking praise
for the Marathas, whose application of Hindoo religion resulted in a ‘regular government,
the principles of which are founded on virtue’.123 How Dow’s attitude to religion further
shaped his criticism of the Company will be discussed more in chapter five. It remains to
be noted here that Dow saw deism as resulting in the most stable and enlightened form
of government, with the rational religion of the Hindoos following a close second.

As well as this engagement with contemporary philosophy and theology, there
was a commercial and fashionable dimension to Dow’s literary projects. In addition to A
History of Hindostan Dow also published Tales Translated from the Persian of Inatulla of Delhi in
1768. This collection of stories was received with excitement and fed the increasingly
fashionable demand for Oriental fiction.124 It was only the following year that Dow’s
play, Zingis, was staged by David Garrick at his Drury Lane theatre. To a London
audience it presented a dramatisation of the life of Zingis Chan, or Genghis Khan, who,
according to the play’s advertisement was ‘perhaps, the greatest prince, that ever

124 Srinivas Aravamudan, Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel, (Chicago: University of
appeared in history’. Dow went on to produce two more editions of *A History of Hindostan* as well as another play, *Sethona* (1774), which was set in ancient Egypt. This considered, the context for reading Dow’s dissertation on the *Hindoos* is one of literary ambition.

Dow’s first literary productions all appeared in the space of two years, upon his return to England. Perhaps the urgency surrounding Dow’s several publications can be explained by the insecurity of his position. His return in 1768 coincided with the fact that he had been one of a number of officers who had resisted Lord Clive’s attempt to abolish the double ‘batta’, a type of field allowance. During the dispute Captain Robert Parker accused Clive of illegally detaining him for his involvement in the protest, which Dow attested to as an eye-witness for the plaintiff at the trial of Clive in 1769. Finding himself back in England with his military career frustrated Dow wrote to the Board of Directors requesting a new position on the basis of the reputation that his literary exploits had afforded him. The letter opens with reference to his linguistic abilities: ‘That your memorialist served the Honourable Company in the Army at Bengal for six years in which time he acquired a knowledge of the Persian and Indian languages’, and goes on to offer his ‘service in either the civil or military departments’ on this basis. To make the point clear, Dow also adds that should he be successful he ‘hopes that the progress he has made in the oriental tongues, and his knowledge of the political state of Hindostan will enable him to be useful to the Company.’

Despite this, it is no contradiction to say that Dow viewed all his literary projects as serious interventions into the Enlightenment world of ‘Letters’. Dow’s endeavours certainly suggest an interest in developing his reputation as a man of letters and his

---

126 BL Mss Eur F128/117.
127 Dow’s Letter to the Court of Directors, Nov 18th, 1768, IOR/E/1/51, 232-232v.
personal contacts reveal that he did indeed move in such circles. David Hume’s surviving letters reveal that he and Dow were correspondents, for whom ‘a discussion over an evening fire’ was not unfamiliar. It appears that Dow and Hume met through a mutual friend, James Macpherson, the author behind what came to be known as the ‘Ossian hoax’. The published diaries of a footman, who for a time was employed by Dow, record that when he returned to England in 1768 Dow shared some London lodgings with James Macpherson and that both of them were regular visitors to the home of David Hume.

Macpherson’s, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland* (1760) was a cycle of Epic poems which purported to be translations of Gaelic poems from Scotland’s early dark ages. They are narrated by Ossian, a blind bard, who sings of the life and battles of Fingal, a Scotch warrior. Macpherson’s claims were somewhat similar to Dow’s opening comments in the *Dissertation on the Hindoos*, that ‘common sense, upon the affairs of religion, is pretty equally divided among all nations’. Macpherson himself wrote that though ‘there are no traces of religion in the poems ascribed to Ossian’, on account of the Druids having being supressed, ‘To say, that a nation is void of all religion, is the same thing as to say, that it does not consist of people endued with reason.’ Consequently, scholars of the text have pointed out how Ossian, the primitive and noble bard of ancient Scotland, articulated simple and natural religion imagined in the discourses of eighteenth-century deism.

Macpherson had claimed that the poems of Ossian were based on an ancient Gaelic manuscript. The authenticity of this claim was immediately challenged by Samuel Hume to Alexander Dow. 1772. In *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932) vol.ii, Letter 480, p.267.


Johnson, and others, who was incredulous about Macpherson’s inability to present an original manuscript. Johnson decided that Macpherson’s failure to respond to requests for evidence was ‘proof enough’ that the whole literary endeavour was a forgery.\textsuperscript{133} In Europe, the reception was generally much more positive, with literary circles responding more to the Romantic appeal of the work, rather than questions of its authenticity.\textsuperscript{134} Unresolved, the controversy continued into the early years of the nineteenth-century, with the text now generally regarded as a legitimate reworking of traditional oral tales, but certainly a forgery in terms of whether it approaches anything like a translation.\textsuperscript{135} While Dow’s confusion over the contents of the Shasters and the unreliability of his manuscript evidence is not on the same scale as Macpherson’s so called ‘hoax’, the notion that the use of ancient textual evidence could supply some kind of insight into the reason-based faith of these original cultures is a significant point of similarity. Earlier in the century John Toland’s \textit{History of the Druids} (1726) had argued for the original wisdom of the Druids on the basis of evidence collected from uncertain and unpublished Irish manuscripts, supposedly dating from the time of Cicero’s writing.\textsuperscript{136} Although the nationalistic tendencies of Macpherson and Toland’s projects are less a factor, the desire to provide ‘evidence’ for an idea of primitive, simple and pure religious truth existing prior to the strictees of formal Christianity, was a common motivation for all three of these writers.

\textsuperscript{134} Howard Gaskell (ed.), \textit{The Reception of Ossian in Europe} (London: Thoemes Continuum, 2004).
\textsuperscript{135} Hugh Trevor-Roper, \textit{The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History} (London: Yale University Press, 2008), p.186.
Conclusion

In presenting the religion of the *Hindoos* to a European audience Dow was building on the controversial contribution of Holwell by emphasising the sophistication and significance of Indian religious concepts, which had previously been denied. Dow’s claims to be motivated by the unprejudiced desire to rescue the *Hindoos* from misunderstanding were likely meant, but the outcome was far from impartial or dispassionate. Dow combined Indian and European concepts to argue for a universal concept of religion, the particular manifestations of which were subject to the same follies of human nature as each other. Later, Dow’s treatment of Indian religion became more political in approach. His assessment of its nature is determined less by its internal consistency and more by its historical and potential role in Indian civilization. His purview was widened to consider religion as part of the fabric of the history of man, society and civilization, topics with which his friends Macpherson and Hume were also intimately concerned.

Dow’s approach to the interpretation of Hinduism was ‘philosophic’ because he, like Holwell, consciously cast his discoveries as unique in the degree to which they penetrated the philosophical core of a previously ‘veiled’ religion. Furthermore, these discoveries were conveyed through language and concepts that belonged to eighteenth-century intellectual culture, inspiring an analogous status between Indian philosophy and Enlightenment thought. For Dow, ‘common sense in the affairs of religion’ was equally distributed and so was superstition and enthusiasm. On the one hand the vulgar *Hindoos* exhibited similar superstitions to those of the ‘pious Christian’. On the other hand was the example of the *Neadrisen*, whose philosophical enquiries made them ‘look up to the divinity through the medium of reason’; a method which included the rejection of the same irrational doctrines as Newtonian theology did, such as particular providence. Dow’s separation of the ‘learned’ from the ‘vulgar’ as well as the ‘philosophical’ from the
‘allegorical’ and the ‘symbolical’ thus articulated a view of religion that saw it as universal and natural, but that was nevertheless susceptible to corruption and degeneration. It was thus rooted in and in turn inflected Enlightenment intellectual culture. From his account of Nyāya to his insistence on its monotheistic core, it was these aspects of his work, this ‘philosophic’ approach to the religion of the Hindoos that, as we shall see, particularly appealed to Enlightenment writers like Voltaire.
Chapter Four: N.B. Halhed and Wilkins

The works of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed (1751-1830) and Charles Wilkins (1749-1836) were the result of the direct patronage of Governor-General Warren Hastings. Consequently their contribution has often been subsumed under a more general analysis of Hastings’s ‘orientalist’ policies.\(^1\) Halhed’s *Code of Gentoo Laws* was an integral part of Hastings’s 1772 judicial plan. Likewise, Wilkins’s *Gēētā* played a less direct role in policy but was certainly viewed by Hastings as a tool for communicating and legitimising his approach. And yet, both writers also offered a great deal of personal interpretation and conjecture. They did this in the prefaces to the translations of Indian texts they supplied. They provided commentaries that were directed beyond the scope of official policy, towards much broader questions about religion, civilization and human nature. In this way, they imitated the ‘philosophic’ approach of Holwell and Dow. This chapter will thus extend beyond existing analysis by focusing on the specifically religious content of the work of Halhed and Wilkins, to provide an alternative way of historically situating their ideas. The result will be to realign their work with the ideas and approach of Holwell and Dow, in opposition to tendencies that see them merely as leading the way to a more proficient British Indology.

As we have seen, Holwell and Dow were not attempting to penetrate the exact meanings and mysteries of Indian theology, but were instead motivated to construct individual interpretations of Indian religion according to specific religious, philosophical and political perspectives. Halhed and Wilkins, though markedly advanced in their ability to read and translate Indian texts, similarly mediated the theological ideas that they encountered through a series of personal concerns. While some have suggested that we see all four writers as progressively improving the quality of British scholarship on Indian

\(^1\) See, for example, David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
religion and culture, this chapter will argue that their connection is rooted far more in the historical moment to which they belonged, whereby British encounters with ‘Hinduism’ presented a field onto which European intellectual discourses could be examined and played out.²

There are two points of interest that call for the reassessment of these authors in line with their predecessors. In the first instance Halhed’s and Wilkins’s explicit references to Holwell and Dow suggest that they regarded themselves as possessing a degree of intellectual continuity.³ Halhed’s preface to A Code of Gentoo Laws, for example, states that it was an ‘ingenious author of our own’, who was responsible for explaining the little understood Gentoo doctrine of transmigration. This statement is footnoted as J.Z. Holwell, author of Interesting Historical Events.⁴ In the second instance, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Halhed and Wilkins have also been connected to Holwell and Dow by the suggestion that their interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ were ‘deist’. Arvind Mandair, for example, describes them as being influenced by a ‘generally benign deistic outlook’.⁵ Trautmann has also agreed that there are ‘features’ of deism in their work, which ‘drew fire from the orthodox’.⁶

As in the case of Holwell and Dow, it is not the argument of this thesis that this labelling is wholly incorrect, but that it requires understanding and nuance; both because of the subsequent historiographical changes to our appreciation of the term, and because of the manifest differences and similarities between each writer and their approach. Halhed’s assessment of Indian religion came from a more sustained scepticism about religion in general, but shared an emphasis on antiquity and the universal properties of

² See for example Thomas R. Trautman, Aryans and British India, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
⁶ Trautman, Aryans and British India, p.72.
religious belief. In many ways, Halhed’s outlook resulted in a more civic and historical view of religion, similar to that of Dow. In contrast, Wilkins’s interpretation of Hindoo religion operated on the same assumptions about monotheism, religious schism and reform, and original purity, as ran through the work of Holwell and Dow. These perspectives thus had their roots in productions of their predecessors and were not straightforwardly wedded to the colonial project. This chapter will highlight specific aspects of their thought which suggest that their interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ were primarily shaped through ‘deist’ and heterodox religious discourses.

This is not to say, however, that their relationships with the Company were insignificant. It is certainly important to point out that the work of Holwell and Dow was written and published independently of the Company and that, in contrast, Halhed and Wilkins were the direct beneficiaries of the Governor’s patronage. What this chapter and the next will demonstrate, though, is that it was not necessarily the interpretations of Indian religion that altered in these circumstances, but the political context in which they were appropriated and applied. This chapter will extend the scope of our understanding by offering an alternative angle from which to view the work of Halhed and Wilkins. The policies and patronage of Warren Hastings were certainly the conditions for the creation of their work, but were not its ultimate definition. Taking Hastings’s administration instead as their point of departure, this chapter suggests that his patronage was the means by which ‘philosophic’ interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ were worked into the fabric of Company policy, but were by no means their origin or limit.

The Company setting

The 1770s-1780s marked a significant turning point in terms of the Company’s institutional approach to research on Indian languages, history and religion. In 1769,
Robert Orme was appointed ‘historiographer to the East India Company’ at £400 a year. He was succeeded by John Bruce in 1801. As well as their published histories, both Orme and Bruce left to the library a large number of manuscripts relating to India. In the same period the Company accumulated an ever larger number of manuals on local dialects and translations of various different historical and legal texts, all by Company servants and all supported through subscriptions and other methods of financial support, by the Board of Governors. In some cases the Board of Directors resolved to subscribe for forty copies of works on India and often subscribed for more. The petitions or memorials of the writers as well as the ‘dedication’ of their work to either the Directors or the Governor-General also testify to some cases of direct patronage. In the period that Wilkins and Halhed were writing, therefore, the Company was increasingly invested in the active discovery and use of knowledge about India, which in many cases included information about Indian religion.

The relationship between the Company and the works produced by these writers cannot be explained without exploring the particular role of Governor-general Warren Hastings and his consciously ‘Orientalist’ policies. As discussed in chapter one, Hastings’s governorship was concerned with responding to the criticism of the Company that surrounded the introduction of the 1773 Regulating Act, one of the purposes of which was to improve the Company’s reputation. Instead of the image of the plundering ‘nabob’, Hastings sought to erect a regime that could claim to be ‘enlightened’ and legitimate according to local customs. This approach bore a resemblance to some of the recommendations advanced by Dow, a copy of whose work Hastings had received from

---

10 Explicitly described as such by David Kopf, British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance, p.22.
John Macpherson in 1772. Macpherson had forwarded it straight to Hastings having received it himself, ‘reeking from the press’, suggesting that it will have been ‘the only Copy of it in India’. Though Hastings’s response to Dow’s work was critical, mainly because it contained censure of the Company, he evidently shared Dow’s admiration for the Mughal Empire. Hastings vigorously rejected depictions of India that cast *nawabi* officials as barbaric and instead preferred Dow’s description of a benign Eastern despotism. Like Dow, Hastings saw the benefits of emulating such a model for advancing company interests. Sending an early draft of his revenue reforms to the chairman of the Company, Hastings justified the changes on the basis that they did not include any measures which ‘the original constitution of the Mogul Government hath not before established or adopted, & thereby rendered familiar to the People’.

This was the same justification applied to Hastings’s policy of religious toleration. As discussed in Chapter One, non-interference in local religions had been the unofficial policy of the Company since its inception. Hasting’s Judicial Reforms of 1772 altered this, effectively establishing it as official policy with a clause (Clause XXIII) which read: ‘in all suits regarding Inheritance, Marriage, Caste and all other religious Usages or Institutions, the Laws of the Koran with respect to the Mahometans, and those of the Shaster with respect to the Gentoos shall be invariably adhered to’. It was as a part of this scheme that Halhed’s *Code* was commissioned. The Clause necessitated European judges' familiarity with what were perceived to be the ‘native laws’, and the reassurance of the British public concerning the sophistication of these laws. Hastings thus promptly

---

11 John Macpherson to Hastings, Madras, 12th October 1772, BL Add. MSS 29133 fo.262.
12 Hastings to Robert Palk, 11th November 1772, BL Add. MSS 29127, fo.49.
13 For example, Hastings’s minute of 1st March 1763, printed in Henry Vansittart, *Narrative of the Transactions in Bengal from the year 1760 to the year 1764 during the government of Henry Vansittart*, vol.1, (London, 1766) pp.302-304.
14 Travers, *Ideology and Empire*, p.106.
employed eleven learned Brahmins, through the Revenue Board, from 1773 to 1775 to compile the Persian digest of Sanskrit law from which Halhed would translate the *Code*.

These judicial reforms have since been judged to have been erected on an inadequate understanding of pre-colonial legal systems.¹⁸ Despite this, and despite the objections of the contemporary Nawab, Hastings presented the clause as consistent with the ancient Mughal constitution, as described in the work of Dow amongst others.¹⁹

Ever the pragmatist, Hastings certainly used Indology to ‘shape’ his administration, at the centre of which was the need to establish the hegemony of the East India Company. And yet, a solely cynical interpretation does not suffice. Some have speculated that Hastings’s own beliefs had a deistic quality which underlined his policies. Penelope Carson suggests that ‘Hastings, while probably a deist, took care to attend church regularly’.²⁰ Stephen Neill concurs that in India, Hastings ‘lacked any deep belief in the doctrines of the Christian faith’ casting him instead as ‘an eighteenth-century deist’.²¹ Certainly Hastings’s letters and patterns of patronage demonstrate that he shared the view of Dow that Akbar’s deistic governance was to be admired. It was after reading Dow that Hastings encouraged Francis Gladwin to translate the ‘institutes’ of Akbar,²² resulting in the publication of the *Ayeen Akbery* (A’an-i Akbara) in 1783.²³ The work had actually been completed by Gladwin in 1777, but the Directors were unwilling to bear the cost of ten Guineas a copy and it was Hastings who eventually reimbursed Gladwin.²⁴

Hastings’s commitment to the particularly secularised aspects of Akbar’s government, or what Bayly has described as being understood as ‘enlightened Islamic freemasonry’, was

---

¹⁸ Travers, *Ideology and Empire* p.122.
¹⁹ Travers, *Ideology and Empire* p.123.
²² Grewal, *Muslim Rule in India*, p.25.
thus, to a degree, influenced by the work of Dow. Whether or not Hastings himself was a deist is indeterminable, but he was certainly interested in religious toleration and the ideas and arguments of ‘deist’ writers like Dow. Far from representing the beginning of these ideas, then, we can see the patronage of Hastings as changing the context in which interpretations of Indian religion and history took place, by appropriating them for the purposes of his administration.

The work on the Code was begun in May 1773 and finished in February 1775. In March 1775, Halhed’s translation, prefaced with a dissertation, was sent by Hastings to London, where it was printed under the title *A Code of Gentoo Laws, or, Ordinations of the Pundits*, in 1776. Most significant here, though, are the reasons for which Hastings saw its publication in London, rather than its practical implementation in Bengal, to be of the greatest importance. Prior to its publication Hastings wrote a letter to the Board of Directors and to Lord Mansfield asking for approval for the idea of applying native laws, affixed to which was the example of the Code. Hasting also wrote to literary critic and essayist, Dr Johnson, as part of his effort to generate interest in the Code. To ensure that the project was speedy Hastings had already personally met the cost of 30,000 rupees to produce the Code, and was again reimbursed. Although Hastings asserted that the Code was intended ‘principally to assist the courts of justice in their decisions’, he went on to add, ‘It has been one of my first wishes to be able to free the inhabitants of this country from the reproach of ignorance and barbarism which has been undeservedly cast upon them by the too precipitate information of those who have wanted opportunities of knowing their real states’. Hastings thus saw the considerable expense of the Code as

---

worth it, not because of the deeply problematic role it would play in the law courts of Bengal, but because of its capacity to reconcile the public to his Orientalist model of government through an appreciation of Indian civilization.

Ensuring the British publication of Charles Wilkins’s *The Bhāgavat-Gītā, or Dialogues of Krēśnā and Ārjōṇ* (1785) was also a personal cause for Hastings. In a letter to his friend “Scott” asking for his assistance in passing it on to his publisher, Hastings makes his feelings quite clear: ‘If Mr Smith, contrary to my expectation, and the ingenious opinion which I have conceived of him, should refuse his patronage to Wilkins’s production, or the Court of D[irectors], refuse to give their consent to the publication; I devise that you will consequent Mr Smith to allow…publication in my Name and under your inspection.’ He also voiced his awareness of potential criticism that such an endeavour could inspire, imploring his friend to, ‘Defend me if you hear me reproached with lavishing my time on these levities, as they may be termed by many, to the neglect of Business’. Hastings was obviously willing to ensure its publication even at the expense of both his personal finances and reputation.

Moreover, the practical uses and justification for the publication of the *Gītā* were far less clear than in the case of the *Code*. The letter in which Hastings recommended to the Director of the Company that the translation should be shared with the public was published alongside Wilkins’s preface. In it Hastings simply states that ‘I presume to offer, and to recommend, through you, for an offering to the public, a very curious specimen of the literature, the mythology, and morality of the ancient Hindoos’. He gives no other justification for its publication or utility, except to repeat ‘I could hardly venture to persist in my recommendation of this production for public notice’. With the caveat that many passages will appear obscure or incomprehensible because of

---

30 Most likely Major John Scott Waring (1747-1819), a political supporter and promoter of Hastings.  
31 BL, Add MS 29129, 1784, fo.270.  
their antiquity and ‘sublimity’, Hastings insists that there very little in the Gēētā that will ‘shock either our religious faith or moral sentiments’. In fact, he then goes on to declare the text, ‘a single exception, among all the known religions of mankind, of a theology accurately corresponding with the Christian dispensation, and most powerfully illustrating its fundamental doctrines’. Hastings’s interest in the Gēētā clearly went beyond pragmatism. At this point Hastings shows himself to share the underlying principle of Wilkins’s interpretation that within this text was an argument for monotheistic, rational religion, compatible with a minimalistic understanding of the core Christian doctrines.

Indeed in both cases Hastings was interested in projecting to the British public a vision of his administration that was enlightened and religiously tolerant. This was the platform by which ideas similar to those expressed by Holwell and Dow entered into the sphere of policy. And yet there are clearly aspects of these translations, primarily expressed in the accompanying prefaces, which went beyond the scope of legitimising a certain style of government. This is most readily observable in those elements of their discussion that border on the religiously subversive. The following sections of this chapter will, therefore, outline the ways in which the contributions of Halhed and Wilkins went well beyond the demands of the East India Company policy and thus broaden the scope of context in which we can appreciate these authors.

**The Code and its Preface**

Halhed’s ‘translator’s Preface’ to the *Code* features a tangled network of bold assertions, equivocation and subtle raillery. These were not aimed in the direction of the ‘peculiarity’ of some of the *Code’s* contents, however, but at the challenges that this much older set of

---

scriptures posed to Christian orthodoxy and authority. The whole preface is structured as a polemic against religious dogmatism, in favour of the idea that ‘Diversity of Belief, which are Causes of Envy, and of Enmity to the Ignorant, are in fact a manifest Demonstration of the Power of the Supreme Being’. Such a statement strongly echoes the universalism of Holwell, who claimed that ‘all divine worship’ was directed towards ‘the same Deity’, and Dow, who believed that ‘common sense, upon the affairs of religion, is pretty equally divided among all nations’. Yet, Halhed often goes beyond the moderate implications of this concept of universal religion, sometimes positing a more fundamentally sceptical position. Generally his rhetoric is considered and equivocal, making it difficult to pinpoint a singularly outrageous statement. By the end of the preface, however, the reader has been presented with numerous suggestions that, taken together, work to undermine orthodox Christian history and theology.

Halhed begins the Preface by establishing an equivalence between the premises of all religious beliefs in general. He suggested that the Gentoo faith ‘is equally implicit with that of a Christian’, since both have just as firm a faith in the ‘supposed revelations of the Divine Will’ attached to their system of worship. Interwoven with such claims, however, there is always an equivocation: in the case of the above it is the inclusion of a bracketed caveat, resulting in the full sentence, ‘The Faith of the Gentoo (misguided as it is and groundless as it may be) is equally implicit with that of a Christian’. This careful balancing act is perpetuated in the following paragraph, which appeared immediately after Halhed’s discussion and insistence on the greater antiquity of Gentoo scriptures:

Great, surely, and inexplicable must be the doubts of mere human reason upon such a dilemma when unassisted and uninformed by divine revelation; but while we admit the former in our argument, we profess a most unshaken reliance upon

36 Halhed, A Code of Gentoo Laws, p.3.
the latter, before which every suspicion must subside, and scepticism be absorbed in conviction: yet from the premises already established, this conclusion at least may fairly be deduced, that the world does not now contain annals of more indisputable antiquity than those delivered down by the ancient Bramins. 39

This fragile and passive attempt to at once assert the antiquity of Indian civilization but at the same time pay a manner of respect to Christian revelation did not go unnoticed. As family friend and critic of the preface George Costard asked quite plainly of Halhed’s conviction in the antiquity of the Gentoo ‘annals’: ‘how will you reconcile this with that unshakeable Reliance on Revelation which you speak of in the Sentence immediately before?’ 40

The challenge posed to biblical history by Gentoo scripture is the central feature of Halhed’s preface to the Code. The above quotation followed a section in which Halhed had emphasised the absence of any record of the great biblical Flood in the annals of Indian history, ‘which yet we must think infinitely too remarkable to have been even but slightly spoken of, much less to have been totally omitted, had it ever been known in that part of the world.’ 41 This was a fundamental challenge to biblical history. Halhed thus went on to consider Gentoo antiquity against the equally ‘plausible Accounts’ of Chinese history and suggest that, taken together, we can infer that Gentoo chronology dates back ‘to such antiquity the Mosaic creation is but as yesterday’. 42 In fact, mirroring the suggestions of Holwell, Halhed used the idea that the Code’s instances of ‘wonderful correspondence with many parts of the institutes of Moses’, meant that ‘it is not utterly impossible, that the doctrine of Hindostan might have been early transplanted into Egypt, and thus have become familiar to Moses’. He argued for this on the grounds that it could not have happened the other way round, since the contents of the Code were

much older.\textsuperscript{43} It was precisely this feature of Halhed’s work which would inspire dissenting thinker and natural philosopher, Joseph Priestley, to pursue his own researches into the ‘Hindoo religion’.\textsuperscript{44} The outcome was, however, an inverse of Halhed’s chronological suppositions. Priestley instead used Halhed, Holwell and Dow to make direct comparisons between Mosaic institutions and Indian thought, with a view to proving the superior ‘wisdom of the Laws, and of the religion, prescribed in the writings of Moses’.\textsuperscript{45}

Halhed’s comparison of the Gentoo and Christian religions takes a more sceptical tone when he turns to consider the basis of each tradition’s claim to be true. Holwell and Dow both did this by questioning those who approached the ultimately reasonable religion of other nations with prejudice because they believed their religion to be the only acceptable expression of adoration of the ‘Supreme Being’. Halhed takes a far less subtle approach, arguing that since each religion’s claim to truth was completely analogous, they were both by implication, equally imperfect. Halhed did this by attacking the basis of those claims, and thereby positioning himself alongside freethinkers, deists and sceptics in one of the most contentious religious debates of the Enlightenment: the status of miracles. Having established that both the Christian and the Gentoo shared an equal conviction in ‘the supposed revelations of the Divine Will’ according to their religion, Halhed went on to remark that the Hindoo ‘therefore esteems the astonishing miracles attributed to a Brahman, a Raam, or a Kishen, as facts of the most indubitable authenticity, and the relation of them as most strictly historical’.\textsuperscript{46} This, Halhed suggested, was equivalent to the Christian belief in a ‘strictly historical’ reading of the Bible. A flawed reasoning, as Halhed suggests a few pages later, when he pointedly remarks on the

\textsuperscript{43} Halhed, \textit{A Code of Gentoo Laws}, pp.xliii-xliii.
\textsuperscript{44} Joseph Priestley, \textit{A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with those of the Hindoos and Other Ancient Nations}, (London, 1799).
\textsuperscript{45} Priestley, \textit{A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses}, pp.4-5.
\textsuperscript{46} Halhed, \textit{A Code of Gentoo Laws}, p.xv.
striking absence of any mention of a global Deluge in the thorough and more ancient Hindoo annals of history.  

Halhed was, therefore, resurrecting a debate that had raged throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, culminating in Hume’s essay ‘Of Miracles’ (1748). Throughout sceptical challengers of religion increasingly ridiculed their opponents’ use of miracles as evidence to support theological orthodoxy. Though there were shades of difference between them, in general these writers were attacking the idea that the argument for Christianity could be established on supernatural foundations.  

Although Halhed does not say this explicitly, by stating that the conviction of both the Christian and the Hindoo rests on the same assumptions, Halhed implies that neither has ultimate authority over the other, since, as Hume had argued, supernatural arguments cannot be proven. Halhed also articulated the same certain religious scepticism by pointing to the circularity of scriptural authority, observing that:

‘we are not justified in grounding the standard and criterion of our examination of the Hindoo religion upon the known and infallible truth of our own; because of the opposite party would either deny the first principles of the argument, or insist upon an equal right on their side to suppose the veracity of their own scriptures uncontrovertable.

This assertion of the relative value of both religions’ claims to truth according to the imperfect logic of revelation was an implicit attack on the ideological foundations of religious dogmatism. This is what was most ‘deist’ in the thought of Halhed. His relativistic weighing up of scriptural authority implicitly endorses similar sceptical attacks

---

on the idea that revelation was an adequate basis for religious belief. It is a bolder expression of Holwell’s similar sentiment that it is ‘just’ that every ‘sect’ has ‘a high and superior opinion of the religious principles, under which they were born’ as long as that does not lead to ‘religious vanity’.

When Halhed later on suggests a similitude between Indian and early Jewish mythology he does so not on the basis of truth, but on grounds of comparative vulgarity. Pointing to the ‘scape-goat’ in Leviticus, in which a goat is designated to be cast into the desert with the sins of the community, Halhed remarks that there is a similar story, involving a horse, ‘in a particular institute of the Gentoos’. Explaining that both of these stories were conceived of ‘in a state of barbarism’, Halhed insists that their originators were ‘by no means fit subjects for the comprehension of mystery’ and thus believed it a literal truth. The didactic meaning of the ‘scape-goat’, argued Halhed, had developed subsequently. Halhed thus describes religion as subject to a historical process, according to which, as ‘the manners of a people become polished, and their ideas enlightened, attempts will be made to revise and resist their religious creed into conformity with the rest of their improvements’. So, as in the case of the ‘scape-goat’, those doctrines, which the ignorant ancestor received ‘as the literal exposition of undoubted fact, the philosophic descendent, will strive to gloss over by à posteriori constructions of his own’.

Rather than a critique of this stage in the historical development of religion, Halhed defends these allegorical interventions on this basis that they are an aspect of the general intellectual advancement of society:

‘Hence it may be understood that what has been herein advanced does not mean to set aside the improvements of philosophy, or to deny the occasional

---

employment of allegory, but merely to establish one plain position, that religion in general, at its origins, is believed as literally as it is professed, and that it is afterwards rather refined by the learned than debased by the ignorant."\textsuperscript{56}

This was by far Halhed’s boldest statement that theology was a matter of human artifice. In fact, Halhed seems to most clearly articulate the elitism which Holwell and Dow left in tension in their own narratives of decline. Halhed argues, we should see all early religious mythologies as they were literally meant, with the understanding ‘that the Institution of a Religion has been in every Country the first Step towards an Emersion from Savage Barbarism, and the establishment of Civil Society’ at a time when ‘Reason is just beginning to dawn’.\textsuperscript{57} In this sense religion becomes an abstracted concept: a stage in the successive progression of social states and tool for instituting social development. Halhed’s philosophic interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ was a matter of civilization, based on the principle that ‘when the Manners of a People become polished, and their Ideas enlightened, Attempts will be made to Revise and Refit their Religious Creed into a Conformity with the Rest of their Improvements’.\textsuperscript{58}

The scepticism of this position also bears a significant resemblance to Hume’s 1757 essay \textit{The Natural History of Religion}, which offered a bitingly satirical critique of the various assumptions underlying the concept of natural religion (i.e. the idea that a pure monotheism is innate, according to its inherent rationality) and instead offered an alternatively naturalist explanation of the origins of religion. In this account theism is reached, not by reason, ‘but by the adulation and fears of our most vulgar superstition’.\textsuperscript{59} That is, rather than the product of rational speculation as to the cause of existence, early religious beliefs were the product of humanity’s struggle for survival combined with their

\textsuperscript{56} Halhed, \textit{A Code of Gentoo Laws}, p.xviii.
\textsuperscript{57} Halhed, \textit{A Code of Gentoo Laws}, p.xiv.
\textsuperscript{58} Halhed, \textit{A Code of Gentoo Laws}, p.xvi.
essential ignorance of the operations of nature, on which this survival depended. Like Halhed’s summary above, Hume argued that it was the need of primitive polytheists to achieve order and simplicity that originated the belief of the refined monotheist. Like Halhed, Hume saw this as part of the process to actuate a civilized society. 60 This was no coincidence since, as we shall see in the final section of this chapter, Hume was indeed an early influence on the formation of Halhed’s scepticism.

Like Dow’s ideas about civic religion, much of Halhed’s preface falls into a pattern of eighteenth-century thought which increasingly treated religious belief as a developmental stage in the history of society. Rather than point to original purity, though, he suggested that all religions share a common history of literal primitivism, and a later refinement of ideas in conjunction with a general reformation of society. Yet, while his approach is perhaps more rooted in scepticism, its practical outcome is similar. Halhed’s history of religion still results in a universalism that sees the ancient and sophisticated system of the Gentoos as equally worthy of esteem as Christian teaching. Both this view and Halhed’s sceptical expression of it went well beyond the bounds of a project to legitimise Company policy.

The Gêêtā

When he arrived in India Charles Wilkins soon distinguished himself as a talented student of Indian languages. In addition, in the words of Halhed, Wilkins was the ‘metallurgist, engraver, founder, and printer’ of the Bengali and Persian type-faces, used in Halhed’s Grammar of the Bengali Language. 61 He first mastered vernacular Hindustani and Bengali, then like his predecessors he turned to Persian. Wilkins is also widely acknowledged as the first Englishman to master Sanskrit, which he studied under the

---

60 Roger L. Emerson, Essays on David Hume: Medical men and the Scottish Enlightenment (Ashgate, 2009), p.93.
61 N. B. Halhed, A grammar of the Bengal language (Bengal, 1778), p.xxiv.
instruction of Kasinatha Bhattacharya, one of the most esteemed pundits of Benares.\textsuperscript{62}

As an obituary in \textit{The Asiatic Journal} of 1836 put it, Wilkins was ‘the first adventurer on this literary ocean’.\textsuperscript{63} These studies eventually resulted in Wilkins’s translation of \textit{The Bhāgavat-Gītā, or Dialogues of Krēśnā and Ārjōṅ (1785)}.

It is as a consequence of this pioneering effort to learn Sanskrit that Wilkins is most often discussed in terms of his contribution to the development of Indological studies. Scholarship has thus tended to view him according to what came after the translation of the \textit{Gītā} and not what came before it. McGetchin, for example, places Wilkins alongside William Jones as being responsible for ‘introducing Europe to the great works of Indian civilization’ and thereby stimulating the growth of Indology.\textsuperscript{64} Yet, at the core of Wilkins’s interpretation of the \textit{Gītā} were the same concerns that animated the work of Holwell, Dow and Halhed before it. Rather than seeing the \textit{Gītā} as making the case for a particular yogic discipline, as many Indian commentators have, Wilkins saw it as a text designed to unify and reform the Hindoo religion. Declaring that the intention of its author was ‘setting up the doctrine of the unity of Godhead, in opposition to idolatrous sacrifices, and the worship of images’, Wilkins consciously cast the \textit{Gītā} in the language of European rational religion and reform.\textsuperscript{65}

As in the case of Halhed’s \textit{Code}, it was primarily in the preface to the publication of the \textit{Gītā} that the translator set out his interpretation of its contents, and their particular signification for Indian religion. From the beginning, Wilkins’s starting point is the assumption of a superior and singular God, describing the text as ‘a dialogue supposed to have passed between Krēśnā, an incarnation of the Deity, and his pupil and

\textsuperscript{63} Anon, \textit{The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British and Foreign India, China, and Australasia}, 20, May–August (London,1836), pp.165–70, p.166.
favourite Arjoon’. Wilkins’s opening reference to ‘the Deity’, singular, is developed into a bolder assertion that the followers of the Gēētā, that is ‘the most learned Brahmans of the present times’ were in fact ‘Unitarians’. That is, as a consequence of following ‘the doctrines of Krēěshnă as outlined in the Gēētā, theirs was one singular God, regarded as a ‘universal spirit’.66 There is in fact ample evidence for this inference and Wilkins is not the only person to have interpreted the Gēētā as establishing a monotheistic system.67 Yet, Wilkins was not only making the claim that the Gēētā contained arguments for monotheism, but that the theological outcome of that essential doctrine was equivalent to Unitarianism. ‘Unitarianism’ had only become a formal denomination in terms of the British religious landscape in 1774, eleven years prior to the publication of Wilkins’s Preface. The Unitarian church had been inaugurated under the stewardship of Joseph Priestly, who was widely considered the respectable face of dissent.68 In making this association though, Wilkins was also in tapping into Unitarianism’s historical relationship with the heterodox anti-Trinitarian doctrines of Arianism and Socinianism.69 Arianism was the much older heresy, which essentially held that Christ must be subordinate to God the Father. Socinianism, which was a much more present school of thought in the late eighteenth century, pushed the more radical conclusion that the Trinity was logically incoherent. With this came a rejection of several doctrines deemed incompatible with reason, such as original sin, predestination and Christ’s atonement.70 In alluding to this history of heterodox, dissenting sects, Wilkins was consciously associating the ‘doctrines

66 Charles Wilkins, Bhagvat-Gēētā or Dialogues of Krēěshnă and Arjoon (London, 1785), p.23.
of Kresbna’, contained within the Gēētā, with a movement to reform religion towards a more rational, Anti-Trinitarian doctrine.

In the preface, Wilkins eluded to the idea that Europe and India experienced similar religious reformations, with the assertion that the explicit purpose of the Gēētā was ‘to unite all the prevailing modes of worship of those days’. Like Holwell and Dow, Wilkins thus used the idea of schism and division to explain those Gentoo customs which were not consistent with their belief in an ancient, philosophical and rational religion. Also, like Holwell and Dow, Wilkins does this with a rejection of the idea that the Vedas were the most important Gentoo scriptures. The Gēētā had been calculated, Wilkins explained, ‘to undermine the tenets inculcated by the Veds; for, although the author dared not make a direct attack…his design was to bring about the downfall of Polytheism’.

71 As we have already seen, since the seventeenth-century the view of Dutch travel writer, Abraham Roger, that although they disagreed about interpretation, all the ‘Bramines’ ultimately submitted to the authority of the Vedas, was taken to be definitive.

72 In contrast, Wilkins posited that the ‘Brāhmāns esteem this work [i.e. the Gēētā] to contain all the grand mysteries of their religion’. In doing so, Wilkins projects an argument that is partly based on a valid analysis of the Gēētā, but which intentionally distorts the subtleties of the tradition in which it existed. The Bhagavad Gita does indeed seek to undermine the Vedic texts, but is also imbued with essentially Vedic concepts making the notion of a schism untenable and certainly not something that his pundit advisors would have communicated. Wilkins’s emphasis on the idea that the Gēētā challenged and subverted the Vedas allowed him to locate his own interpretation of Indian religion in the authority of a text, of which he was the sole translator.

73 Wilkins, Bhāgvat-Gēētā, p.23.


75 Wilkins, Bhāgvat-Gēētā, p.24.
Although he admitted their great antiquity, and that he had not read them, Wilkins dismissed the Vedas as the product of priestly elite. In this way Wilkins shared Holwell and Dow’s assessment that ‘priestcraft’ was the mechanism by which this degeneration emerged. In the same way that Holwell blamed the idolatry of Hindoo practices on the influence of ‘the common run of Brahmns’ and Dow ‘the unlearned part of the Brahmins’, Wilkins employed the notion of priestcraft to explain the conflict between the monotheism of the Gēētā and idolatrous customs of the Hindoons.\(^{74}\) The importance of ‘the Veds’ was assured not due to its contents, argued Wilkins, but by those Bramins who, despite their knowledge of the pure theology contained in the Gēētā, complied so far ‘with the prejudices of the vulgar, as outwardly to perform all the ceremonies inculcated by the Veds.’ This they did, suggested Wilkins, ‘more for the support of their own consequence’, manipulating ‘the great ignorance of the people’, instead of acting ‘in compliance with the dictates of Kreshna’.\(^{75}\) For Wilkins, like his predecessors, priestcraft was the source of degeneration. In this case, though, the outcome is reversed. Unlike Holwell’s Brahmins who invented new texts, Wilkins’s priests continue to allow corrupt practices despite reformation.

While this was an imposition of a particularly European interpretation, it did partially overlap with discussions within certain Hindu traditions themselves, to which it is possible that Wilkins was attuned. As Davis has commented, Wilkins’s statement that the Gēētā was the Brahmins’ central text was in fact ‘the viewpoint not of all Hindus of all times but rather of a particular class of Sanskrit-teaching Brahmin pundits in northern India in the late eighteenth century.\(^{76}\) This is perhaps itself too limited since the text has held an important place in Vedanta traditions since the seventh century.\(^{77}\) But Wilkins’s


decision to translate the Bhagavad Gītā part of the Mahabharata is a sign of the high value that was placed on it by these Brahmin scholars in contrast to other traditions of thought. Moreover, the significance that Wilkins accords to the Gītā does have some aspects in common with other readings of the text. Robert Minor and others have suggested that Gītā marked a turning point in theologies of devotion. Rather than a universalising text which argues for the validity of all methods for achieving a liberating self-realisation, as was argued by some in the nineteenth century, Minor describes the Gītā as presenting a singular path to liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth (mokṣa) through ‘non-attached action’, a realisation of the true-self (atman), and an ‘unswerving, single minded devotion to the lord of the universe’, Krishna. It is certainly possible that this is how the Gītā was presented to Wilkins, through the medium of pundit instruction. Separate, but related to this, is the absolute singularity of Krishna, which is alluded to throughout the text. This is very much considered an important feature in modern interpretations, and will not have passed Wilkins by unnoticed. Nevertheless, the fact that the debates about purpose of the text are still contentious suggests that Wilkins’s confident assertion of its decisive significance was a conscious extrapolation.

It is also possible to observe this process of conscious selection of meaning in Wilkins’s translation. Although he makes no attempt to reproduce the poetical form of the Sanskrit original, Wilkins’s prose is littered with ‘thees’ and ‘thous’ in a manner that evokes the King James Bible. In some cases, too, the translation of particular words and phrases betray the influence of Wilkins’s own religious context and preferences. In particular, some phrases are deployed to support the preface’s constructed analogy between the purpose of the Gītā and the European cause of rational religion. Below is a

---

comparative analysis of an extract taken from Wilkins’s translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which examines the decisions he made in translation, in relation to both a modern translation, and the original Sanskrit:  

\[ \text{syacit pāpaṁ na c’āiva sukṛtaṁ vibhūḥ |} \\
\text{ajñānen’ āvṛtaṁ jñānaṁ; tena muhyanti jantavaḥ | |} \\
\text{jñānena tu tad ajñānaṁ yesāṁ nāsitam ātmanaḥ |} \\
\text{teṣām ādityavaj jñānaṁ prakāśayati tat param | |}^{81} \\
\]

In Wilkins’s translations this appears as:

“The Almighty receiveth neither the vices nor the virtues of anyone. Mankind are led astray by their reasons being obscured by ignorance, but when that ignorance of their souls is destroyed by the force of reason, their wisdom shineth forth again with the glory of the sun”\(^{82}\)

Taking Wilkins’s treatment of the Sanskrit neuter noun for ‘knowledge/knowing’ *jñāna*, and its inflected form *jñānaṁ*, as our focus we can assess some of his choices in translation. Wilkins correctly translates *ajñānaṁ*, the antonym to *jñāna* as ‘ignorance’. Yet, in this passage he translates the first *jñānaṁ* to ‘their reasons’ and then *jñānena*, another inflection, to ‘force of reason’. Yet, in modern translations *jñāna* is most commonly translated as “knowledge” or “cognition”, and is meant here in the sense of self-realisation, or indeed ‘wisdom’, as Wilkins latterly identifies it in the final line. Johnson’s translation for the “Oxford World Classics” series thus sets up a different tone:

“The all-pervading Lord does not take on the merit or demerit of anyone’s actions. Knowledge is concealed by ignorance- and in that way people are deluded.

\(^{80}\) For this purpose I have chosen to use the modern translation by W. J Johnson, in the “Oxford World’s Classics” series, since this is a good standard, rather than verse translation, widely used by scholars. *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. W. J. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).


But for those whose ignorance of the self has been destroyed by knowledge, their knowledge is like the sun, flooding the highest reality with light."\textsuperscript{83}

Here we see the term not only clearly translated as ‘knowledge’, but also as related to some kind of conception of self-realisation.

While not technically incorrect, Wilkins’s decision to translate \textit{jñāna} as ‘reason’ was a conscious one, apposite to a particular interpretation. His decision to latterly translate it as ‘wisdom’ was closer to its meaning, and shows that he was aware of the certain emphasis placed on it in this passage. The association of the term ‘reason’ with the eighteenth century has become so solid that the long history of the period is often referred to as ‘the Age of Reason’. While as much of this period was characterised by critiques of reason, it was taken to be a natural faculty of human nature, or, the \textit{lumen naturale}. It was a faculty that could be corrupted by prejudices or obscured by passions, but in itself it was always true.\textsuperscript{84} Within the context of eighteenth-century religious thought, the idea that this faculty would alone, when unobstructed, lead the possessor to moral virtue, was a cornerstone of concepts of ‘natural religion’.\textsuperscript{85} Wilkins’s decision to align the \textit{Gēētā} with this conception of pure religious belief as a product of reason thus firmly framed it within contemporary descriptions of ‘natural religion’.

Wilkins’s preface was a mere five pages long. Yet within that space there features a comparison between Brahmins and Unitarians and, by implication its Socinian predecessors, as well as the suggestion that the \textit{Gēētā} was a reforming and dissenting text, the main purpose of which to establish monotheism. So, while the conditions for the existence of the translation was closely related to the policies of Warren Hastings, its

heterodox contents had much more to do with the debate established in British interpretations of Hinduism by Holwell and Dow.

An alternative Context

Both Wilkins and Halhed have also been attached to the description of ‘deism’ in historiographical attempts to understand British interpretations of Hinduism. This association has furthermore been linked to a particular political position of sympathetic religious tolerance as a means of consolidating colonial power. Hastings’s policy and patronage are indeed crucial to understanding the impetus under which the Čōde and the Gēētā was commissioned. There is, however, an alternative way of approaching their work too, which seeks to understand it in the context of eighteenth-century religious and intellectual culture more broadly. This section will point this quality of their work can and ought to be understood in relation to aspects outside the Orientalist policies of Hastings, which mostly provided the conditions for their expression. This work will have an unavoidable weighting towards Halhed, of whose life much more detail is known. In the case of Wilkins, though, we can see this in wider context in the way in which the Gēētā was received, most commentators focusing on the religiously-coloured observations made by Wilkins in his preface. It is on the basis of this evidence, then, that we can establish the case for considering Wilkins in a separate context to the simple definition of his work and ideas as a product of Hastings’s policies.

Halhed’s varied life and career has been the subject of an intensive study by noted scholar of South Asian studies, Rosane Rocher. Her detailed biography suggests that although Halhed spent only a few years in India, the effect it had on his psychological and intellectual development was profound, to the extent that it marked a

---

personal transformation from religious sceptic to a follower of the millennialism of Richard Brothers.\textsuperscript{87} To this, the following analysis will add a more detailed consideration of Halhed’s ideas about Indian religion, in relation to the work of his fellow Company authors. As such, it will focus on Halhed’s early thought, since this was the most intense period of engagement with Indian religious concepts. Although Rocher provides an excellent biographical detail of this period, she offers little in the way of contextual links to other authors or wider intellectual contexts. As Marshall puts it in his review of the study, she is an ‘austere biographer’ for whom the context is subordinate to the individual.\textsuperscript{88} For the purposes of this thesis, however, it is important that Halhed is understood as part of a more integrated conversation about the nature and signification of Indian religious beliefs, prior to the advent of Jones’s Asiatick society.

Halhed’s letters to school friend and co-writer in several literary enterprises, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, offer an important insight into his early intellectual formation while at Oxford. The letters are full of pretensions about Halhed’s risqué attitude and irreligious behaviour. Boasting how his ‘fame is up in college’, Halhed regaled how he entertained his fellow students on a Sunday evening with songs parodied from a famous comic opera, that he described as a happy unity of ‘bawdy and blasphemy’, adding that ‘I shall be set up for an atheist in a little time.’\textsuperscript{89} Throughout their correspondence Halhed’s religious outlook appears to be a deliberate construction. In one letter he claimed that his ‘college, in consideration no doubt of my frequent attendance at hall and chapel (of both which places my neglect has long since been a proverb) have made me a present of £20. per annum.’\textsuperscript{90} Later in his life this irreligious reputation seemed to have stuck, since

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{89} Halhed, to R.B Sheridan, (August, 1770), Appendix A in Rocher, \textit{Orientalism, Poetry and the Millennium}, pp.262-263.
  \item \textsuperscript{90} Ibid, (8\textsuperscript{th} November 1770), p.265.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
remarking on the news that Halhed had turned to supporting self-proclaimed prophet Richard Brothers an East India Company colleague remarked ‘what shall I say of Halhed, who has lived his whole life as if he thought there was no God?’.\footnote{John Shore, 1st Baron Teignmouth to Charles Grant, 20th October 1795, Bengal, in \textit{Memoir of the Life and Correspondence of John, Lord Teignmouth}, vol.1, ed. Charles John Shore, (London, 1843) p, 342.}

Whilst at Oxford this affectation of an irreligious attitude also extended to mischievous references to notable heterodox thinker, David Hume. In one letter, in which Halhed was attempting to impress upon his more relaxed friend the urgency of their achieving literary fame and financial success, he brought up the topic of suicide. To his suggestion that if success eluded them for too long he might take a ‘pretty leap from the top of the Abbey’ in Bath, Halhed added that ‘I have lately taken to wearing garters; which I never did, until I had guessed on what Hume’s essays on suicide were about.’\footnote{Ibid.}

Hume’s \textit{Essay on Suicide} was a rare publication in 1770, when Halhed wrote this letter. Originally appearing as the fourth item in Hume’s \textit{Five Dissertations} (1757), Hume and his publisher soon changed their minds and removed it from the publication to quell the offence it had already caused, as well as the threat of prosecution.\footnote{David Hume, \textit{Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion}, ed. Richard Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), p.viii.} It did not appear again until \textit{Two Essays} (1777), published after Hume’s death. Not all copies were destroyed, as is suggested by other contemporary literary allusions, most notably from the cleric William Warburton.\footnote{David Hume, \textit{Essays and Treatises on Philosophical Subjects}, Lorne Falkenstein and Neil McArthur (eds.), (Toronto: Broadview Editions, 2013), p.30.} There was also a French version published in 1770, and evidence of a Dutch edition being circulated.\footnote{Hume, \textit{David Hume, Essays Moral, Political and Literary}, Eugene F. Millar, ed., (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), note 44, p.55.} It is possible that Halhed had read the essays, yet it is more likely, as this quotation seems to suggest, that he ‘guessed’ its contents on the basis of the various outraged responses it inspired. Yet this was no mean feat and would certainly have required some active interest on the part of the young
Halhed. To invoke it in such a casual manner as part of this hyperbolic plea suggests that Halhed saw himself as ‘in-the-know’ when it came to religious scepticism.

Halhed’s ambitions of literary fame continued in Bengal. After being sent to India by his father, who had become increasingly frustrated at his son’s lack of direction, Halhed quickly became involved in the intellectual and literary community. Following the opening of the Calcutta theatre in 1773 Halhed wrote several prologues, including one for a play by the Freemasons which, according to Rocher, was peppered with corresponding allegories and symbolism. While there is no evidence that Halhed himself was a freemason, since he would have been too junior to appear on the lists that have survived, we do know that Charles Stafford Pleydell, with whom he boarded, was at the time the deputy Grand Master for Bengal. While Halhed may not have become a member the secret society, there is no doubt that he felt comfortable with its deistic rhetoric enough to compose corresponding poetry. It would be unwise to infer too much from this, as by this point the Freemasons were a broadly accepted society. Yet, as Margaret Jacob has carefully traced, its associations with deism and freethinking were well established.

That Halhed’s preface to the Code is marked by an inherently sceptical tone is testified to in its reception. Much as was the case for the other authors considered in this thesis, more than the translation itself, it was the interpretation of its author that proved the source of public interest and discussion. The Critical Review, for example, noted the heretical potential of his remarks on the antiquity of Hindoo doctrines. It goes so far as to say that the resulting dissertation was comparable to the scepticism of Hume and

---

96 February 1774. Taken from Rocher, Orientalism, Poetry and the Millennium, p. 42, who saw them in an untraceable private collection that she calls the “Pilcher Papers”, pp.162-163.


Voltaire. As mentioned earlier, George Costard, vicar of Twickenham and family friend, felt it necessary to publish a letter refuting Halhed’s claims. His stated aim was ‘to obviate the conclusions that might be drawn by the unwary or ill-designing’ as a consequence of reading Halhed’s preface. Later on Costard’s letter itself was reviewed, thus expanding the public debate of the Code, and its more controversial contents. One reviewer even declared that Costard deserved ‘the thanks of every friend to revelation’. Halhed’s work on the Code was, therefore, read and received as a religiously heterodox text.

After finishing the Code Halhed immediately set to work on translating the Upanishads from a Persian manuscript. He never published the work, but the manuscript translation, bearing the date of May 1787, was acquired by the British Museum in 1796. Halhed’s preface was left unfinished, containing blank spaces and various marginal and interlinear corrections. From the text, though, it is possible to decipher that Halhed understood the Upanishads to be commentaries on the four Vedas. In it Halhed remained faithful to his belief in Hindu antiquity, but his approach to allegorical interpretations of Hindu concepts had changed. The remarks added to the draft reveal what Rocher calls ‘a higher degree of symbolical interpretation’. In a mirroring of Wilkins’s account of the Gěětā, Halhed declares that the ‘principal aim’ of the Upanishads (or Opnekhet) was ‘to be to establish not only the unity, but the universality of the godhead’. In the period shortly after the publication of the Code, Halhed’s attention

100 On his connection to Halhed see Trautmann, Aryans and British India, p.73.
101 Costard, A letter to Nathaniel Brassey Halhead, p.47.
102 See, for example, Gentleman’s Magazine, 48, (London, March 1778), pp.113-116.
104 The Preface is now published, with an introduction in Rocher, “Nathaniel Brassey Halhed on the Upanishads”, p. 178”, pp.283-289.
turned towards a similar consideration of the significance of the antiquity of Gentoo scripture as Holwell.

In fact, Halhed’s links to Holwell were personal as well as intellectual, and continued throughout his career. Upon arriving in Calcutta, for example, Halhed stayed in the home of Holwell’s daughter, Elizabeth Pleydell, with whom he seemed to strike up a rather intense friendship. When employed in the Company’s home administration, Halhed continued to take out oriental scholarship from the Company library, including Holwell’s Interesting Historical Events. It is perhaps significant that this continued interest bled into the time when, very much like Holwell, Halhed’s religious sentiments took a markedly more dramatic turn. His interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ became more bizarre as he sought it in its most pristine form. Then, in 1795 he became a convert to the millennialism of Richard Brothers. Rocher has suggested that the early seeds of this change are detectable in Halhed’s changing attitudes to the ‘religion of the Gentoo’. While further speculation on this is without the scope of this study, Halhed’s continued interest in the relationship of Indian antiquity with Christian teaching reminds us of their importance to Halhed’s thought. The opinions expressed in the Code were rooted in an intellectual framework that saw this relationship as important, and not just an idea that could prop up a certain style of administration in India.

* 

Comparatively little is known about the early life of Charles Wilkins. Born in 1749, Wilkins arrived in Calcutta in July 1770 to take up the position of writer (a junior clerk)

109 BL, IOR: Mss Eur F303/2. Entry dated May 1st, 1818.
110 Rocher, Orientalism, Poetry and the Millennium, p.137.
in the East India Company. Unlike most Company writers, Wilkins came from a modest family background of clothiers in Somerset and apparently acquired the appointment through the intervention of a great-uncle, who was a London banker. After distinguishing himself as a talented student of Indian languages, Hastings encouraged him to learn Sanskrit, sending him to Benares for instruction. As mentioned in the introduction, Wilkins is most often mentioned in historical scholarship in relation to William Jones. But for those who received his work and the accompanying claim that the Brahmins were Unitarians, this was the first translation of a Sanskrit text, and was thus seen in terms of what came before not afterwards.

In the various published reviews of the translation, as in the case of Halhed, it was the controversial religious content which caught the interests of reviewers, far more than the specifics contained within the text itself. Being the first translation of its kind, Wilkins’s preface set the theological context in which the Bhagavad Gita was placed and understood. Following Wilkins’s identification of the Brahmins with the Unitarians, others attached their philosophies to other heterodox sects. In its review of Wilkins’s Gēētā in 1785, for example, The Gentlemen’s Magazine compared the Brahmins to a sect of dissenters who followed Jacob Boehme. Boehme’s mystical theology had been important in the seventeenth century, and was taken particularly seriously by the Cambridge Platonists. Their significance waned in the eighteenth century, except for something of a revival around the time of the publication of the Gēētā, particularly among the circles associated with German and English Romanticism. Although this association with Boehme’s theology veered away from Wilkins’s view of the Brahmins as

---

believers in rational and natural religion, it perpetuated the association of the Gēētā with
some kind of reform or dissent from what its composer saw as corrupt practices.

The religious speculation contained in Wilkins’s preface was also received with
some derision. On Wilkins’s assessment that the Gēētā was designed to set up ‘the unity
of the godhead’ the reviewer remarks that “This is perhaps “considering the matter too
deeply””. This aspect of Wilkins’s study was, the reviewer argued, akin to ‘the fancy of
Warburton relating to the secret which was revealed in the ancient mysteries, the
important secret, that there was but one God’. This was a reference to William
Warburton’s Divine Legation of Moses (1738-41), the second book of which had sought to
prove that the ‘ancient mysteries’ of the Greeks and the Egyptians inculcated belief in
one God, as opposed to polytheism. The context of this was a complex and
paradoxical attempt to refute the accusations of Freethinkers that Moses was an
impostor by using the same evidence of ancient ‘mysteries’ to argue that there was no
hidden wisdom in these earlier texts. Judging by this reviewer’s comparison between
Wilkins’s excess and Warburton’s ‘fancy’ they were not convinced by the validity of
either, seeing instead the text of the Gēētā as a ‘strange mixture between sense and
nonsense’. Other reviews were less diplomatic, taking a very firm line against the
speculations contained in the Preface. One reviewer in the Gentleman’s Magazine
designated Wilkins’s interpretation only appropriate to ‘those who cannot comprehend
the excellence of the Christian dispensation’ and look, like Wilkins, for ‘confused traces
of the original Revelation made to Adam and his posterity’. This fruitless task, it argued,
should convince them of the purity of Christian doctrine over the ‘Hindoo

mysticisms”. While scholars may now see Wilkins’s translation as an important moment in the development of European Indology, it must be noted that contemporaries saw it and its author as intervening in a discourse about Christianity’s place in an increasingly wider pool of sophisticated religious systems.

Conclusion

The Orientalist policies of Warren Hastings, and more specifically his patronage, were the conditions that resulted in the existence of Halhed and Wilkins’s work, and so were integral to them in that sense. Hastings was a colonialist and his policies significantly forwarded the British imperial project. There is evidence too, that he supported those aspects of Indological research that extended beyond the strict confines of political advantage, sometimes also displaying a similarly deist belief in the universal compatibility of different religious traditions when defined by their essential doctrines. These two elements of their patron are not easily untangled in the conditions surrounding the publication of the Code and the Gēētā but that they were so enmeshed itself suggests that it was a unique and particular historical moment that provided the condition for the expression of ideas that had elsewhere been extraneous to official policy.

Beyond this, the recognition that what was deist in the thought of these writers was diverse, ranging from Wilkins’s reading of Unitarian Brahmns to Halhed’s sceptical stance on the origins of religious belief, forces us to further reconsider this relationship. The obfuscation of their thought under the broad label of deism, often presented as ideologically malleable to colonial government, does not do the complexity of the ideas they express justice, nor does it reflect the ways in which their work was received by

---

contemporaries. Though the business of legitimising the policies of Hastings was often the work to which their ideas were put, these authors also understood ‘Hinduism’ as part of a larger debate in the intellectual culture of eighteenth century Christianity and comparative religion. Put simply, these texts were interpreted according to a much more religiously orientated outlook than has been supposed. In this context deist does not mean a pragmatic detachment from religion in the interests of policy, but an intellectual investment in the discourses surrounding its historical development and its philosophical content.

Finally, often considered in isolation as representing the birth of Orientalism, the reassessment of the Halhed and Wilkins in their broader intellectual context demonstrates how their interests in Indian religion and the relationship of these insights to the Company were part of an already established discourse. Hastings did not delineate the absolute parameters of their work. In fact, the long history in which the terms and ideas towards which their ‘philosophic’ interpretations of Hindoo religion were orientated was the same Enlightenment culture of religious debate that shaped the earlier work of Holwell and Dow.
**Chapter Five: Enlightenment and Empire**

“He spoke to me in the Persian language; of which, as well as the Arabic, and the different dialects of Hindostan, he was perfect master… He had set out many months before, from Calcutta, with an intention of travelling through the northern parts of Hindostan, in order to trace the antiquities of the most ancient nations”.

The above quotation, which could easily be adapted to describe any one of the authors in this study, who were all competent in a number of eastern languages, is in fact taken from Elizabeth Hamilton’s 1796 novel *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*. In it the eponymous Rajah details his first encounter with ‘Captain Percy’, a character based on Hamilton’s deceased brother Charles (1753-1792), author of several translations of Persian manuscripts. This fictional depiction of the British Orientalist, keen to discover the ancient origins of Indian religion and philosophy, went into five editions between 1796 and 1811 and was later printed in America (Boston, 1819). In it, Hamilton portrays a vision of Indian history that reflects the narrative propagated by all the authors in this study, whereby the tolerant and fundamentally monotheistic culture of ancient India had been gradually eroded by corruption. In order to do this with authority and perceived authenticity, Hamilton drew extensively on Halhed’s *Code of Gentoo Laws* and Wilkins’s *Bhagavad-Geeta*. Hamilton thus assembled and popularised the thought of these Orientalists for a wider readership.

Hamilton’s novel was many things: it has been described variously as an ‘anti-Jacobin’ text, a satire and a political novel, but it represents just one of the uses to which

---

British Orientalist scholarship was put. Hamilton’s projection of Indian Hindoo religion as a virtuous doctrine, suppressed by successive invasions of Islamic oppressors, was written in support of Warren Hastings, who at the point of publication was reeling both financially and in terms of reputation from his impeachment trial. Yet, similar interpretations of India as possessing an ancient and essentially monotheistic religion were also deployed in support of far more subversive agendas. Hamilton’s depiction of Captain Percy suggests that by the end of the century the figure of the Company Orientalist had become a familiar concept. Whether or not that figure was sympathetic, however, depended very much on the political alignment of the interpreter. Indeed, in the immediate sense the discourse on Indian religion was a discourse on colonial legitimacy. Yet, for others the work of these writers was to be read against a far reaching ideological backdrop, in which European discoveries of Eastern religions were deeply intertwined with Christian theological controversy and the polemics of free-thinking. Related to this, and to some extent an intellectual consequence of it, is the role of these encounters in the turn towards what has been described by some as an anti-colonialist discourse appearing at the end of the eighteenth century.

This chapter is, therefore, an exploration of the various intellectual contexts in which the ‘philosophic’ interpretations of Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins were received, understood and utilised, with a specific focus on writers and ideas associated with the Enlightenment. This includes their participation and appearance as sources in matters of religious controversy, Enlightenment philosophy and contemporary politics. This discussion will achieve two things outlined in the Introduction to this thesis: the realignment of our understanding of the Enlightenment within an intellectual culture that

---

4 Freeman, British Women Writers and the Asiatic Society of Bengal , p.45.
5 Sankar Muthu, Enlightenment Against Empire.
was deeply concerned with religion, and, the reassertion of the importance of these earlier ‘deist’ writers, whose ‘philosophic’ interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ existed in the period before the establishment of Jones’s Asiatick Society and the rise of so-called ‘New’ or ‘British Orientalism’.6

Holwell, Dow & the European world of Letters

Holwell and Dow were both received by a readership that extended across Europe, and consciously regarded itself as part of a cosmopolitan community of Letters. The works of Holwell and Dow were translated very quickly into other European languages after their publication in English. Holwell’s was translated into French in 1768, and was followed by a French translation of Dow’s work in 1769.7 Around a similar time, Holwell’s work was translated into German (1767 and 1778), as was Dow’s (1772).8 Both Holwell’s discussion of Metempsychosis and Dow’s “Dissertation on the Philosophy of the Hindoos” also featured in Johann Rudolph e Sinner’s Essai sur les DOGMES de la METEMPSYCHOSE & du PURGATOIRE enseignés par les Bramins de l’Indostan (1771).

Sinner was the chief librarian at Berne, and this Essai was the first critically annotated catalogue of important eighteenth-century works on the subject of reincarnation that were published.9 Like Holwell and Dow before him, this study convinced Sinner that the theology of the ancient “Brachmannes” predated Egyptian and Greek ideas about

---

8 Holwell’s work was translated into German by E. Thiel and J.T. Koehler, as Sammlung neuer Reisebeschreibungen aus fremden Sprachen (Gottingen and Gotha, 1767-9) & Dow’s was translated anonymously under the title, Die Geschichte von Hindostan aus dem Persischen von Alexander Dow, 3.vols (Leipzig, J.F Junius, 1772-1774).
9 Essai sur les DOGMES de la METEMPSYCHOSE & du PURGATOIRE enseignés par les Bramins de l’Indostan (Berne, 1771). The works it covers ranged from 1699-1769.
transmigration. He also used their work to establish some similar connections between Indian philosophy and Christian doctrines. Sinner’s work was translated into German in 1773, ensuring that the work of Holwell and Dow was widely disseminated across Europe.

Holwell’s most notable readers included Moses Mendelssohn, Voltaire, Diderot and Joseph Priestley. Dow was similarly read by Voltaire and the Abbé de Raynal, and corresponded with David Hume. In fact, despite there being substantial differences in their work, Holwell and Dow were regularly cited together as complementary sources on the obscure world of Indian religious beliefs. A good example can be found in Julius Mickle’s 1776 translation of the Portuguese epic poem, the *Lusiad*. The original poem, written by Luis de Camões in 1572, presented the story of Vasco de Gama’s voyage to India and incorporated information from various travel narratives. Mickle’s translation tapped into a resurgent interest in both the work and its geographical subject. Attempting to provide readers with some explanation of the ‘the religion and philosophy of the Brahmins’, Mickle discussed and cited extensively the work of both Holwell and Dow. Acknowledging their disagreements, Mickle nevertheless consistently referred to them as ‘Messrs. Holwell and Dow’ in conjunction.

Crucially, Mickle regarded them as united by their methodology. In the first edition of the *Lusiad* he introduces their work as ‘Accounts much more to the honour of the Indian philosophy’ on account that they were produced by ‘gentlemen, who, by conversing with some eminent Brahmins, have enjoyed the best opportunities of information’. Mickle thus endorses the impression which both authors took pains to

---

11 Kurth-Voigt, *Continued Existence*, p.115
13 See for example *The Lusiad: or Discovery of India* (1776), p.298.
14 *The Lusiad: or Discovery of India*, (1776), p.294.
convey when presenting themselves as unique authorities. Holwell, for example, denounced all previous authors as ‘defective’ on the basis that their evidence was only fragmentary and literal.\footnote{J.Z. Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events Relative to the Provinces of Bengal*, vol.i, (London, 1766), p.5-6.} Dow likewise dismissed ‘modern authors’ for presenting an ‘unfair account’ of the religion, having not investigated beyond its ‘external ceremonies’.\footnote{Alexander Dow, *A History of Hindostan* (London, 1768), p.xxii.} Both Holwell and Dow were, then, united by their claims to be offering knowledge directly from scriptural sources. Ironically, though, owing to Dow’s confession that ‘he had neither the time nor leisure to acquire the Shanscrita language’ Mickle determined that Holwell’s forged *Shastah* was ‘the most authentic’ and that although Dow’s ‘superior knowledge’ was unusual, it was also too ‘partial’ since it was dependent on the ‘truth of his pundit’.\footnote{Luís Vaz de Camões, *The Lusiad: or Discovery of India. An Epic Poem. Translated from the Portuguese of Luís De Camoëns.* Trans. William Julius Mickle (London, 1778), p.327, p.310} That Mickle buys into this self-construction of authority is significant. While we can assert that, since much of their contents were invented, Holwell and Dow made a dubious contribution to eighteenth-century knowledge about India, the manner in which they presented their research explains how their ideas achieved a heightened degree of public attention.

Holwell and Dow’s claims to authenticity and authority were not just for their own sake, but also deployed in service of a particular reading of *Gentoo or Hindoo* religion. By accepting this paradigm of authority despite its shaky foundations, Mickle also gives credit to the more fundamental distinction which it is used to convey: between high philosophical and low allegorical religious tradition and thought. Both Holwell and Dow distinguished their work from previous authors on these terms, claiming that what had made earlier accounts so erroneous was precisely their failure to distinguish between what was ‘philosophical’ and what was purely ‘allegorical’. Holwell thus attacked the Dutch traveller Baldaeus (1632-1671) for not attending to allegory and consequently producing a translation of the *Viedam* (Veda) that was too literal and could therefore be
described only as a ‘monster’. Likewise, Dow accounted for the sheer number of the ‘many different accounts of the cosmogony of the Hindoos [that] have been promulgated in Europe’ on similar grounds. According to Dow, while there is only one ‘philosophical’ account of creation in Hindoo doctrine, there are several ‘allegorical’ tales that the Brahmins made use of. The exposure of travellers to these different systems had thus resulted in a confusing picture, all of which ignored the philosophical core of the ancient theology. Mickle gives credit to this directly, agreeing that ‘former travellers gave us a true picture of the popular religion of India, but they did not attend to the gloss and refinement of the recluses remnant of the Brahmins’. He then goes on to quote Holwell directly, validating his comparison between ‘the common run of the Brahmins’, and those that ‘seclude themselves…in philosophic and religious retirement’, and represent ‘the purest models of genuine piety that now exist’.

Yet, while he tacitly accepted their assertion that these doctrines were ‘more remote than that of any known writings’, Mickle drew the line at the idea of a universal religion that both Holwell and Dow regarded as the logical conclusion of their research. To Dow’s suggestion that many of the deities of the Hindoos are really allegorical representations of God’s divine attributes, Mickle concedes, suggesting that this ‘apology for the idolatry of the Brahmins is applicable to that of every nation’. But for Mickle, Dow’s further assertion that the logical conclusion of this is ‘that whatever the external ceremonies of religion may be, the self-same infinite being is the object of universal adoration’ was a step too far. This ‘ingenious refinement’ of Dow’s was, according to Mickle, the position of a ‘metaphysician’ rather than the more grounded considerations of a ‘moral philosopher’. This marks a pattern of reception whereby some were willing

---

to accept the authenticity and antiquity of the scriptures presented to them, but not the conclusion of their translators that they were therefore evidence of some original and pure religious truth that could facilitate the dissolution of some of the more restrictive forms of Christian orthodoxy. In its mildest form, criticism centred on the accusation that Holwell had spent too much time in India, becoming biased in its favour. One reviewer compared Holwell’s ‘admiration’ of the Gentoo to both Montesquieu’s admiration of the English and a certain Scottish MP, ‘who, after a long residence in Holland as a merchant’ began every speech by referring to what the ‘Dutch, a wise people’ had to say on the matter. 23 By the time Holwell’s more controversial observations appeared in 1771, this incredulity turned to offence, as one reviewer dismissed Holwell’s ‘Charta Bhade Shastah, of Bruma, Bramma, Burma Brumma, Birma, Bramah, or Lord knows who’, adding that in championing the Shastah Holwell had become a victim of ‘the speculative errors of deluded superstition’. Yet, in claiming that the Gentoo religion was more ‘a compound of Manicheism, vitiated Christianity, pagan idolatry, superstitious rites, and unintelligible jargon’, the reviewer was taking offence to Holwell’s ‘philosophic’ interpretation, not his authenticity. 24

The most renowned detractor and critic of Holwell and Dow was the Enlightenment polymath and founder of Unitarianism, Joseph Priestley. Priestley used Holwell to support his central thesis in A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with those of the Hindoos (1799) that Moses ought to be rescued as the author of the most original and divine theology. Priestley was not, however, convinced by the philosophic picture that Holwell and Dow had painted of ‘Hinduism’, exclaiming that, ‘If the representations of

---

Mr. Holwell may be depended upon, the most raised ideas of the Hindoos concerning the Supreme Being fall far short of those that were entertained by the Hebrews”. Beyond their interpretation of Hindoo thought, Priestley’s criticism of their work was limited to the discrepancies between them, with him noting in particular that ‘the account of the fallen angels is peculiar to Mr. Holwell’. In all other matters he seemed to regard them as authoritative sources. Priestley consistently cited both Holwell and Dow throughout when considering information on the various aspects of Hindoo religious theology and practice. In perhaps what is a difficult distinction to make with regard to modern scholarship, Priestley was not questioning the authority of these authors, but rather their veracity. In the case of Holwell’s assertion that the ancient Hindoos had no animal sacrifices, for example, Priestley is in fact outraged at this ‘mistake’ precisely because Holwell otherwise ‘had the means of the best information’. This is a pattern repeated by other critics of their work, whose position could be best described as Christian apologist. Thomas Maurice, for example, joined Priestley in widely using these authors as sources in his Indian Antiquities (1793-1800), while at the same time roundly denouncing the heterodox conclusions they brought with the aid of William Jones’s alternative chronology, which was much more favourable to a biblical interpretation of history.

For others, though, the universalising conclusions wrought by Holwell and Dow’s interpretation of Brahminical ‘Hinduism’ were a welcome addition to their own thought. Enthusiasm for analysing European philosophical and cultural traditions through the lens of alternative and foreign epistemologies abounded in the world of Enlightenment Letters. It even constituted a literary genre, where, for example,

Hamilton’s *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* can be placed alongside such works as Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* (1721), in which Europe is analysed through fictional “foreign eyes”.29 It is interesting, then, that German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) chose to echo the effect of this genre by describing Holwell as having attained the ability ‘to see with the eyes of a native Brahmin’.30 Mendelssohn used Holwell’s work in his controversial work, *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*, which argued that it was possible to conceive of the core of Judaism as a religion founded upon reason alone.31 He cited Holwell’s allegorical interpretation of the *Gentoo* creation story, and his explanation of the deities as symbolic attributes of ‘the Eternal’ and singular Deity, to argue that all religions had begun with such symbolism, the true meaning of which had been lost in those ages in which ‘real idolatry became the dominant religion in every part of the globe’.32 This statement was at the core of Mendelssohn’s argument which separated Judaism from radical Spinozaism on the one hand, and orthodox revealed religion on the other. Just as Holwell’s ‘philosophic’ interpretation of the *Gentoo* religion had concluded, Mendelssohn’s deistical rendition of Judaism put forward the argument that it was perfectly compatible with reasonable, enlightened and tolerant society. This work proved to be a pivotal text in the German Enlightenment.33

Voltaire, also regularly deployed the work of Holwell and Dow in support of his ideas. Although Voltaire’s understanding developed as he accumulated more reading on India, he tended to rely heavily on three sources in particular: the forged *Ezour-Védam,*

32 Mendelssohn, *Writing on Judaism, Christianity and the Bible*, pp.102-103.
33 Arkush claims that Mendelssohn was a deist who moderated his presentation of his own belief in order to “construct a version of Judaism suitable for a time when Jews would take their places as citizens alongside their Gentile neighbours in a fully liberal polity.” Arkush, *Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, pp.291–292.
Holwell’s *Interesting Historical Events* (second edition, 1767) and, Dow’s *History of Hindostan* (1768). Like many others, Voltaire’s first contact with Indian religious thought came through contact with Jesuit sources. Yet these interpretations, which generally characterised Hinduism as polytheistic, did not suit his purposes and he followed Holwell and Dow by using them as an example of erroneous and biased misinformation.\(^34\) The notoriously anti-clerical Voltaire also mirrored Holwell and Dow in suggesting that the missionary Jesuits were themselves more shocking to the Brahmins they encountered, on account of their hypocrisy. Turning the accusation of irreligion on its head, he suggested that after witnessing ‘our monks’ indulge in eating meat and sexual misconduct, ‘if their customs were regarded by us as being ridiculous and idolatrous, ours seemed to them to be crimes.’\(^35\) Instead, Voltaire came to rely on the *Ézour-Védam*, brought to him by the Comte de Maudave in 1760. This forged ‘Veda’, most likely written by a Jesuit missionary, was presented by Voltaire as a work of true antiquity.\(^36\) He was its main champion and he described its unknown author as a ‘vrai sage’ (a true wise man).\(^37\) Yet Voltaire also showed signs of being aware that its origins were dubious. Some have suggested that this was a deliberate coup: that Voltaire knowingly took it from its original intentions and appropriated to the cause of anti-clerical deism, in a calculated and bitingly ironical move.\(^38\) Voltaire himself provides a good summary of this reasoning when he suggests that ‘one praises the bracmanes in order to correct the [Christian] monks: and if Saint Ambrose [an important Fourth century theologian] had

\(^{34}\) He uses them in both the revisions of *Essai sur les meurs* (1769) and elsewhere in the Fragments sur quelques revolutions dans l’Inde (1773). For more detail see, Kate Marsh, *India in the French Imagination: Peripheral Voices, 1754-1815* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), p.181.

\(^{35}\) As quoted by Kate Marsh, *India in the French Imagination*, p.119.


lived in India, he probably would have praised the monks to put shame on the bracmanes.  

Later, and certainly because of the increasingly dubious status of the *Ezour-Védam*, Holwell and Dow became more central sources to Voltaire’s work. While their contents were different, both from each other and from this ‘French Veda’, Voltaire was able to unify them in terms of several key positions that supported his broader polemical agenda, such as their insistence on its original purity and its great antiquity. Holwell and Dow thus informed his general philosophical works as well as those specifically devoted to India. The extent to which these sources were appropriated to suit Voltaire’s purpose of establishing evidence of a pure and uncorrupted religion outside of the strictures of episcopal Christianity is made clear in his comment that the ancient ‘Brachmanes’, having neither a formalised ecclesiastical structure or a monarchy, could hardly fail to establish the religion according to reason (‘ne pouvaient guère établir la religion que sur la raison universelle’). Voltaire’s analysis thus directly echoed that which united Holwell and Dow, positing a similar theory in which the pure ancient monotheism of the ancient Brahmins (*Brachmanes*) had been corrupted by their modern successors (the Bramins) who had skilfully created a lucrative culture of superstition. Voltaire’s principal work dedicated to India was *Fragments sur quelques révolutions dans l’Inde* (1773). In it he used the work of Holwell and Dow in conjunction to deny the monopoly of the Abrahamic religions on monotheism, arguing that ancient Hinduism, unlike its modern successor, was not polytheistic:

‘That the Indians have always worshipped one God, in the same way as the Chinese, is an incontestable truth. One has only to read the first article of the

---

ancient Shastah, translated by Mr Holwell. The faithfulness of this translation is recognised by Mr Dow, and this recognition is all the more convincing because these two differ over several other articles.\footnote{As translated by Kate Marsh, \textit{India in the French Imagination}, p.115.}

Voltaire also emphasised the originality of Hindu customs and, importantly, joined Holwell and Dow in asserting the influence that they had on Western traditions. He certainly agreed with Holwell that the doctrine of metempsychosis had been transmitted to ancient Greece by the Brahmins via Pythagoras.\footnote{Voltaire, \textit{Fragments sur quelques révolutions dans l’Inde, sur la mort du comte de Lally, et sur plusieurs autres sujets} (1773), in \textit{Œuvres complètes de Voltaire}, 20 vols (Paris: J. Bryainé [1858]), vol. 6, pp. 167–262, p.226.} Their work thus served perfectly Voltaire’s aim to challenge the idea of a universal history based Judeo-Christian chronology and contest errors in biblical teaching.\footnote{Kate Marsh, \textit{India and the French Imagination}, pp.116-117.}

Following on from the French Enlightenment, the ‘philosophic’ interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ presented by Holwell and Dow had a significant impact on the intellectual culture of Germany, extending into the nineteenth century. A good example of this can be found in the work of German philosopher, theologian, and prominent figure of both the German Enlightenment and Romanticism, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Herder came to an interest in India initially through the work of Holwell and Dow, an interest which led him to translate fragments from Wilkins’s Gita.\footnote{Bradley L. Herling, \textit{German Gita, The Hermeneutics and Discipline in the Early German Reception of Indian Thought}, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Studies in Philosophy, Routledge, 2006), p.62.} This was part of his wide-ranging attempt to capture world-history in the development of a historicist philosophy of human nature.\footnote{Frederick C. Beiser, \textit{The German Historicist Tradition} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.105.} Herder first encountered the works of Holwell and Dow indirectly, through Voltaire, but he did eventually acquire copies and read them himself.\footnote{Robert T. Clark Jr, \textit{Herder, His Life and Thought} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), p.163.}

Most importantly it was those elements of their work that could be considered either deist or religiously heterodox in another sense that made them most attractive to these thinkers. Particularly attractive to Herder was Dow’s account of the presence of vitalism
and monism in Indian philosophical thought. This would become the foundation of Herder’s separation from Voltaire’s interpretation of a pristine monotheistic Hinduism, towards and understanding of Hindu thought as essentially a pantheistic monism.\(^{49}\) Herder judged Dow’s work to be much more sophisticated investigation into Hinduism than Holwell’s, focusing on Dow’s depiction of the Hindu philosophy of a divine element, or the ‘Great Soul’ that was diffuse within all living things.\(^{50}\) Dow’s emphasis on the belief that ‘God is the animating soul of all living things’ and that ‘God is the soul of nature’ spoke to Herder’s extensive engagement with the philosophy of Spinoza, out of which, many have argued, came the fundamental metaphysical basis for German Idealism.\(^{51}\)

Through Herder we can see the work of Holwell and Dow crop up in several places across the corpus of work associated with early nineteenth-century German Idealism. John Friedrich Majer, for example, who was a follower of Herder and would become Germany’s foremost expert in Indic knowledge, quoted Holwell as capturing the sublimity of the Hindu conception of God.\(^{52}\) Majer was an important source for most German writing on India. In fact, Holwell was being defended in German as an authoritative source as late as 1832, by notable German philosopher anthropologist and disciple of Friedrich Schelling, Carl Joseph Windischmann (1775-1839).\(^{53}\) Similarly, Hegel referred to Dow as ‘one who has translated the history of India through Persian’ and cites Dow’s version of the Hindoo creation narrative, taken from the “Dissertation on the Philosophy of the Hindoos”.\(^{54}\) In fact, the passage appears at the end of a section as a

\(^{50}\) Herling, *German Gita*.
\(^{53}\) Carl Josef Hieronymus Windischmann, *Die Philosophie im Fortgang der Weltgeschichte* (Bonn, 1832), pp.616-617.
concluding point, with Hegel declaring that in it ‘all the moments which we have hitherto considered in their divided state and dialectic are expressed unitedly’. What this quotation expressed so clearly, according to Hegel, was that ‘The fundamental determination of the theoretical consciousness is therefore the determination of unity… Brahma is at one time the Universal, the All, and at another a particularity as contrasted with particularity in general.’ Like Herder, Hegel took Dow’s notion that the Hindoos believed God to be the ‘great soul’ or the ‘great soul of the universe’ as indication that natural religion was a form of monist pantheism. Yet again, it was Dow’s religiously orientated interpretation of the Hindoo religion that caught the attention of other thinkers.

For many of these authors Wilkins’s *Gita* and Anquetil-Duperron’s translation of the *Upanisads* (1801-1802) became the ultimate sources on Indian philosophy. It is significant to note, though, that the works of Holwell and Dow for a long time stood beside them and were taken, usually where convenient, as complimentary and equally as authoritative sources on the philosophy and theology of India well into the nineteenth century. Despite the separation of these texts through the hindsight of modern scholarly standards, to contemporaries and the curious intellectuals of the early nineteenth century the work of all four Company authors furnished a compatible view of a unified and highly philosophical religious tradition. Most significantly, though, it was their particularly ‘deist’ or religiously heterodox approaches to the interpretation of Indian religion that appealed to these other authors.

---

Holwell, Dow, the Company & its Critics

As well as influencing several strands of the intellectual culture of the Enlightenment, Holwell and Dow also had an impact on a specific discourse, which was more closely related to their position as Company servants. Both authors composed their work in a period when the Company’s fiscal crisis forced consideration of its legitimacy, as it increasingly supplanted the Mughal economy and administration. Without denying that their research into Indian religion did indeed inflect and sometimes inform their support for the colonial ambitions of the Company, this following section will explore those aspects of it that were also in tension with it. In both cases, this came in the form of a warning to the Company about how it should operate. Moreover, it was the deist ‘philosophic’ interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ which provided possible avenues for disagreement with some colonialist thinking. In the second part of this section, therefore, it will also consider how Holwell and Dow were used in relation to what some scholars have described as the ‘anti-imperialist’ discussion of the later Enlightenment.  

As discussed in chapter one, Holwell and Dow were writing at a time when the Company was consolidating its hold on Bengal. They both made explicit interventions into the discourse surrounding British hegemony in the territory. Holwell argued in Parliament that the Company must dispossess Bengali landlords, who he saw as taking a disproportionate share of the agricultural surplus, and auction their property to speculative capitalists in Britain, believing that the lands were currently undervalued and that such measures were the only way to establish their actual value. Although Dow opposed Holwell’s policy, demanding that rents were fixed, he did so not out of respect for native traditions, but with the explicit justification that it would ‘bind them’ [the native

population] with stronger ties to our interests’. Statements like this should leave us in no doubt that Holwell and Dow had no objections to colonialism. Moreover, historians addressing their disagreement over property rights in Bengal have argued that Holwell and Dow’s Orientalism directly shaped their positions, with both attempting to present their approach as consistent with local customs. This is certainly true to the extent that both made reference to the idea, which would eventually be taken up by Hastings, that colonial rule gained legitimacy on the basis that it at least appeared to preserve native traditions. Yet, these arguments were firmly grounded in a much more dominant discussion about the responsibility of the Company to prove profitable to its investors and to Britain. In this sense we should see their arguments as less a product of their research and more as simply being in step with contemporary approaches to the rights of trade and conquest.

Where their research into Indian religion, and more specifically ‘Hinduism’ did have a direct impact it was often in tension with the Company and its ambitions. As discussed in chapter one, Holwell was already well-known before the publication of Interesting Historical Events, having made an impression on the reading public in 1758 with the publication of A Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen, and Others, who were suffocated in the BLACK-HOLE. This was a first-hand, and highly dramatic, account of the fall and seizure of Fort William in June 1756 by the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daula. Despite its obvious embellishments, its sentimental style and

---

59 Dow, History of Hindostan, iii, cxx.
62 Full Title: A Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen, and Others, who were suffocated in the BLACK-HOLE in FORT-WILLIAM, at CALCUTTA in the Kingdom of BENGAL, in the Night succeeding the 20th Day of June, 1756 (1758).
sense of jeopardy meant it became a literary success. Consequently many have read the *Genuine Narrative* as a tract aimed at reaffirming empire and reinforcing colonial anxiety about the cruel excesses of Oriental power. In a slightly different take Chatterjee has suggested that Holwell intended the tract as a comment on the fragility of civilization, reversing the racial relations between the European prisoners and their captors in order to critique the negligence of his superiors. To a degree it fulfils both descriptions.

This first function is most obvious where Holwell has played on popular prejudices by casting the Nawab as a ‘tyrant’. In one particularly indicative scene, the otherwise reasonable Nawab becomes so fixated on the idea that there was hidden treasure in the Fort that he barely acknowledges his failure to uphold his promise of safe passage. As a result, many have taken Holwell’s message to be that the loss life was a direct consequence of Oriental despotism. Yet, as others have pointed out, Holwell’s criticism was as much directed at his superiors as anyone else. According to Chatterjee the dominant theme of Holwell’s narrative was not the vilification of Siraj or his guards, but instead a ‘call for the imperial nation to civilize itself before taking on the task of civilizing others’. To this interpretation the following paragraphs will add additional nuance, on account of a broader appreciation of Holwell’s thoughts on India throughout the following decades. It will suggest that a full appreciation of this critique requires an understanding of Holwell’s views of Gentoo religion. It is indeed the case that the narrative was aimed more at the Company than anything else, but in many ways

---

64 See for example, Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: Indian and the creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp.1-3.
65 Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (Princeton N.J: Princeton University Press, 2012), p.26. According to Teltcher one of Holwell’s goals was to describe the reversal of the natural order that, by implication, had to be restored. Kate Teltcher, *India Inscribed*, p.120.
66 Holwell, *A Genuine Narrative of the Deporable Deaths of the English Gentlemen and others who were suffocated in the Black Hole* (London, 1758), p.34.
Holwell’s moral corrective was more closely related to his Indian experience than Chatterjee’s reading had accounted for. Above all Holwell’s narrative consistently touches on the themes that would be more fully developed in his later work about Indian religion.

As was discussed in chapter two, according to Holwell the Gentoo doctrine of metempsychosis revealed that this life is not the last and the suffering one encounters is a just judgement of a previous lapse. It is on this basis that Holwell celebrates the philosophical detachment of the Gentoo in the face of death. Describing the controversial practice of ‘voluntary sacrifice’ (the self-immolation of widows on their husband’s funeral pyres), for example, Holwell concludes that the actions of these women result from ‘heroic as well as rational and pious principles’.70 This is not merely rhetoric. The unusual serenity of the widow in the throes of the act is as result of the knowledge that ‘this world, and corporeal form that incloses them, is defined by God, the one as their place of punishment, the other as their prison’.71 Thus when Holwell describes these women as ‘raised to a soothing degree of dignity befitting angelic beings’ he meant it in a sense so disarmingly literal that it has hitherto been overlooked.72 Moreover, according to Holwell, the doctrine of metempsychosis means that ‘a contempt of death, is not peculiar to the women of India, it is the characteristic of the nation; every Gentoo meets that moment of dissolution, with a steady, noble, and philosophic resignation, flowing from the established principles of their faith.’73 For Holwell this is an

---

important feature of Indian religious philosophy, and fundamental to his appreciation of its ‘original’ truth.

This understanding of Holwell’s construction of the *Gentoo* religion presents a different perspective on the *Genuine Narrative*, and in particular his role within it. Holwell cast himself as a model of *Gentoo* piety throughout, describing how he dealt with the torturous situation through philosophical detachment akin to what he would later describe as being a noble characteristic of the *Gentoos*. In the *Narrative*, Holwell claims to have regarded death as inevitable. He maintained that having ‘seen this common migration in too many shapes’ he approached the fact ‘with too much propriety to be alarmed at the prospect’. The use of the word ‘migration’ must be noted, further connecting the *Narrative* to his belief in the *transmigration* of souls. Another interesting feature is the physiological side of Holwell’s account, which also has strong ties with his construction of ancient *Gentoo* religious principles. In his account of the events that followed his imprisonment in the dungeon, Holwell detailed being held captive throughout a long journey to see the Nawab and is absolutely insistent that the ‘rice and water diet, designed as a grievance to us, was certainly our preservation: for could we…have indulged in flesh and wine, we had died beyond all doubt’. From a man who later insists on the rationality of *Gentoo* vegetarianism, according to the principle of metempsychosis and a medical theory in which meat consumption inflames negative passions, such a comment has a certain resonance. Seen in this light, Holwell’s critique of the Company in the *Narrative* is far more closely related to the same suppositions which form the basis of his ‘philosophic’ appreciation of various *Gentoo* religious tenets.

---

74 Holwell, *India Tracts*, p.259.
75 Holwell, *Genuine Narrative*, p.269.
Dow believed to himself to have discovered in the *Tārikh-i-Firishta* a ‘minute and authentic history of a great empire.’ It was with this model that the political dimensions of his work were primarily concerned. In this sense, Dow’s *A History of Hindostan* was not just a translation. According to J.S. Grewal’s study of British histories of Muslim rule in India, ‘a careful reading of [Dow’s] prefaces to the History will show his intention from the very beginning to write a general history of Indo-Muslim politics.’ Through this history, Dow diagnosed that since the reign of Muhammed Shah the political power of the later Mughal empire had been in steady decline, to the extent that Hindostan had become run by ‘petty tyrants’. Dow saw the British at the apex of a new period of empire in India and if the British did not supplant the Mughals then the reappearance of the Muslim Afghans, in the form of Ahmed Shah Abdali, meant that they certainly would. This is significant, since in his *Dissertation on Despotism in Hindostan* (1772) he refers to the Afghans as a particularly bad category of Muslim despot owing to the fact that they characteristically ‘place justice in force, and conceal treachery under the name of address’.

In contrast to the current state of tyranny, Dow observed that in the past ‘the mild and humane character’ of the earlier Mughal empire had ‘rendered Hindostan the most flourishing empire in the world during two complete centuries’. For Dow, the Golden Age of enlightened Mughal government had begun with Akbar who was, according to Dow, a deist and ‘totally divested of those prejudices for his own religion’ to the extent that he introduced a model of mild and religiously tolerant government.

---

78 Dow, *History of Hindostan*, (1772), p.c
82 *The History of Hindostan*, (1772), p.xxv.
was on the basis of this model that a British government could claim to be legitimate, should it return Hindostan to the ‘former prosperity and splendour’ it had experienced under the deistical government of Akbar. 83 Thus Dow’s hope in the ‘Dedication’ that his majesty’s British subjects read the history and in it ‘see a striking contrast of their own condition’ and ‘feel for human nature suffering under despotism’, 84 extends to his later suggestion, at the end of that same volume, that the ‘slavery and oppression, which the Indians suffer from their native princes, makes the justice and regularity of a British government appear to them in the most favourable light’. 85

Dow’s endorsement of a British government was not, however, without caveats. Making it clear to his readers that he, as a ‘silent spectator’, ‘guiltless of rapine and depredation’, and chastised ‘the transactions of the British nation in the East’. 86 In extorting the once opulent region and rendering it ‘desolate’ Dow argued that the British attitude to India had been ‘unworthy of our boasted humanity’. 87 Dow advocated British conquest in India, only under the condition that in proceeding they restore Bengal ‘to its former Prosperity and Splendor’. 88 In the second instance, though, Dow complicated his own position with an important warning and assessment of the other great power in India, which stood apart from the waning Mughal Empire: the nation of the Mahrattors. This was a tension that emerged as a direct result of his particular appreciation of the ‘Hindoo religion’. This Hindoo form of government imitated the morality that in the paragraph above he described as belonging to the ‘the followers of Brahma’. According to Dow, even ‘when their armies carry destruction and death into the territories of the Mahomedans, all is quiet, and happy, and regular at home’. Most crucial, though, is

83 Dow, “An enquiry into the state of Bengal; with a plan for restoring that province to is former Prosperity and Splendour”, History of Hindostan, vol.ii (1772) pp.xl-cliv.
87 Dow, History of Hindostan, (1772), p.xl, p.cxviii
Dow’s observation that in this land there is ‘no imposition or obstruction from the officers of government’. Read in the full context of the work in which this statement appeared we can recognise it as warning against British ambitions. The rationale for a British government was that the Hindoos of Bengal had grown accustomed to dominion. As Dow put it in ‘when people have long been subjected to arbitrary power, their return to liberty is arduous and almost impossible’. The Mahrattors were, however, the inverse of this. Although the Mahrattors, ‘have been represented as barbarians’ they were, warned Dow ‘a great and rising people, subject to a regular government, the principles of which are founded on virtue’.

The relationship that Holwell and Dow had to the question of Company expansion and Colonial enterprise was not confined to their own reflections on the subject. They were very much known as authors from the East India Company, and were often read accordingly. This came to be particularly significant in terms of their reception in France following on from Voltaire’s popularisation of their work. French and British rivalry in the territory had provoked the question of the legitimacy of both powers to seize Indian land, and consequently invited a period of what intellectual historians have defined as anti-colonialist intellectual discourse in France, in the 1770s. In some cases this was also linked to a generalised criticism of ancien régime politics. This was not, however, a questioning of colonies per se, which for many fell into the mutually beneficial category of ‘commerce’. Instead, this has been described as the combination of support for American independence, physiocratic opposition to overseas expansion and

---

idealisation of the ‘noble savage’. The first of these ignited a residual Anglophobia and assimilated it into the tension between the two nations in India.

The moral implications of rule by the East India Company thus became a focal point for French debates about imperialism and a foil for ‘French values’ (be they republican or otherwise). The *Journal encyclopédique* edited by Pierre Rousseau, to which Voltaire contributed several articles, provides an interesting insight into the development of these attitudes and discourses in relation to our authors through the course of the 1760s and 1770s. In 1768 an anonymous review of the French translation of Holwell’s *Interesting Historical Events* welcomes the publication as a piece of scholarly research and, like Voltaire, accepts Holwell’s explanation of the origin of the Brahmins. In contrast, reviews of Dow’s latterly-published work focused their critique on the question of British government in India, and on what basis it could be justified. This evolved from a physiocratic objection to European expansionism to a condemnation of the Company in the language of despotism and tyranny. An important example of this was Raynal’s *Histoire philosophique et politique de l’établissement et du commerce de Européens dans les deux Indes* (1770). This text was a compendium of philosophical ideals with a number of contributors, the most prominent of which was Diderot, who argued that in operating overseas the British had lost one of their usually essential natural characteristics, which was justice. The work of Holwell and Dow were integral to these critics, with Teltscher going so far as to suggest that Raynal’s *Histoire* ‘plagiarizes a great many authors, including Holwell and Dow’.

---

96 Kate Marsh, *India in the French Imagination*, p.128.
Most significantly, it was very often their particularly ‘philosophic’ interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ that were worked into the fabric of the ‘anti-imperial’ critiques in the *Histoire*. The two passages that Tetscher marks out as examples of this plagiarism both correspond to passages in Holwell and Dow that focus on the moral virtue and reasonableness of Indian religion. In the first instance, after a long retelling of Dow’s story of a Mughal prince named Feizi who went in disguise to steal the secrets of the Brahmins, a passage attributed to Diderot shares Dow’s conclusion that although they admit no converts, the *Hindoos* ‘allow that everyone may go to heaven his own way’.98 Mirroring this Diderot stated ‘Brama delights in the peculiar forms of worship that is observed in different countries’.99 The following chapter on ‘Religion, government, legislation, manners, and customs of Indostan’ relied heavily on the work of Holwell and Dow, with later additions adding in information from Halhed’s *Code*. Holwell’s account of the fallen angels features prominently.100 Also from *Interesting Historical Events*, is a passage taken Holwell’s description of the *Gentoo* city of ‘Bisnapore’ (Bishnupur). As discussed in chapter two, Bishnupur had been for almost one thousand years the capital of the Hindu Malla kings and Holwell presented it as example of *Gentoo* principles put into practice. Raynal does much the same, reciting almost exactly Holwell’s account, with the same intention of illustrating the virtue of the ‘Hindoos’. He did also add, though, that it could be untrue since he found himself ‘between two authorities’, which were Holwell on the one hand and Dow, who simply did not mention it, on the other.101 Far from undermining the important point that ‘Hinduism’ was a virtuous religion, however,

99 As quoted in, Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*, p.81.
this was part of a more general pattern in the political thought of Raynal and Diderot, which held any ideal society could not be maintained against degeneration.  

Writers like Marsh have attributed the development of a French ‘anti-imperialist’ discourse precisely to the popularity of Raynal’s *Histoire*, which went into several editions throughout the latter part of the eighteenth century. Moreover, when in 1776 the *Histoire* was translated into English, its popularity soared yet again and it was widely cited in the British press during the trial of Hastings. So while indeed Holwell and Dow were deeply involved and invested in the East India Company’s colonial ambitions, the ‘deist’, or religiously orientated aspects of their work were not always in step with those same interests. In fact, their comments on ‘Hinduism’ were often the source of the more critical aspects of their engagement with Company politics. Moreover, their research into Gentoo religion provided the source material for others intent on launching more radical attacks on the Company’s imperialist exploits in India. This is something that Christian Apologist writer and Orientalist Thomas Maurice later recognised when writing his memoirs in the early part of the nineteenth century. Maurice indirectly attacked these ‘infidel writers’ by declaring that Volatire and others’ discussion of ‘the uncounted ages during which the arts and sciences were asserted to have flourished amongst the Brahmins’ became the conditions under which India became ‘the debateable ground on which the fury of jacobin hostility had reared her most triumphant banner’.

---

102 As explained by Peter Jimack in his introduction to Raynal’s, *A History of the Two Indies*, pp.xviii-xix.
103 Kate Marsh, *India in the French Imagination*, p.128.
Halhed & Wilkins: Chronology, Controversy and the Company

In contrast, the institutional shift towards the Orientalised government of their patron Warren Hastings, as well as the practical uses to which their work would be put, meant that in the work of Halhed and Wilkins, the relationship between knowledge and Company interests was more firmly united. Thus, where the work of both Holwell and Dow can be described as independent and idiosyncratic, by the time that Nathaniel Brassey Halhed and Charles Wilkins began publishing their thoughts on Indian religion, the implications of these reflections for the East India Company were much more closely felt. This is one important aspect of the reception of their work. As was argued in chapter four, however, to view them according to these terms only would be to erase the complex and personal layers of interpretation that these writers affixed to their interpretations of Hindoo texts. Furthermore, it would also ignore their own perception of themselves as writing in the same tradition of Holwell and Dow, as well as the similar view of their readers. Instead, their work must be seen as existing alongside the above and not what came afterwards.

Halhed’s Code of Gentoo Laws was largely received as an important contribution to Letters, since it represented a firm step towards a more fixed knowledge of the perceived rules and ethics of Indian civilization. Historian and prominent figure of the Scottish Enlightenment William Robertson (1721-1793) likewise viewed the Code as ‘the most valuable and authentic elucidation of Indian policy and manners that has been hitherto communicated to Europe.’ But while the achievement of the Code was largely welcomed, Halhed’s conclusions elicited a mixed reaction. There were two particular

---

105 In fact it was widely read by those not even especially interested in India, such as, James Boswell (16th November 1777), Boswell in Extremes, 1776–1778, Charles McC. Weis and Frederick A. Pottle, (ed.), (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p.194.

106 William Robertson, Historical Disquisition concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India (1791), pp.273-275.
debates, already touched on in relation to Holwell and Dow, for which it had an immediate resonance: the questioning of biblical authority, and the question of colonial legitimacy. The Code offered controversial material which Halhed prefaced in a controversial way. Reactions were, therefore, married to the degree that the respondent’s ideological orientation was in tune with Halhed’s approach. Those of a broadly liberal mindset received the book with sympathy, whereas for those whom the lack of Christian mission in India was a failing, the contents were a biting reminder. In turn, more radical anti-clericals, such as the Abbé Raynal, advertised it as one more example to demonstrate the cunning of priestcraft.107

In the first instance it was Halhed’s emphasis on the Gentoo principle of religious toleration that, while attracting praise from the same writers who subscribed to Holwell and Dow’s religious universalism, was a cause for alarm among those who had hopes of a Christian mission in India. Thomas Maurice, for example, lamented that their readiness to allow that all modes of worship were acceptable to God would continue to be an insurmountable obstacle to their conversion to Christianity.108 More than this, though, the most controversial aspect for Christian readers was Halhed’s chronology, which unequivocally dated Hinduism as the most ancient philosophical system and most others as therefore derivative. Halhed had known he was treading on dangerous ground, especially when bringing up the issue of the absent biblical Flood, as is evident in the convoluted justifications that both prefaced and concluded his calculations. Yet his interpretation was made clear in the general thrust of his arguments, evident in remarks such as ‘when the line of implicit faith is once extended, we can never ascertain the precise limits beyond which it must not pass’ and ‘the doctrines of Hindostan might have

108 Thomas Maurice, Or, The Attempts of the Sacerdotal Tribe of India to Invest Their Fabulous Deities and Heroes with the Honours and Attributes of the Christian Messiah Examined, Exposed, and Defeated (London, 1812), p.67.
been early transplanted into Egypt, and thus have become familiar to Moses’. Halhed was clear; the chronology of the Gentoo ordinations vastly eclipsed the timeline of biblical history and thus proved problematic for all its claims to authority.

The controversy that Halhed thus deliberately courted came without fail. The Critical Review admired Halhed’s liberalism, while noting the heretical potential of his remarks. The well respected Annual Register observed that Halhed would be less prepared to accept the ‘wild extravagant chronology of the bramins’ had he ‘given himself but a little time to reflect upon the absurdities of their geography’, which is something Halhed himself referenced as ‘deplorable’ in the same preface. The Gentlemen’s Magazine refuted Halhed’s arguments at length, with a particular emphasis on chronology. The reviewer rightly pointed out the variation in opinion among other Orientalists, and suggested that the common idea of a missing Veda, or ‘Beids’, meant that the problem was left open. This was not an impartial comment on method, however, as the reviewer made plain in the suggestion that should this text be discovered it would likely be found worthless. As we have seen, the most sustained and public outrage at Halhed’s remarks came from George Costard, vicar of Twickenham and a friend of the Halhed family, who had felt compelled to publish a letter refuting Halhed’s assertions as ‘totally void of truth, or at best precarious’.

Among the more liberally-minded press, there was an ironic and deliberate intention to align Halhed’s Code with the opposite position to that it had been intended to support, i.e. the administration of Warren Hastings. The Critical Review, described by Sack as often tending towards a sceptical stance in religious matters, agreed with

---

112 Gentlemen’s Magazine, 47, 1777, pp.527, 636, 638.
Halhed’s account of the antiquity and sophistication of Indian civilization in order to critique the Company. After agreeing that some of the contents of the Code were no more ridiculous than ‘European Codes’, this reviewer goes on to make the mordant observation that:

‘In this Code of Gentoo laws we have searched to no purpose for some passage declaring that, when, after a certain series of years, a nation of white people should come over the great water, bearing in their hands a message from their queen, requesting leave to trade in the country of the Gentooos; the Gentooos should grant them that leave, should trade with those people, and that it should be lawful for those people having so gained leave to trade, to begin to rob and plunder their hosts…that the white people should no longer be merchants in the land, but masters, legislators; that the natives should serve that people…In this code no such law appears; though it might properly have been made part of the chapter of Theft. It is to be found, however, we suppose, in the more enlightened codes of European laws, in the sacred Shaster perhaps of European faith…”

In line with this, perhaps the most iconic purpose to which the Code was put was in the course of the impeachment trial. When counsel mounted the defence that Asiatick governments had always been despotic, Burke brandished the Code as evidence to the contrary. He argued that in fact the duties of the magistrate were clearly spelled out, and the right of the people to property was well established. It is very possible that he had remembered an earlier interaction during a debate in the Commons (1781) in which he had made a similar statement about Asian despotism, and had been refuted with the Code by his opponent.

---

In the case of Wilkins, his translation of the *Gēētā* was of little practical importance in an immediate sense, but it did play an important role in shaping future scholarship and perceptions of a homogenised ‘Hinduism’ in the decades to come. Many have pointed to the role of Wilkins in the canonization of the text as a key Hindu scripture. Others have emphasised the role of his acquisition of Sanskrit in propelling a new era of more rigorous and serious Orientalist scholarship. What is most relevant here though, is that like the other writers here, Wilkins’s work’s most immediate impact was on the realm of European understandings of religion. While scholarship might now be tempted to see Wilkins as ushering in a new “Oriental Renaissance”, contemporaries viewed the translation as very much sitting in the tradition of writers like Holwell, Dow and Halhed. In contemporary terms its impact was very much seen as continuing from and reinforcing the more controversial productions of these earlier authors. This situates Wilkins not in the world of formal Orientalism, but in the ad hoc framework of eighteenth-century Enlightenment Letters, where the emphasis was not simply on the mastery of language and the cataloguing of information, but on the religious implications and disruptions that the discovery of ancient philosophical thought encouraged.

Like the productions of our other authors, the *Gēētā* was also translated into French (1787). In response, one French Orientalist explicitly described how Wilkins had built on the work of his predecessors, whom he lists as ‘MM. Holwell, Dow, et Halhed’, from whom the French have received the most valuable knowledge of India (‘la partie la plus précieuse de nos connaissances sur l’Hindoustan’y). The work of Wilkins also had a particularly significant impact on what Wilson calls the ‘Indic ideal’ in German

Romanticism.\footnote{121 Leslie A. Wilson, \textit{A Mythical Image}, p.vii.} This intellectual project, articulated by Herder and developed by various Romantic artists, looked to India as the possible location of the origin of human culture. Rejecting the Kantian Enlightenment, Herder sided with an aesthetic, synthetic account of cultural reality which could only be understood through historical and anthropological enquiry. As we have seen, Heder’s enthusiasm began with Dow’s depiction of philosophical monism in Indian philosophy. In his later work Herder translated passages directly from Wilkins’s \textit{Gēētā}.\footnote{122 Bradley L. Herling, \textit{German Gita}, p.104.} In his study of the German reception of the \textit{Bhagavad Gītā}, Herling has suggested that Herder’s selective reworking of Wilkins’s translations was inherently linked to his Spinozist interpretation of Dow, in response to the German Pantheismusstreit. In this ‘pantheism controversy’, Herder defended Spinoza and in the process developed a commitment to a philosophical holism that he presents throughout his rendition of the \textit{Gītā}.\footnote{123 Bradley L. Herling, \textit{German Gita}, see Chapter Three, pp.73-116.}

Finally, we can understand Wilkins as part of a tradition of transmitting a ‘philosophic’ interpretation of Indian religious thought, with heterodox implications and consequences, by picturing him as he was described by prophetic visionary William Blake. Wilkins appeared in an engraving by Blake that was entitled ‘The Bramins’. Although no copy exists, the engraving was described in an exhibition catalogue as a depiction of Charles Wilkins consulting Brahmins while making the first English translation of the \textit{Bhagavad Gītā}.\footnote{124 The drawing, now lost, is described in ‘A descriptive catalogue of Pictures, no.x, exhibited by Blake in 1809 (The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed., David. E. V. Erdman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008 [1965]), p.548.} In it Blake describes having dressed Wilkins in the manner of the Brahmin, thus suggesting his complete absorption into and understanding of the philosophy of his instructors.\footnote{125 In David Weir, \textit{Brahma and the West: William Blake and the Oriental Renaissance} (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p.21.} Blake admits that his idea of what a Brahmin’s clothing looked like was imagined, writing ‘I understand that my costume is incorrect’.

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{121} Leslie A. Wilson, \textit{A Mythical Image}, p.vii.
\item \textit{122} Bradley L. Herling, \textit{German Gita}, p.104.
\item \textit{123} Bradley L. Herling, \textit{German Gita}, see Chapter Three, pp.73-116.
\end{itemize}
\end{flushright}
However, it was the symbolism behind it that was more important. As Blake scholar David Weir suggests, this was a depiction of Blake’s own feeling that Wilkins had in some sense ‘gone native’. Blake’s dual expression of libertarian politics and dissenting religion thus drew on that which has been called deist in the work of Wilkins, i.e. his universalising account of Hindu monotheism, to form his own idiosyncratic mythography. In 1788, for example, Blake produced a manifesto outlining his belief that poetic inspiration was the source of all religious philosophy. This text, titled *All Religions are One*, was a series of philosophical aphorisms that echoed similar sentiments to those expressed in Wilkins’s preface. Blake’s interest in the philosophic interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ alerts us to one final further context which demonstrates the wider impact of all four authors. Well beyond their immediate context, these authors appear as sources and noted figures in the vast array of nineteenth-century radical pamphlet literature. Dow’s discussion of the Brahmins the *Hindoo* conception of Hell, for example, feature in a work by George Ensor, a political author and friend of Jeremy Bentham, James Mill and campaigner for Catholic emancipation, Daniel O’Connell. That these authors and their approach to Indian thought should be understood in the context of religious heterodoxy is further vindicated by the fact that the majority of the works that mention them are associated with radical dissenting culture. The work of Halhed Wilkins and Dow appear in the 1843 catalogue for the London Institute, which was the precursor to the University of London, and was founded (in 1806) for Dissenters.

127 David Weir, *Brahma and the West*, p.91.  
Most striking is their association with nineteenth-century freethought, a branch of rationalist radical politics. The first Volume of the Oracle of Reason, which was an important freethought journal, featured an essay on India which appears to have been based on the work of Holwell, Dow and Wilkins, although they are not cited directly. Often their ideas are posed as counter-points to the arguments of Orientalist Christian apologists, like Thomas Maurice, who according to the author made ‘the inspiration of Moses the fixed point from whence to set out in search of philosophy’. In one instance the author criticises the notion that one can dismiss the antiquity of the Hindoo scriptures because their account of antiquity ‘flatly contradicts that furnished by the great Jehovah himself.’ To do this they invoked Halhed’s claim that ‘we are not justified in grounding the standard and criterion of our examination of the Hindoo religion upon the known and infallible truth of our own’ because both religions hold steadfastly to the incontrovertible truth of each, by stating in a similar manner that ‘The assumption of the Indian or Egyptian priest is just as good, to our thinking, as the assumption of a Christian priest.’ This association with freethought is consistent with the fact that in 1887 the paper of the Social Democratic Federation, Britain’s first organised socialist party, listed Holwell among a catalogue of important freethinkers.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis an emphasis has been placed on the religious views of the authors concerned; an approach that has been justified on the basis that the ideological backdrop

to European discoveries of Eastern religions was always rooted in Christian theological controversy. In this chapter we have seen that outside of the personal convictions and eccentricities of these authors, this was also the case for the ways in which their work was received, used and distributed. Far from being confined by the policies of the East India Company, their religiously and deistically directed interpretations of Indian philosophy and culture touched multiple spheres of intellectual development. Their far-reaching impact thus makes the case that this thesis has provided a significant contribution to the history of these encounters by reconsidering the ways in which deist or religiously heterodox ideas about ‘Hinduism’ were developed and received in the period before the establishment of Jones’s Astiatric Society and the so-called rise of ‘New’ or ‘British’ Orientalism.\textsuperscript{135} Thus, when viewed in isolation the work produced by these authors could easily be dismissed as minor texts, written from an eccentric perspective. Yet, when seen in relation to one another, as this chapter has demonstrated, the common ‘philosophic’ quality of their inquiries is shown to have had a significant impact on numerous intellectual elements of the late Enlightenment and its various trajectories.

For some of these authors, consistent separation of high theistic philosophy from low religious superstition was a way of defending theistic belief on terms compatible with reason. For others it provided grounds for more fundamental challenges to religious belief. Their account of the great antiquity of Indian theology and philosophy also resonated across the political sphere, ironically providing not only the ideological tools for Hastings’s policies, but also the ammunition in the arguments of his opponents. Finally, their claims for the compatibility of Hindoo/Gentoo religious systems with Christian theology further galvanised public debate relating to the religious controversies

\textsuperscript{135} See for example, David Kopf, \textit{British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
from which their ideas had initially been drawn, with most reviewers specifically reacting
to these authors’ heterodox interpretations and commentaries rather than the content of
their translations.
Conclusion

When William Jones first arrived in India in 1782, after being appointed to the Supreme Court at Calcutta, he was unfamiliar with both Hinduism and Sanskrit, although he had learnt Arabic and Persian at Oxford.¹ Though his scholarly achievements as an Orientalist were undoubtedly remarkable, very little of what he understood of Hinduism was original. His discussion on the resemblances between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek had already been forwarded by Halhed. For this reason some have suggested that while Jones’s work has been taken as the starting point for the modern study of the Indo-European family of languages, it was in fact the case that he developed and published the work of others who lacked a similarly established literary reputation.² Similarly, his analysis of the Hindu philosophical schools showed an acquaintance with Indian philosophical thought, but the main distinctions between Nyāyā and Vēdānta had, as we have seen, already been developed to a degree by Dow. Most significant though, is Jones’s position in the transmutation of philosophic interpretations of Hinduism into what could better be described as a sympathetic or admiring account of the religion. Holwell had declared India the cradle of all civilization, and the literal origin of all religious truths. Halhed had similarly traced the origin of all languages and the most ancient religious scriptures back to India. In contrast, Jones framed his discussion of Indian antiquity in contemporary disputes about the authority of Moses,³ believing that his stated origin of Indo-European languages, somewhere in the Middle East, was a clear vindication of Genesis.⁴ In addition, in his distinction between Nyāyā and Vēdānta, Jones demonstrated a preference for the latter, preferring to romanticise Vedantic metaphysics,

which he described as a system of thought that ‘human reason alone could…neither fully
demonstrate, nor fully disprove.’ This, as the birth of Orientalism as a field of
scholarship, as well as the romanticisation of the ‘mystic’ East, was distinct from the
philosophic interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ advanced by Holwell, Dow, Halhed and
Wilkins.

In addition to Jones, the institutionalisation of Orientalism further obscured its
more heterodox origins in the mid-eighteenth century. By the turn of the century, when
the Company was undergoing rapid expansion and a formalisation of its system in
recruitment and training, the idea that its servants ought to be well acquainted with local
languages and customs became a standard expectation. Hastings’s successor, the
Marquess of Wellesley, had a great concern for, as he titled it in a public letter to the
court of Directors of Bengal, ‘an objurgation on the character and conduct of the
servants of the Company’ (1798). In the letter, which included plans for a new training
college in Bengal, Wellesley called for the mandatory study of Persian by all trainee
writers. To this Hastings added his support with an open letter, adding Arabic,
‘Hindostanny’ and Bengali to the list. On the question of Sanskrit, Hastings was
emphatic, arguing that although it was ‘not of the same use’ as Begali in conducting
official transactions, it ought to be studied ‘for the sake of the rich stores of knowledge,
of which it is the repository’. Though Wellesley did not go so far as to include Sanskrit
in the curriculum, he and his supporters did see the purpose of the College in a similar
light. When, in 1833, the Company’s charter was up for renewal, the case for the
continuation of the College, known by then the East India College, was made according
to the principle that ‘the education of our young civilians in the Oriental languages’ had the twin outcomes of encouraging ‘our own countrymen in Oriental pursuits, as well as to prove to Native subjects the interest taken and the respect felt by the Government’.

This development of the philosophic interpretation of Hinduism into the Orientalism most readily associated with Saidian notions of the Romanticised ‘other’, have obscured the nuances of eighteenth-century intellectual encounters with Indian religion. The following conclusion with discuss how the thesis has corrected this.

* 

This thesis began with the proposition that there was a crucial shift in the period 1760-1790 among British authors, whose claims to have penetrated the original principles of this ‘symbolical religion’ instigated a distinctively ‘philosophic’ approach to the interpretation of ‘Hinduism’. This approach, it has argued, was rooted in their intellectual engagement with contemporary European religious and philosophical discourses, and in particular their ‘deist’ approach to these debates. Through detailed analysis of their work, this study has demonstrated the ways in which their authority claims were constructed, what their interpretations of the ‘philosophic’ core of ‘Hinduism’ looked like, and which sources shaped those insights. Common to each author was the notion that through Brahminical instruction and linguistic skill they had penetrated the previously veiled doctrines of the original and ancient religion of India, and that this religion was rational and philosophically sophisticated. In contrast, the preceding paradigm for the discovery and interpretation of ‘Hinduism’ was characterised by deductions made from eye-witness observation, travel literature and antiquarian conjecture. The Jesuit literature which was an exception to this approach was, in the mid eighteenth century, easily dismissed by

---

these competing claims to authority as marred by religiously orientated prejudice. Although the seventeenth century saw the project of comparative religion take a ‘libertine’ turn towards the deconstruction of biblical history and authority, it was in the accounts of British authors that this critical potential was married with what was perceived to be unprecedented insight into the original theology and scriptures of Brahminical religion.

The introduction to this thesis also began with the reflection that the existing literature on British interactions with ‘Hinduism’ in the eighteenth century tended to superficially characterise British authors writing about Indian religion as ‘deist’. It observed that not only does this scholarly position imply that these writers had a shared perspective, but also a similar agenda. In answer I have argued that this simplification of their beliefs and their consequent association with a particular ideological and political project is historically invalid. Instead I have pointed to the more complex and idiosyncratic origins of their ideas about Indian religion, and identified a diverse set of contexts in which they were subsequently read and received. Through detailed analysis of the evidence that these authors characterised a particular philosophic interpretation of Hinduism this thesis has demonstrated the important role of both religious thought and Hinduism within European intellectual culture, challenged the homogeneity of the term ‘deism’, and disrupted existing characterisations of the onset of British understandings of ‘Hindusim’ in the chronology of Orientalism. That is, it has shown this ‘philosophic interpretation’ to be an important and far-reaching aspect of late Enlightenment intellectual culture.

John Zephaniah Holwell was one of the first British authors to present a detailed account of what he termed ‘the religion and philosophy of the Gentoos’ to a European audience. This account was certainly religiously heterodox, but Holwell’s fixation with
metempsychosis and theodicy went well beyond most simple definitions of deism. Publishing shortly after Howell, Alexander Dow presented a different image of India’s religious landscape and history that was based on a more conventional narrative of original purity and decline. In aligning Dow with deism, therefore, it was necessary to be explicit and delineate a particular approach to ‘rational religion’ as precipitated by the likes of Samuel Clarke and other Newtonian deists. Nathaniel Brassey Halhed’s complex personal religious history demonstrated a shifting approach, initially characterised by religious scepticism at odds with Dow’s theistic, moderate deism. Finally, Sir Charles Wilkins’s ‘Unitarian’ Brahmins cast the Bhagavad Gita as a dissenting text, alluding to connotations with the European Reformation. The outcome of this has not been to undermine the contention that religiously heterodox attitudes played a role in shaping these encounters, but rather to correct a simplistic understanding of what these attitudes were, in favour of a more historically accurate and specific appreciation of these authors and the intellectual context in which their work was composed and received. It was in fact the complexity of their different heterodoxies and engagement with multiple religious debates that gave their work the ‘philosophic’ shade that made it appeal beyond the scope of Company propaganda.

Consequently, this thesis marks an important contribution to a growing body of work in intellectual history which stresses the need for a greater appreciation of the role of religious thinking in eighteenth-century European intellectual culture. These authors were all prominent members of the East India Company. Their work was considered by contemporaries and critics to be an important contribution to the world of Letters. Moreover, prominent figures associated with the Enlightenment and its intellectual

---

offshoots read, engaged with and critiqued their work. Considering their position and their impact, the fact that Howell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins held a range of controversial religious opinions and advanced these in their writings has two important implications for our understanding of eighteenth century intellectual culture. In the first instance it validates the argument that religious thinking continued to dominate the thought process of historical agents. On a wider level it demonstrates that religious discourse and debate had an impact beyond the scope of internal theological debate and entered into various fields of intellectual discussion, and in particular, encounters with other cultures.

It has also been observed that by lumping these authors together as writing from a ‘deist point of view’ scholars of the period have tended to invoke the notion that these writers all belonged to some kind of coherent project in constructing an ideologically useful account of ‘Hinduism’. As we have seen Rocher, Marshall and Franklin have all argued that the ‘sympathetic’ view of Indian religion that their deism engendered propped up a particular political approach to the government of India. In a more subtle argument Halbfass has identified them alongside a generalised trend in European attitudes to Indian religion that looked for universal moral and philosophical principles. Halbfass suggested that the political outcome of this was a sympathetic appreciation of ‘Hindoo’ civilization that both called for and legitimised an Orientalised style of government.\footnote{Wilhelm Halbfass, India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding, (Motilal Banarsidass, 1990).} Where this picture becomes more complex is when we consider that some of the elements of the work of these writers, such as Holwell’s fallen angels, went well beyond pragmatic appeal to rational and universal religion. It has thus been an important contribution of this thesis to show that although the productions of these authors certainly did come to have a material and ideological impact on colonialism, these encounters were far more deeply rooted in European religious ideas and controversies.
than has previously been accounted for, and were certainly not part of any coherent project.

Related to this is another distortion that this thesis has pointedly challenged: a historical narrative in which these authors are considered unsophisticated precursors to the scholarly Indology of British intellectual and jurist, Sir William ‘Orientalist’ Jones.\footnote{See M.J Franklin, ‘Orientalist Jones: Sir William Jones, Poet, Lawyer, and Linguist, 1746-1794,’ (Oxford University Press, 2011).} Indeed, the founding of the ‘Asiatick Society of Bengal’ by Jones in 1784 is often considered to be the birth of British Indology. Those promoting the idea that British encounters with ‘Hinduism’ in this period were defined by a collaborative ‘Bengal Renaissance’ have described Jones and the Society as its clearest expression.\footnote{David Kopf, \textit{British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance} (University of California Press, 1969); Franklin, ‘Orientalist Jones,’ p.19.} The thesis has shifted this chronology by demonstrating how in the eighteenth century the more obscure and ad hoc productions of Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins were considered important by contemporaries. A significant outcome of this was a reassessment of both Halhed and Wilkins in light of what came before them, rather than the hindsight which sees them leading to Jones. Consequently I have argued that Halhed and Wilkins were in fact responding to earlier discourses and that their involvement in Hastings’s project was only one element of their work. As we saw in chapter four, for example, Halhed’s speculations about ‘Gentoo’ chronology were not merely offered as a dismissal of contemporary Indian religious practices to the advantage of certain administrators, but in fact emphasised the implications that these ancient annals had for Christian interpretations of history. The \textit{Code} proved to be an ineffective instrument of administration, and had a greater impact on European audiences, already receptive to the similar claims of Holwell and Dow.
This revaluation of the period prior to 1784 has several important implications for an adjacent debate. Previously the historiography of intellectual encounters between British thinkers and Indian culture and religion has been dominated by the twin influences of Foucault and Edward Said, and by the reaction against their analysis. Emerging in the form of post-colonial theory, their work has sharply focused historical analysis on conceptions of knowledge as forms of coercive power. In reaction, others have argued that cross-cultural exchange was the defining characteristic of European interactions with foreign societies.\(^\text{13}\) The latter manifests itself in a tendency among scholars to talk of this process in terms of ‘British Orientalism’ or ‘new Orientalism’, characterised by an enthusiasm for Indian culture, history and language.\(^\text{14}\) On the one hand post-colonial theory maintains that the epistemological foundations for European scholarship on Indian culture were synonymous with Imperialist ideology.\(^\text{15}\) On the other hand, the critics of post-colonial studies argue that encounters between Europe and India were in fact marked by the principle of intellectual exchange, admiration, and in some cases, revitalisation.\(^\text{16}\) Yet, in this thesis I have shown that a close analysis of the actual content and context of these specific mid to late eighteenth-century encounters actually destabilises these analytical binaries.

I have argued that the projects associated with ‘Orientalist’ Jones represent not the beginning but the tipping point of a pre-existing intellectual culture into elements of the kind of ideological programme that Said describes. The Orientalist policies of Jones and Hastings thus stand at the apex of a previously improvised and idiosyncratic process of encounter and construction. In this thesis I have suggested that Halhed and Wilkins

---


\(^{15}\) Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*.


\(^{16}\) The most extreme example of this position is David Kopf’s, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*.
represent the beginning of the gradual incorporation of earlier ‘philosophic’ interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ into institutional Orientalism and the consequent shift towards a more direct relationship between knowledge of Indian religion and the interests of the East India Company. This disruption of the notion that Holwell and Dow simply represent unscholarly attempts at what Jones and others would achieve points to a more interesting relationship between the Orientalist discourses of the Enlightenment and the construction of legitimacy in favour of Company interests.

Part of the great traction of Said’s argument is the way in which his conception of what Aravamuda has described as ‘a dualistic logic of the self and other’ feeds in a critique of the Enlightenment’s betrayal of its emancipatory potential.17 On the one hand Orientalism was a manifestation of the Enlightenment’s pursuit and celebration of knowledge, yet on the other, is the role that this Orientalism played in the ideologies of imperial expansion. In Saidian terms, Orientalism is ‘a cultural apparatus…all aggression, activity, judgement, will-to-truth, and knowledge’.18 Said’s thesis thus sits at the foundation of a plethora of post-colonial critiques of Enlightenment, echoing the idea that its internal contradictions were played out in the pursuit of empire. This thesis does not deny these tensions, but instead has nuanced them through the close examination of the various influences on each of these key figures and their ‘Orientalist’ work. It points to how such an approach has often obscured the complex relationship between the genesis and the various uses of different forms of knowledge, and their historical environment. Indeed, critics of Said have pointed to how his analysis of Orientalism as a corporate enterprise, and the Foucauldian ideas on which this was based, tend to ignore the agency of historical actors.19 This thesis has alternatively demonstrated that for the

19 Carol A. Breckenridge & Peter van der Veer (eds), Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament, pp.1-19.
people involved in practicing and creating it, colonialism was fraught with contradictions and ambiguities in a way the long history of empire often obscures. It argues that individual and inherently religious dimensions of interpretations of ‘Hinduism’ by British authors in this period should nuance this picture.

Related to this are the possibilities that the arguments outlined in this thesis present for the history of the Company, colonialism and British sovereignty in the early nineteenth century. One promising area for further research is a consideration of how the inheritance of these religiously heterodox interpretations of ‘Hindusim’ can elucidate our understanding of the increasingly vehement denunciation of the Company from Evangelicals and the eventual dominance of missionary ideology. For those lobbying for a specifically missionary policy, the work of these writers was an egregious violation of Christian duty. As was highlighted in the introduction to this work, the nineteenth century’s first Chairman of the Company’s Board was the evangelical Charles Grant. Grant’s “Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain” was a tirade against the religious practices to be found in India, both ancient and modern, and ironically used the evidence amounted amassed by Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins in support of his contrary opinion. By better understanding the origins of their ideas we can better understand the emergence of their intellectual opposites. James Mill’s assessment of the ‘Hindus’ in 1817 represents a contrasting attitude to “Hinduism” as it was then conceived:

‘No [literate] people, how rude and ignorant soever…have ever drawn a more gross and disgusting picture of the universe than what is presented in the writings of the Hindus. In the conception of it no coherence, wisdom, or beauty, ever appears: all is disorder, caprice, passion, contest, portents, prodigies, violence,

---

and deformity. It is perfectly evident that the Hindus never contemplated the universe as a connected and perfect system, governed by general laws, and directed to benevolent ends..."22

How far these ideas were in reaction to the work of the authors studied here is an interesting question that has only been very briefly posed in some quarters of the literature on Orientalism.23 This thesis has illustrated the importance of perusing the nuances of religious discourse in pursuing this line of study and thus poses a promising starting point for such inquiries.

*

In summary, this thesis has identified a distinct approach to ‘Hinduism’ in the late eighteenth century, which had important intellectual ramifications for the late Enlightenment. It has done this by presenting a detailed study of the various beliefs and sources of four Company servants, each of whom has been referred to as writing from a ‘deist’ perspective. Recognising that this liberally applied term actually covers a wide variety of personal convictions and disputes, my analysis has complicated that generalisation by scrutinizing the specific religious content of each writer’s work. I have therefore argued that the actual nature of their interpretations and sources have been taken for granted, hidden behind the vague label of deism. Instead I have shown them to have been touching on a wide range of contemporary discourses, some of which could be considered religiously ‘heterodox’ and some of which were more political in quality.

Within this framework I have examined the significance of this complication for our understanding the wider context in which their work sat: namely the politics of the East India Company, European intellectual culture, and, the role of the Enlightenment in encounters with India.

23 See for example, Michael Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam*, p.181.
This thesis has presented a case-study in support of the argument that eighteenth-century intellectual life was still deeply intertwined with religious controversy and debate. The East India Company is not usually associated with Christian theological discourse, and yet these authors brought issues as diverse as theodicy, providence and biblical chronology to bear on their experiences with Indian culture. The outcome of this was a particularly ‘philosophic’ interpretation of the notion that India had an ancient and rational religion, the contents of which were pertinent to existing debates and controversies in eighteenth century Europe. Secondly, by shifting the chronological location of the debate, this thesis uncovers a much more nuanced and unexpected set of ideas relating to Indian religion than those supposed by chronologies that posit William Jones as the definitive expression of British understandings of ‘Hinduism’ in the eighteenth century. This thesis therefore calls into question the polarisation of post-colonial and sympathetic ‘orientalist’ narratives, by adding richness to intellectual and cultural histories of eighteenth-century encounters between Europeans and their global context.
Bibliography

Abbreviations

BL- British Library
IOR - India Office Records and Private Papers
OMS- Oriental Manuscripts
RCHC- Reports from Committees of the House of Commons

Primary Sources

A. Archival Sources

British Library:

IOR/E/1/51 ff. 232-232v, Letter 116 Memorial of Alexander Dow to the Court requesting to be employed in the civil or military departments at Bengal.


IOR: Mss Eur F303/2. Library Daybook.

Add MS 29127, Official and Private Correspondence and Papers of Warren Hastings, vol.iii.


Add. MS. 18469, Evidence taken before the Committee [of the House of Commons] on the state of the East India Company, 27 March to 13 April, 1767.

Add MS 29129, Letterbooks of Warren Hastings.
Add. MS 29133, Sir John Mcpherson, Member of the Council, afterwards Governor-General of India: Letters to W. Hastings: 1772-1786.

OMS Add. 4830. Dow’s submission ‘Neadrisen Shaster’ to British Museum.

B. Printed Sources

Journals and Periodicals:

Asiatick Annual Register

Journals of the House of Commons

The Gentleman’s Magazine

The Critical Review,

The Annual Register

The Monthly Review, or Literary Journal

Public Advertiser

The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British and Foreign India, China, and Australasia.

Works by Holwell, Dow, Halhed and Wilkins:

Holwell, John Zephaniah.


-An address to the proprietors of East India Stock Setting forth the unavoidable necessity and real motives for the revolution in Bengal, in 1760, (London: T. Becket and P.A. de Hondt, 1764).
- A Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen, and Others, who were suffocated in the BLACK-HOLE in FORT-WILLIAM, at CALCUTTA in the Kingdom of BENGAL; in the Night succeeding the 20th Day of June, 1756 (London: printed for A. Millar, 1758).

-Mr. Holwell's refutation of a letter from certain gentlemen of the Council at Bengal, to the honourable the Secret Committee. Serving as a supplement to his Address to the proprietors of East-India stock, (London : T. Becket and P.A. de Hondt, 1764).

- Important facts regarding the East-India Company's affairs in Bengal, from the year 1752 to 1760, (London : T. Becket and P.A. de Hondt, 1764).

- Some observations on the practice and mode of treating that disease in those parts. Inscribed to the Learned The President, and Members of the College of Physicians in London. (T. Becket, and P. A. De Hondt, 1767).

-Dissertations on the origin, nature, and pursuits, of intelligent beings, and on divine providence, religion, and religious worship, (London: R. Cruttwell, 1786).

-A review of the original principles, religious and moral, of the ancient Bramins: comprehending an account of the mythology, cosmogony, pasts, and festivals, of the Gentooos, followers of the Shastah, (London: D. Steel, 1779).

- Événements historiques, intéressants, relatifs aux provinces de Bengale Anon. (trans.), (Amsterdam, 1768).


Dow, Alexander,

- The History of Hindostan; from the earliest account of time, to the death of Akbar; translated from the Persian of Mahummud Casim Firishta of Delhi, 1st edn. 2 vols, (London: T. Becket and P. A. de Hondt, in the Strand,1768).

- Zingis. A tragedy. As it is performed at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane. (London: T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt, 1769).

- The History of Hindostan; from the earliest account of time, to the death of Akbar; translated from the Persian of Mahummud Casim Ferishta of Delhi, 2nd edn, (London: T. Becket and P. A. de Hondt in the Strand, 1772).

- Sethona. A tragedy. As it is performed at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane, (London: T. Becket, 1774).

- The History of Hindostan; from the earliest account of time, to the death of Akbar; translated from the Persian of Mahummud Casim Ferishta of Delhi, 3rd edn, 3 vols, (London: T. Becket and P. A. de Hondt in the Strand, 1792).


Halhed, Nathaniel Brassey.

- A Code of Gentoo Laws; or Ordinations of the Pundits, (London, [s.n.] 1776).

- A grammar of the Bengal language, (Hoogly, Bengal: Charles Wilkins, 1778).

Wilkins, Charles.

- The Bhāgvāt-Gēētā, or Dialogues of Krēēshnă and Ārjŏōn, (London: C. Nourse, 1785).

Other Primary Material


Aquinas, Thomas. ‘The way in which the Divine Truth is to be made known’, in Summa Contra Gentiles, Anton C.Pegis (trans.), (Indiana USA: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975 [1259-1265]).


East India Company (British). *Preliminary Papers respecting the East India Company’s Charter*, (London: Printed by the General Court, 1833).


Fort William: *India House correspondence and other contemporary papers relating thereto (foreign, political, and secret)*, (Delhi, India: National Archives of India, 1962).


Lord, Henry *A Display of two forraigne sects in the East Indies*, (London: [s.n.] 1630).


Maurice, Thomas. *Brahmincal Fraud Detected, Or, The Attempts of the Sacerdotal Tribe of India to Invest Their Fabulous Deities and Heroes with the Honours and Attributes of the Christian Messiah Examined, Exposed, and Defeated*, (London: W. Bulmer & co., 1812).


O’Conor, Charles. *Dissertations on the ancient history of Ireland* (Dublin: James Hoey, 1753).


Price, Joseph. *The saddle put on the right horse; or, An enquiry into the reason why certain persons have been denominated nabobs; With an arrangement of those gentlemen into their proper classes, of real, spurious, reputed, or mushroom, nabob*, (London: John Stockdale, 1783).


*Reports from Committees of the House of Commons*, 1715—1801, vol.4, (London: Ordered by the House of Commons, to be printed, 1803).


Robertson, William. *Historical Disquisition concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India*, (Dublin: John Ershaw, 1791).


- *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (Strasbourg: Chez Treuttel et Würtz, 1835).


**Secondary Sources**

**Online:**


Printed:


Balagangadhara, S.N. *The Heathen in His Blindness...‘: Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*, (Leiden: BRILL, 1994).


Dirks, Nicholas B. *The Scandal of Empire; India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).


Emerson, Roger L. *Essays on David Hume: Medical Men and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).


Franklin, M.J. *Representing India: India Culture and Imperial Control*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000).


Freeman, Katherine S. *British Women Writers and the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1785-1783: Re-Orienting Anglo-India*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).


Herling, Bradley L. *German Gita, The Hermeneutics and Discipline in the Early German Reception of Indian Thought*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).


Hessayon, Ariel and Apetrei, Sarah (eds.). *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme: Four Centuries of Thought and Reception*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).


MacCallum, David and Pratt, Terry (eds.). *The Enterprise of Enlightenment: A Tribute to David Williams from His Friends*, (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2004).


Palmeri, Frank (ed.). Humans and Other Animals in Eighteenth-Century British Culture: Representation, Hybridity, Ethics (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006).


Telttscher, Kate. *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600-1800*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Travers, Robert. *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-century India, the British in Bengal*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


