



## Changing views at Banaras Hindu University on the Academic Study of Religion: A first report from an on-going research project

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### ABSTRACT

Given India's vibrant religious landscape, there is a somewhat surprising paucity of departments, centres or even programs for the academic study of religion. This article discusses this issue based on the preliminary results of an interview study conducted at Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi, India, in 2014 and 2015. Its focus is on the views of university teachers and researchers concerning the place, role and function of religion and religious studies at BHU. Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. In the course of their analysis, six themes emerged: 1) the place and role of religion in society; 2) religion as 'religiosity/spirituality' or *sanatana dharma* vs. political ideology/communitarianism; 3) religion vs. *dharma*; 4) secularization; 5) religion in education in general; and, 6) religion in the education at BHU. The informants agreed on the increasing importance of religion in India, and most of them viewed the meaning of secularization as being 'equal respect for all religions'. Moreover, a majority distinguished between 'religion', in the Western sense, and the Indian conception of *dharma*, considering it regrettable that the latter, described as the common ground of all religions, is not taught more extensively at BHU. They also considered the original ideal of BHU's founder, Madan Mohan Malaviya, to be of significant importance. That ideal involved not only teaching students the knowledge and skill sets found in a standard modern university, but

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also equipping them with a value-based education, grounded upon *sanatana-dharma*. As our project progresses, further understanding of this turn toward *dharmā* education is something we intend to pursue through the lens of multiple modernities, developed by Marian Burchardt *et al.* as multiple secularities.

#### KEYWORDS

secularity; higher education; sociology of religion; Banaras Hindu University; religion vs. *dharmā*

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#### CONTRIBUTION OF THE CO-AUTHORS

Co-author \* contributed 60% of the work writing, defining the objectives, topic range, and selection of methods.

Co-author \*\* contributed 40% of the work writing.

Co-author \*\*\* has carried out most of the field-work, helped other co-authors in their field-work, in discussions contributed much background information and commented on the text.

## INTRODUCTION

## PURPOSE AND AIMS

The remarkable late twentieth and twenty-first century resurgence of religion and religiosity as a worldwide influence has made the academic study of these phenomena increasingly important.<sup>1</sup> Only by obtaining an adequate knowledge of religion/religiosity's various roles and functions will we be able to acquire the tools that are necessary to both comprehend and address many of today's urgent societal questions. This seems especially so for India, with its long history as a diverse and troubled religious landscape. The reality is, however, that formal academic studies and teaching about religion at Indian universities (and, generally, in public education) are markedly scarce and underdeveloped (O'Connell, 2011; Narayanan, 2015). The omission is glaring, especially given India's vibrant religious life, and poses a potential threat to the development of the world's largest democracy. Indeed, the recent ban of Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An alternative history*, and similar stands against books such as Perumal Murugan's *One part woman*, are worrying signs of a deteriorating situation.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for the lack of religious studies in India's educational system include large-scale historical and societal processes, the main one being the secularist Nehruvian ideology that has been fundamental to Indian nation-building since independence in 1947 (Alles, 2010; O'Connell, 2010; Narayanan, 2015). Of late, however, this secularist framework has been powerfully challenged by the global resurgence of religious influence, the processes of modernization and globalization (Beyer, 2006; Kalb & Siebers, 2004), and the domestic rise of both Hindu nationalist organizations (Gáthy & Juhos, 2013; Nag, 2014; Sardesai, 2014) and a variety of religious communal and communitarian movements (see below). Thus there appears to be clear signs of a paradigm shift away from the socialist legacy of the Nehru era (Thapar, 2000), which is to some degree confirmed by secularism's decreasing popularity among members of the general public.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This global revival of religion has been lately chronicled in a number of important works, for example: Berger, 1999; Shah, Toft, & Philpott, 2011; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2009; Kaufmann, 2010; Stark & Finke, 2000; Thomas, 2005; Juergensmeyer, 2000; Juergensmeyer, 2008; Casanova, 1994; and many of the articles in Barrett, Kurian, & Johnson, 2001. See also many of the studies published by the PEW Forum on Religion & Public life (*Pew Global Attitude Project* 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the newspaper article: BJP, RSS seek ban on Tamil novel, arrest of author. *The Times*, December 27, 2014 — <http://bannedbooks.world.edu/2014/02/16/banned-books-awareness-the-hindus-an-alternative-history> and also: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/bjp-rss-seek-ban-on-tamil-novel-arrest-of-author/article6729393.ece>.

<sup>3</sup> The number of persons that completely agree upon the separation of religion and government (the State) dropped from 78% to 58% between 2002 and 2007 (Grim & Finke, 2010: ch. 7; *Pew Global Attitude Project* 2007: 37; Gáthy & Juhos, 2013).

This study aims to examine, describe and understand the degree to which this apparently paradigmatic societal shift towards religion has affected the climate and education at Indian universities. More precisely, we intend to analyze the views of faculty on the place and role of religion in society, as well as on the study and teaching of religion as it relates to the present Indian debates on the secularity of the state and higher education. These questions are approached via interviews with academic leaders, researchers and teachers at Banaras Hindu University (BHU), also known as *Kashi Hindu Vishvavidyalaya*; and for future purposes, a similar study is also under way at Pondicherry University (PU).

In our view, the academic study of religion at Indian universities must adapt to the evolving economic and socio-political realities of present-day India as well as to the emerging negativity towards the secularity of the Indian state, especially as these are reflected in the attitudes of individual faculty members. With this study, we hope to contribute to the discussion and understanding of the wider processes of transformation that are today taking place in India.

#### SURVEY OF THE FIELD

Little has been written about the formation of religious studies and the researching and teaching of religion in South Asia, with no major work on these subjects having been thus far produced (Narayanan, 2015). The same can be more or less said of research on higher education in general, as has been noted in 2012 by former Indian planning commissioner Narendra Jadhav, who concludes that:

[P]romoting research on higher education is a key tool for reducing the vulnerable position of the country. Such an initiative would also bring an enriching and up-to-date learning and research environment in the country. [...] This would provide an approximation of the strength and weakness of our system. This is also essential to improve and adapt to the emerging demands (Jadhav, 2012: xii).

Among the few articles that have been written on religion and religious studies in India, the following should be mentioned: a 1967 report on the study of religion at Indian universities (Carman, 1967); Pratap Kumar's chapter, *New approaches to the study of religion in India* (Kumar, 2004); and Rowena Robinson's section on South Asia in *Religious studies: A global view* (Robinson & Sinha, 2010). These last two articles, however, deal with research being conducted in various departments rather than with education and institutions (Robinson, 2004). Articles that focus more particularly on the status of religious studies itself are Vasudha Narayanan's *The history of the academic study of religion in universities, centers, and institutes in India* (Narayanan, 2015), Rajeev

Bhargava's *Secular state and religious education: The debate in India* (Bhargava, 2010), and Jack Llewellyn's *Nation without a soul: Religious studies in the Indian University* (Llewellyn, 2008). Important pioneering research also has been conducted by Joseph T. O'Connell (O'Connell, 1976; O'Connell, 2007; O'Connell, 2009), which he summarized at the IAHR conference in 2010 (O'Connell, 2011).

More substantial, on the other hand, is the literature on Indian secularity, secularism and other such terms (Nandy, 1988; Baird, 1991; Madan, 1997; Bhargava, 1998; Bhargava, 2006a; Bhargava, 2013; Galanter, 1999), largely due to the rising, sometimes violent, tide of political Hindu communalism, which has been responsible for such watershed events as the 1992 demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya and the 2002 Godhra train burning in Gujarat (Jafrelot, 2007). Other factors that have contributed to the urgency of the present discussion on secularism are India's tense relationship with Pakistan in the context of the so-called 'war on terror' and the increased political saliency of the Hindu nationalist party BJP, especially in the aftermath of its recent landslide election victory (e.g. Nag, 2014; Sardesai, 2014).

#### BANARAS HINDU UNIVERSITY

Established in 1916 and located in the Hindu pilgrim city Varanasi,<sup>4</sup> Banaras Hindu University (BHU) is today one of the largest and most important residential universities in South Asia, with a population of approximately 25,000 students and 1,700 faculty members. Due to its special status as an endowed university, the Indian Constitution (sect. 28:2)<sup>5</sup> grants it with more freedom to incorporate religion into its teachings (Renold, 2005; Pandey, 2014; Pandey & Chandramouli, 2011), as it does Aligarh Muslim University and other such religiously based schools. As an explicitly Hindu university BHU showcases its religious underpinnings in both its logo and its objectives:

To promote the study of the Hindu *śāstras* and of Sanskrit literature generally as a means of preserving and popularizing for the benefit of the Hindus in particular [...] the best

<sup>4</sup> Among Hindus, Varanasi is also known as: *sarva vidya kee rajdhani* (the capital of all disciplines and knowledge).

<sup>5</sup> Article 28 in the Constitution of India 1949 (§§ 1 and 2): 28. Freedom as to attendance at religious instruction or religious worship in certain educational institutions: (1) No religion instruction shall be provided in any educational institution wholly maintained out of State funds (<http://indiankanoon.org/doc/265235/>). (2) Nothing in clause (1) shall apply to an educational institution which is administered by the State but has been established under any endowment or trust which requires that religious instruction shall be imparted in such institution (<http://indiankanoon.org/doc/1747067/>).

thought and culture of the Hindus and all that was good and great in the ancient civilization of India [...] to promote the building up of character in youth by religion and ethics as an integral part of education (<http://www.bhu.ac.in/aboutus/obj.php>).

The university's principal founder, Madan Mohan Malaviya, envisioned a school that would employ in equal amounts the very best of two diverse spheres: India's traditional spirituality, wisdom and religious understanding on the one hand and the West's modern knowledge, organizational techniques, and rational disciplines of thought on the other. His aim was to focus as much on the creation of good, wise Hindus and human beings as on the teaching of academic and vocational knowledge and skills, with both aspects considered equally essential features of a well-rounded education, and necessary for the development of a prosperous India (Pandey & Chandramouli, 2011; Pandey, 2014). This vision is emblemized by the temple-like architecture of the buildings and the placement of the New Vishwanath temple in the very center of the mandala-inspired campus design (constructed between 1931 and 1966).<sup>6</sup>

## METHOD AND INFORMANTS

In February 2014, author one and two, in consultation with a BHU professor of sociology, identified those departments and subjects that would be the most suitable to involve in our study. We then presented the project to the heads of these departments and asked for their cooperation, after which we arranged to meet with their staffs and seek their participation. Our next step was to arrange meetings with these various staffs so as to provide them with information about the project and ascertain whether or not they were interested in participating. The selection of informants proceeded in two phases, with the aim of covering as wide a range of departments and subjects as possible. In the first phase, we selected 32 individuals, based upon position, gender, and age. Then, when some of the members of our initial group dropped out, author three, who holds a Ph.D. in sociology from BHU, selected their replacements; this selection can be considered a convenience sample.<sup>7</sup>

In the end we were able to interview 28 BHU faculty members (19 full professors and 9 lecturers and researchers) from the following faculties: Arts,

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<sup>6</sup> There are three Vishwanath temples in Varanasi: 1) the temple on the BHU campus; 2) the original Kashi Vishwanath Temple (today also known as the Golden Temple); and, 3) the Vishwanath temple established by Swami Karpatri, located near the banks of Ganges (Vidyarthi, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> There is no space herein to dwell upon our chosen methodology (qualitative interviews). Given the general development within social science, and the large number of books and papers published on qualitative methods over the last decades, we believe that this omission will be acceptable to most readers.

Performing Arts, Social Science, Medical Science and the newly instituted Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). In terms of gender, our informants consisted of 20 males and 8 females between the ages of 24 and 56 (7 were 40 or younger; 12 were between 41 and 60; and 9 were over 60); with regard to religious background, there were 23 Hindus, 1 Protestant and 1 Roman Catholic and 3 Muslims. Moreover, among our interview questions was an optional one about ethnicity/caste, and among the twenty-five respondents that chose to answer, 10 claimed to be Brahmin, 2 Rajput, 2 Kayastha and 1 OBC. The extent to which our sample is representative of the entire university faculty is unknown.

Between March and December of 2014, author three conducted the first round of interviews, and in February 2015, author one conducted a second round (which included discussions) with a select group of respondents from the first round — a group that was chosen on the basis of transcripts from the first round. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by the following five themes (which also included sub-themes): 1) the place and role of religion in society; 2) the place and role of religion at Indian universities; 3) the place and role of religion at BHU (on campus and in education, teaching and research); 4) the thinking of interviewees concerning what has been and what should be the focus and content of academic religious studies (historical studies and studies of lived religion with social-scientific methods) on the one hand, and theological studies on the other<sup>8</sup>; and, 5) how the interviewees understood the terms ‘religion’ and ‘secular’ as well as their relation with and attitudes towards the phenomena that these concepts denote. In this regard, the interview guide did not include pre-established definitions of concepts like religion, religiosity, secular, secularism and Hinduism, the reason being that in a multicultural, multireligious environment it is unlikely for such terms to be uniformly understood (Dubuisson, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2000; Lorenzen, 2006; Oberoi, 1994; Nongbri, 2013; Pennington, 2005; Sikka & Lori, 2014). Our

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<sup>8</sup> How the distinction between (academic) studies of religion (education/studies about religion) and theology (education/studies in religion) can be more exactly drawn is a much-debated issue (see, for example, the collection of articles in: Bird & Smith, 2009). One criterion that seems to be generally agreed upon is that academic studies or teaching of religion should not presuppose, endorse or negate the truth, correctness or falseness of any particular religious (or other) metaphysical view, claim or position, and that such studies or teaching should be non-confessional in the sense that it should treat all claims, *etc.* of every tradition in the same critical way, employing the standard theories and methods of the humanities and social sciences. This distinction was the background of the decisions of the US Supreme Court 1962 and 1963 (Engel vs. Vitale, 1962 and Abington School District vs. Schempp, 1963; see Gill, 1998: 298–313; <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1361>), which allowed for teaching, education and research about religion in the US educational system and the rapid growth of institutions providing such studies. For a discussion on how the views on religious studies have developed in the West, see Stausberg, 2007; Stausberg, 2008; Stausberg, 2009.

primary aim was thus to discover and analyze how the informants themselves understood these terms.

In addition, wherever applicable in relation to all five themes, the interviewees were asked to describe the current situation, share their views on how it had changed over the years, provide a critical evaluation of this development, and offer constructive suggestions regarding how things might be improved. The following analysis will focus on themes 3, 4 and 5.

During the interviews, respondents were given the opportunity to present additional angles and themes, and, at the end, were asked whether there was anything else they wished to contribute. They were also asked whether they would like to participate in further discussions on these matters (to which almost all agreed), and were further urged to contact us if they wished to elaborate on or clarify their thoughts or ask additional questions. Most of the interviews occurred at the respondent's department and were 1 to 4 hours in length, with some being conducted in two different sessions. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the third author, who also translated the Hindi portion of interviews that were conducted in both English and Hindi. No compensation was offered for participation, which is the reason that a handful of our initial interviewees decided to drop out.

The source material for this preliminary report consists of ten transcribed interviews from the first round as well as recorded interviews, discussions and field-notes from the second round.

## THEORY

The relation between higher education and the secularity of the state is central to this study, with the understanding that all social phenomena, including norms and values, are dependent on time and space and thus must be understood in relation to the historical and societal contexts in which they are embedded and from which they receive their meaning and function. And since the empirical factors that constitute a given social, political, economic and cultural context are constantly transforming, a second assumption is that any and all embedded phenomena are constantly transforming as well. This means that social phenomena such as religious traditions, norm and value systems, *etc.* tend to acquire new forms, functions, meanings and modes of expression when they are confronted with new societal conditions that require the provision of new answers, as well as the legitimization and confirmation of new identities. Thus the process of re-formulating, re-defining and re-evaluating beliefs, ideas and other social phenomena is ever taking place, meaning that the 'content' of a tradition, as well as the ways in which it is understood and expressed, change along with the society of which that tradition is a part. As such, the

phenomenon of religious studies must be understood within the framework of the larger narratives of modernity, secularization and globalization<sup>9</sup> (Bauman, 2000; Berger, Davie, & Fokas, 2008; Punter, 2007; Wagner, 2001; Dobbelaere, 2008; Norris & Inglehart, 2006; Pollack & Olson, 2008; Sander & Andersson, 2015; Sander, 2013; Sander, 2015).

This having been said, it is also important to note that the particular development in India is not merely the result of giant homogeneous processes such as globalization and secularization, but also has been vitally influenced by unique local aspects of these ongoing global transformations. It follows, then, that if scholarly research is to remain relevant, it must take into account the impact of local context on the global processes that are studied — as has been made clear in academic discussions on the resurgence of religion and religiosity (Berger, 1999; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2009; Shah, Toft, & Philpott, 2011; Berger & Huntington, 2002). In response to this need, we have thus taken the notion of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000; Eisenstadt, 2002; Eisenstadt, 2003; Berger & Huntington, 2002; Hefner, 1998; Schmidt, 2006)<sup>10</sup> as our guiding concept, but in the form of multiple secularities, with specific application to India (Wohlrab-Sahr & Burchardt, 2012; Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr, & Wegert, 2013; Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr, & Middell, 2015).

In this regard, Burchardt *et al.* make an important distinction between secularism and secularity, observing that the former denotes the ideology of separation between religion and other social spheres (derived from the ideas/ideology of European Enlightenment [Berger, Davie, & Fokas, 2008]) while the latter refers to the actual level of separation found in a particular society. In the case of India, they analyze the situation as a struggle between the idea of ‘equal respect for all religions’ (*sarva dharma sambhava*) and ‘Indian holism’, which is related to modern *Hindutva* ideology. For purposes of our study, it is important to recognize that operating behind both these guiding principles is the notion of a *dharmic* unity lying beneath the surface of diversity and difference.

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<sup>9</sup> Although this paper does not allow for a detailed discussion on these processes, we can point out the more important sociological markers (or sub-processes) that are often singled out as being identified with globalization: a) individualization; b) privatization; c) relativization; d) de-differentiation; e) diversification of lifestyles and identities; f) ideological, ethnic, religious, social and geographic mobility (mass migration and diasporization); and, g) loss of the power of traditional authorities. Another important and regularly mentioned feature is: h) technological innovations such as the Internet and other forms of electronic communication, socializing and interactivity. These processes, of course, have long been the cause of cultural change. In India, for example, the effects of colonialization brought about tremendous development and change — and a number of counter reactions as well.

<sup>10</sup> For the suggestion of the alternative term ‘regional modernities’ in relation to India, see Sivaramkrishnan & Agarwal, 2003.

The notion of multiple secularities provides a tool by which to address the contradictory, and somewhat confrontational, relationship between the development of religious studies and the secularity of the state in diverse regions of the world. In Sweden, for example, the progressive secularization of the state<sup>11</sup> has provided space for ‘non-religious’ academic religious studies at the expense of Christian theology. In India, on the other hand, the secularity of the state<sup>12</sup> has been a strong argument against the education and study of religion in public educational institutions. The idea of secularity thus has worked against the establishment of religious studies departments and centers, while not excluding the study of religious texts and rituals, religious sculptures and artefacts, and other such religious themes.<sup>13</sup> The particular genesis of the current situation can be traced to the mutual influences of British colonial power on the one hand and the Indian religious landscape on the other (*e.g.*, Narayanan, 2015).

The origins of the particularly Indian conception of secularization (as well as cognate terms such as secularity, secularism, the secular and so forth) are complex and much debated (Bhargava, 1998; Chatterjee, 1994; Madan, 1987; Needham & Sunder Rajan, 2007; Tejani 2007). How much, for instance, does it depend on traditional, historical Indian political and religious ideas and how much has it been influenced by various Western colonial and Christian views (Balagangadhara, 2005; Veer, 2001)?

In terms of the latter of these, most historians would agree that British colonial rulers introduced a variety of notions, structures and measures that radically transformed the social, religious and economic fabric of Indian life. Such influences can be seen, for example, in the various Hindu reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century, especially those originating in Bengal, such as the Brahmo Samaj, the Ramakrishna Math, and Swami Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna Mission. These movements had a dramatic effect on the way that Indians (and, for that matter, the rest of the world) viewed the Hindu religion and its role in society (Sardella, 2010), which thereby influenced Indian views on secularization as well.

Beyond this, views on how religion and secularization should be understood also have been shaped by the debates on the place and role of caste and religion between the major figures of the Indian independence movement:

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<sup>11</sup> The so-called Western meaning of the term implies a strict dichotomy between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’, with ‘secular’ meaning to be ‘free from religious influence’ on both the societal and the personal level.

<sup>12</sup> In the Indian sense of the term there is no strict dichotomy between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’, and ‘secular’ means ‘equal respect for all religions’. This, of course, makes the Western distinction between academic religious studies and theology more difficult to comprehend and consider relevant.

<sup>13</sup> That is, themes of study that could very well have been pursued in a religious studies department in Europe, Australia or USA.

Jawaharlal Nehru (India's first prime minister), Bhimrao Ram Ambedkar (the Chairman of India's Constituent Assembly and the first Law Minister of independent India) and Mahatma Gandhi (with the polemics between Ambedkar and Gandhi being especially heated). Both Nehru and Ambedkar, like many other Western-educated people involved in the freedom movement, were highly critical of religion and the caste system, concluding that they had absolutely no place in a modern democratic India (Deshpande, 2003: 98). Gandhi, on the other hand, seems to have found nothing fundamentally wrong with either the Hindu religion or Indian society's system of caste-based divisions, although his views on religion, caste and politics were complex, if not paradoxical — *e.g.*, simultaneously affirming both religious politics and secularism.

These diverging views seem to have had some basis in two distinct ways of understanding the nature of religion and its role and function in society. The Western educated Nehru and Ambedkar had what can be considered a classic orientalist, colonial understanding of religion, and especially Hinduism,<sup>14</sup> while Gandhi held a more traditional Hindu point of view. A cornerstone of the first view was that the original basis of the caste system was Hinduism itself, which has remained the strongest proponent and legitimizer of caste throughout India's history; as such, ridding India of the caste system absolutely entailed ridding India of the Hindu religion. Regarding Ambedkar,<sup>15</sup> although he did not share Nehru's admiration for socialism, the Soviet Union, and later, Mao, he did agree with Nehru that the caste system and the Hindu elite were the main obstacles to the dismantling of Hinduism. The solution, therefore, was to 'secularize' Hinduism and its representatives out of the public sphere — a truly Western approach to the problem.

According to Nehru, the Hindu-based caste system, and much that goes with it, is 'wholly incompatible, reactionary [and] restrictive', and a barrier to progress (Nehru, 1946: 257); and according to Ambedkar, nothing can be built on the foundation of Hinduism and caste: 'You cannot build up a nation; you cannot build up morality. Anything you will build on the foundations of cast will crack and will never be a whole' (Ambedkar, 2002: 102). And, of course, among the leaders of the freedom movement, Mahatma Gandhi was the primary opponent of this point of view.<sup>16</sup> Neither can one

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<sup>14</sup> Possibly the best description of this view can be found in Dumont's well-known work *Homo hierarchicus* (Dumont, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> Being born in a Mahar family at the bottom of the Indian caste system, he criticized Hinduism for the caste system and its consequences. On the other hand, he embraced Buddhism so as to overthrow the untouchability and humiliation thrust upon the people of his community by Hinduism.

<sup>16</sup> A excellent, if brief, discussion on the conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar can be found in Noorani, 2015.

dismiss the tragic events surrounding the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan — a time in which displacement, assault, rape and murder were everyday occurrences — as having contributed to the shaping of Indian views about religion, secularism, *etc.*

Finally, although many writers on these matters appear to have various ‘extra-scientific’ (or ideological) gees to fry (*e.g.*, Malhotra, 2011 vs. Yelle, 2012), one thing seems fairly clear: all camps agree that the Indian understandings of secularity, secularism, religion, religiosity, *etc.* are quite different from the standard Western understandings, which have been primarily shaped by an Enlightenment mindset that views both the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ as being naturally and categorically distinct. They also agree that such concepts are ideologically and theoretically constructed categorizations instituted by specific interest groups that had been desirous of pushing religion, the church and its representatives out of the political sphere and into a more private sphere, where they could do less sociopolitical harm. And as the Indian line between public and private is both weaker and differently drawn than its Western counterpart, it is understandable that ‘Western readers’ have found it difficult to comprehend the particularly Indian meaning of the secular, the religious and so forth.

In short, it is important for Western readers to understand that ‘secular/secularism’ in the Indian context does not primarily mean freedom from or opposition to religion. Rather the classical Indian model of secularism is, as expressed by Nehru, one that ‘honours all faiths equally and gives them [*i.e.*, their followers] equal opportunities’ (quoted in: Madan, 2003: 63). Based on this understanding, Tharamangalam thus writes: ‘the intention of the [Indian] Constitution is neither to oppose religion nor to promote a rationalization of culture but merely to maintain the neutrality of the state in matter of religion’ (Tharamangalam, 1995: 457).

One factor complicating the question of secularity and secularism is that ‘religion’, an English term with Latin origins, has a largely Western history. Yet even in the English-speaking West, it has been far from obvious how the term should be analyzed and defined, with discussions on this matter having produced a vast quantity of volumes over the last century.<sup>17</sup> Some scholars have even gone so far as to wonder whether non-Western peoples can even have ‘religions’ in the Western sense. This notwithstanding, it can be reasonably argued that although ‘religion’ may not be a traditional Indian concept, India’s rather long history of contact with the West, not the least

<sup>17</sup> The body of weighty volumes dedicated to the question of ‘religion’ and other related terms is obviously too vast to review herein; nonetheless, some of those that we consider worth looking into are: Fitzgerald, 2000; Masuzawa, 2005; Asad, 1993; Staal, 1989; Lash, 1996; Harrison, 1990; Stroumsa, 2010; Flood, 1999; Flood, 2012; Bianchi, 1994; De Vries, 2008; Clarke & Byrne, 1993; Sander, 1994; Sander, 2014.

through British colonialism, has ensured that at least most English-speaking academic Indians (such as our informants) have a fairly good notion of its general English meaning; they also likely understand why (and how) ‘Hinduism’ has come to be understood in Western literature as the ‘religion’ of India — despite the fact that for most Hindus, Hinduism is technically not a religion in this sense, but rather *sanatana dharma*, the eternal duty and cosmic order.

## ANALYSIS

The analysis of the interview transcripts involved a combination of deductive (or theoretical) and inductive thematic analysis, the first of which can be described as top down and the second as bottom up or data driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 83). To begin with, both the first and the second author separately read and then reread the transcripts; then both authors separately coded the dataset, attempting to fit data to the research questions. Ideas that arose for possible other structures were noted, and then both authors came together to discuss those ideas and employ new ideas in re-coding. All codes were then organized into preliminary themes and the coded data extracts were reviewed to determine whether the themes captured and fit the dataset. Next, the codes were reorganized under six main themes: i. the place and role of religion in society; ii. religion as ‘religiosity/spirituality’ or *sanatana dharma* vs. political ideology/communitarianism; iii. religion vs. *dharma*; iv. secularization; v. religion in education in general; and vi. religion/*dharma* in education at BHU. Finally, all data extracts were reviewed in order to find quotations that best captured the essence of each theme and subtheme.

Our informants’ various views and reflections on the academic study and place and role of religion will be presented in terms of the above themes, with explanations and quotations indicating the relationship between the data and each theme. All quotations have been abbreviated and edited to facilitate reading and are anonymously presented in order to protect the confidentiality of the informants.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The problem of informant anonymity is a thorny one. In our case, due to the limited number of staff at each department, information on age and gender carries the potential of revealing the identity of the informant. Thus, in this article, we have decided against attaching such information to our informant quotes. The downside of this decision is, of course, that it makes it impossible for the reader to compare the relation between the opinions of individual informants. When at the point of analyzing the entirety of the material, we intend to reconsider this decision and possibly find a clever way to provide this information while simultaneously preserving anonymity.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1 The place and role of religion in society	Sub-theme i: Traditionally/historically Sub-theme ii: Changes in the role of religion in society
Theme 2 Religion as 'religiosity/spirituality' or <i>sanatana dharma</i> vs. political ideology/ communitarianism	
Theme 3 Religion vs. <i>dharma</i>	Sub-theme i: religion $\neq$ <i>dharma</i> Sub-theme ii: <i>dharma</i> $\approx$ universal human values
Theme 4 Secularization	Sub-theme i: The meaning of the concept secularism Sub-theme ii: The colonial heritage Sub-theme iii: Pseudo-secularism
Theme 5 Religion in education in general	
Theme 6 Religion/ <i>dharma</i> in education at BHU	Sub-theme i: Malaviya's two pedagogical ideals Sub-theme ii: the decline of Malaviya's pedagogical ideals Sub-theme iii: Religion in the education at BHU

## FINDINGS

All informants held views on what religion 'is', how the term 'religion' should be understood in the Indian context, and about the place, role and function of religion in India, both historically and in the present. The following material consists of a portion of these views, selected in accordance with the themes and subthemes identified in the analysis, with our central themes being more richly presented, and each paragraph representing one specific informant.

### THEME 1: THE PLACE AND ROLE OF RELIGION IN SOCIETY

#### Sub-theme i: Traditionally/historically

All informants agreed that India always has been a place where religion has played an extremely important role on both the societal and the individual level:

India is, or rather has been, a religious country since time immemorial. When I say 'India is a religious country', the idea is that religion, particularly through Hinduism, has been an important part of the life of the people of this country since time immemorial. Religion has been deeply embedded in the life, the living pattern, of the people in India. There is a deep connection between the Indian social milieu and the whole idea of religion. [...] Religion has been the inspiring, in a way the dominant, factor in India's social life. Most of the things — our thinking, our rituals, our living, our social patterns — all these are, in one way or the other, directly and indirectly based on religion and religious thinking.

For a very long time religion has been the cornerstone of our lives; [...] all of us are religious. [...] Religion is a very important marker of our identity.

Religion has always occupied a very, very important place: at the national level, at the regional level, at local level, and even at the familial and individual level.

### Sub-theme ii: Changes in the role of religion in society

Most informants thought that the role of religion, both in society and in individuals' lives, had increased rather than decreased over the last several decades:

Religion and religiosity has not diminished. On the contrary, I feel that it has increased. There are more people visiting temples, more devotees now going to mosques, *gurdwaras* and churches. Why? As we are becoming modern, I think people are also becoming more religious [...] — India is increasingly becoming more religious.

I think people are becoming more religious today, they are going to temples and mosques — large numbers of people are going there. [...] For the last 10 years we are feeling that more and more persons are becoming religious.

I am becoming very conscious of an increasingly strong existence of caste and religion in our society, and how these define our acts or our judgment or any kind of behavior we have.

Religious symbolism of various kinds has been more and more prevalent, both in society and on campus, during the last years. Both in terms of dress and in physical symbols in the environment,

I think that visible religion is increasing. There are a lot of religious activities across communities, across religions.

Our religious identity is our major identity, and we seem to like to emphasize that identity more and more.

Groups increasingly like to express their identities. [...] Homogeneity within a particular group is increasingly becoming stronger. [...] The exhibitory aspect of religion has taken an upper hand.

THEME 2: RELIGION AS 'RELIGIOSITY/SPIRITUALITY' OR *SANATANA DHARMA*  
VS. POLITICAL IDEOLOGY/COMMUNITARIANISM

Most of our informants qualified their statements about the role of religion in a 'normative' manner, drawing a distinction between 'religiosity/spirituality' or *sanatana dharma* on the one hand (which most viewed positively) and 'political ideology' on the other (which most viewed negatively). Here 'political ideology' can be roughly taken to mean the deployment of ideology as a means of instigating political or communitarian mobilization, organization and activism:

There are two forms of religion in the society. The one is that horrible form that makes us afraid, whether that is the slogan of *Nara-e-Takdeer*, *Allab-o-Aqbar* or *Jay Shree Ram*. This is certainly the misuse of religion. [...] The other is real religion, which is a very good thing.

If you really look at religion's role in organizing people against somebody as a kind of marker of identity, using it to highlight your differences and get organized, definitely it is negative; but if people could become really religious then there will be a lot of positive effect because religions across the board teach almost the same positive insights, like compassion, fellow feeling, fraternity, equality and the universal identity of the soul.

Political parties have increasingly started propagating one religion or the other. [...] I find that the role of religion has been changing in Indian society since religion has become a vehicle of, a mobilization, of political support.

Religion is a good thing, but religion becomes a problem when it becomes an instrument for acquiring power in society, an instrument that provides a ground for social division, the ground for social mobilization. [...] Making use of religion this way is abusing religion.

THEME 3: RELIGION VS. *DHARMA*

Sub-theme i: religion  $\neq$  *dharma*

All our informants seemed to have a fairly good idea of the general (vernacular) meaning of 'religion' in a Western-Christian context.<sup>19</sup> They were also aware of

<sup>19</sup> Roughly: 1) 'believing' in some kind of objectively existing transcendent being or order that is of normative/ethical relevancy regarding how one should live one's life; 2) 'believing'

the Western-Christian distinction between religion and religiosity, where the first refers to a sociological category of institutionalized forms and the second to individual, personal attitudes (beliefs, feelings and behaviors). Many of them also believed that a major distinction between 'religion', as generally understood in 'the West', and Hinduism (or Buddhism or Sikhism or Jainism) is that the former has its main focus and emphasis on 'believing the right things' (orthodoxy) whereas the latter has its main focus and emphasis on 'doing the right things' (orthopraxy):

'Religion' has a different meaning in India than what it has in the USA or Europe. So when they talk about religion, their versions would not be applicable in our country. We need to define 'religion' according to the context of the Indian subcontinent, where, I think, 'a special way of life' is the best way 'religion' can be defined — a higher pursuit, as described in the Vedas.

In Semitic religions, 'religion' means a set of conducts that you do or not do, and if you don't you are a heretic or somebody who is not religious. In Hindu *saṃskāra*, we are not religious, [...] I mean ours is not 'religion', ours is *dharmā*, and *dharmā* means respect for a tree, respect for a flower, respect for a bird, respect for a lion. For us everything is animate; nothing is inanimate. [...] In that sense we are *dharmic*; [...] we have respect for everything.

But then again, as I am telling you, there is a strong difference between the word 'Dharma' and the word 'religion'. But in normal parlance we have translated the word 'dharma' with 'religion'.

The original spirit of Indian is *dharmā*! I am not calling it 'religion'. 'Religion' is an English translation for the word *dharmā*; and religion has a different meaning and *dharmā* has a different meaning. So, for Indians, *dharmā* means a way of life: we should conduct our lives in a proper way, in a way conducive to the growth of the society, to the growth of the nation, to the growth of our people [...].

### Sub-theme ii: *Dharma* ≈ universal human values

What is *sanātana dharmā* according to our informants? One of the main themes that seems to ring through in the interviews is the idea that if you study the various *darśanas* and other religious traditions of the world 'deeply enough', you will find 'at the bottom' that all *darśana*/traditions, all religions, are 'the same'. And they were clear about the fact that 'religion' is not a good

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in some sort of afterlife, etc.; 3) 'believing' in some sort of theodicy (people will 'reap what they sow'); 4) 'believing' that one should worship this transcendent 'being' in a more or less ritualized fashion; 5) 'believing' that 'being a good Christian' roughly means that one should live in accordance with the norms and values learned or deduced from that transcendent 'being'; and so on and so forth.

term to designate this ‘sameness’, but that *dharmā* (or universal human values) could be:

There is a difference between how ‘religion’ is conceived here as opposed to the West and other places! Here we are more interested in *dharmā*, and *dharmā* is essentially universal ‘values’ and ‘ethics’. It’s very true that the basic tenets of all the religions are same; [...] there is nothing like ‘Hindu religion’ as such, it is a name given by outsiders. It used to be *sanātana dharmā*, which is in a larger realm, in the universal realm.

But there is a great deal of confusion because our Hinduism is not religion, it is *dharmā*; whereas other sects have a religion — sets of fixed values — Hinduism is free of all such fixed sets of values; it is universally applicable to everybody.

There is absolutely no religion at this department. We do not teach or study religion here. We only teach and study Buddhism! And Buddhism is not a religion, it is *dharmā*: an empirically based description of how to get from a state of suffering (*dukkha*) to a state of bliss (*ānanda*). And *dharmā* is one and only one; it is universal, even if it is described in different words within different *darśana*. But if you study deeply enough you will realize that it is only just differences in words, no real difference. With a proper understanding of all *darśana*, all religions, we start seeing all as one. The issue of religion is very simple. The world has only two religions: good and bad.

Ayurveda is not based on religion; it has nothing to do with religion. It is based on the Veda, which has nothing to do with religion, but, as its name ‘Veda’ (‘Truth’) indicates, contains the truths about humans and human life.

The Human Values Courses here at the IIT are not based on religion, but on *dharmā*, which is best described as a set of universal human values of a transcendent origin that are innate in all human beings, and therefore compatible with all religious traditions. [...] These values, however, cannot be taught by books or by lectures. Each individual has to be taught, by seminar-like activities, how to discover them in themselves, and how to realize them in their lives.

Religious study never means to provide education about any particular religion but about developing an urge so that the ideas within you, the values you are born with, the natural dispositions in you, can be awakened and gain power to work.

#### THEME 4: SECULARIZATION

##### Sub-theme i: The meaning of the concept secularism

There is among the informants a near consensus on the Nehruvian understanding of secularism as ‘equal respect for all religions’:

But my point is simple: secularism means that every religion must bloom together and flourish with intermingling and it should not be the sectarian, or the sectarian idea, or the thought or the communal idea towards the others. Secularism means equal respect for the others.

As I see it, and this is typical in the Indian context, in secularism each person is allowed to follow his or her own religion; the State will not interfere with it. [...] It is not that nobody is to have a religion or that the State will ensure that nobody is to have a religion. No! It is that everybody can have a religion, and the State will not interfere with this. But if the State doesn't interfere, this immediately brings responsibilities that you also should not interfere with the State.

The knotty problem of Hinduism as a 'religion', however, receives more critical treatment:

The terms secular and secularism were designed in the context of European history, when Christians and Muslims struggled in religious wars and all such things. When people were living together harmoniously, then the term 'secular' didn't mean anything because when you say 'secular' in the Indian context then you have to define Hinduism as a 'religion' in the Western sense. But Hinduism is a way of life, not an organized kind of thing.

One informant, with implicit reference to the Muslim minority, took the principle of tolerance to the extreme by declaring that only the members of a given religious tradition should be allowed to criticize it:

See, the type of secularism India needs, with open heart, is that everybody should have freedom to follow her/his religion in a complete way. Along with this, nobody should have the right to pass negative comments on others' religions. Even if there are some problems within some religion, only the followers of that particular religion should be able to comment on that.

In counterbalance, another informant considered the Muslim minority to be misusing the idea of secularism in precisely this way:

The others, the Muslims, are taking advantage of secularism as if it is there to protect them and give them the liberty to do anything. But if we compare them with the Indian Hindu society, it is not as fundamentalist or traditionalist as that; all the problems are coming because of the Muslim society. It is just that every action has equal and opposite reaction!

## Sub-theme ii: The colonial heritage and Indian traditions

Two informants explicitly referred to India's colonial heritage; here is one example:

It was a kind of modernity that was imposed, a colonial kind of modernity. [...] The problem of our modernization is that most of it, the dominant part, is Western modernity. And what are the parameters of Western modernity? [...] Yes, the democratic polity is there, the state is secular, and there is tolerance for difference — these things we have learned from the West, [...] that is all right. [...] But, at the same time, the kind of power we try to exert on nature, other human beings, and also animals — violent technology and all the progress we have made — [...] these things are the down side of that modernity.

The above informant also argued that religion is an inescapable part of Indian modernity, while another maintained that there is an Indian tradition of secularism that predates the colonial period — *i.e.*, a peaceful coexistence between religions:

In the history of secularism in India, as compared to Europe, we did not have so many religious wars, and all lived together. There was a strong branch of secularism in the Indian ethos, and once you start disturbing that it becomes translated into religious conflict and all that. I think again of the honeycomb structure, with its cellular construction. Everything was more harmonious within the larger framework and that was the main characteristic of Indian society.

### Sub-theme iii: Pseudo-secularism

Some informants criticized secularism as a mere sham hiding a political agenda:

Politics! Party line interest! They want to appease the party that is in power, and they want that party to remain in power. Apparently, it pretends to be doing a very secular kind of politics but in spirit it is highly communalized; it is based on a very strong partisan approach, fully biased.

Another difficulty is that as long as you have highly educated enlightened politicians, yes, that can be managed. Once you no longer have leaders of that caliber, the agenda turns into personal political loss and gain, and that, sincerely, is where most of our leaders failed. That is why you have either pseudo-secularists or out and out communalists in charge. Although, as per the Indian Constitution, which concerns the principles and spirit for our state, there is no place for such persons, but that is what we have.

For a very long time religion has been the cornerstone of our lives; the recent secular polity is only related to statecraft. They have tried to declare out of necessity that the state must be secular because most of the founding fathers of our modernity, our state and our constitution wanted to modernize India in a way that would allow India to progress. This can be seen as a very artificial means, but if you look at the agenda of some of the top leaders, that means was symbolically used to political motivate our youths. All of them were religious; Gandhi was very religious in his approach, thus the symbols he used to motivate the masses were deeply rooted in religion. The same

thing was true of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who wanted to galvanize Indians. He did it through religious power, by using Ganesh *puja* and also by presenting Shivaji as a role model. So only late in the struggle for freedom was there the idea of uniting the people through the notion modernity imported from the West.

#### THEME 5: RELIGION IN EDUCATION IN GENERAL

A majority of our informants were positive to the idea that there should be some elements of religious education (education about religion) on the primary and secondary school levels:

Religious values should be the cornerstone of all educational programs, but the so-called secular state doesn't want to bring in a very healthy discussion of religion in the curriculum.

Religious studies should certainly play a part at the primary and secondary school level, [...], like the 'role of religion' in Indian politics, and more so, some of the problems India is facing, like the problem of communalism. [...] In my view, there is an increasing need to study religion, its impact and the transformational forms that religion is adopting in Indian society, [...], why such tendencies are growing, [...] why fundamentalism either in Hindu or in Islam or in any religion is developing in our society? This is a major concern that needs to be addressed.

I feel that there should be a kind of a common course for all across the table, maybe for a year, maybe for two years, where we will be able to communicate to the school children irrespective of religion, irrespective of their creed and caste, all the major religions and their teachings, so the students will have a better understanding.

We should teach our students in the schools about good points of all religions, some sort of history, some great personalities of all religions. Then probably in the young mind, the affection and love for others' religion would come out. And I think that should be done.

It should be across the table: all children must know the major religions and the teachings of major religions in our country.

#### THEME 6: RELIGION IN THE EDUCATION AT BHU

##### Sub-theme i: Malaviya's two pedagogical ideals

All informants were aware of, and almost all were positive towards, Malaviya's pedagogical ideals for higher education, which had two equal foci: on the one

hand, to equip students with the best academic knowledge in their fields (from both the Indian and the Western scientific traditions), and on the other, to mold students into good and wise human beings,<sup>20</sup> meaning to ‘cultivate’ them into good Hindus in accordance with the eternal and universal spiritual wisdom of the Vedas:

One of the prime objectives of this university was character building; Malaviyaji thought that without character building you cannot produce young dynamic persons. He thought that the Gita embodied most of the values of India. So he emphasized that everyone should take a course on the Gita, and for this purpose BHU used to have ‘Gita Lectures’. Earlier, you know, Dr. Radhakrishnan [an ex-VC of BHU and ex-President of India], and all used to teach the Gita and give lectures for which the university was very famous all over. Over the years and time that course got diluted with student agitation.

This campus has a unique history, and this university was created with the aim and objective of realizing some of the glorious traditions of ancient Indian Hindu culture. This can be seen, for example, in the placement of the *Vishwanath* temple in the center of the university. You also will find that the architecture of the entire university has been developed as a temple like structure, and that the university flag is saffron in colour. [...] This gives you a predominant feeling that the university is closely reflecting Hindu religious practices and life. [...] Thus there is no doubt that the Hindu religion has been very predominant at BHU — in its thinking, in its philosophy.

Malaviyaji started this. His main inspirations were, on the one hand, the Theosophical Society, and when Malaviyaji was, you can say, a traditional modernizer, he wanted the society to be organized in a manner in which you will have all the benefits of modernity, Western modernity, without really discarding the tradition altogether. He wanted to identify whatever was best in the tradition and integrate it with whatever was best in the West — to bring about a kind of synthesis. So this was the very foundation; this kind of synthesis was there in the ideology of the construction of this university.

Primarily BHU was established to particularly impart the study of Hindu religion and culture; that was the main aim of the university. Although the founder, Malaviya, was a devout, in some sense, orthodox Hindu, he was a large-minded person who never tried to restrict himself to the orthodoxy of Hindu Religion.

### Sub-theme ii: the decline of Malaviya’s pedagogical ideals

According to most informants, the second of Malaviya’s ideals has more and more disappeared, largely due to British colonialism, Nehruvian secularism,

<sup>20</sup> As we understand it, Malaviya’s ideas about ‘student cultivation’ come pretty close to how Saba Mahmood explicates the process of cultivating religiosity in her now famous study on the cultivation of Islamists (Mahmood, 2005).

and India's half-century of modernization, globalization and Westernization. Most also believed that these forces had been at work from both above (politicians and policymakers only focusing on India's economic development and success) and below (students having increasingly accepted 'Western', capitalistic, individualistic, urban values and goals — making careers, making money, making it in the 'big global cities'):

That is because of the so-called secular state doesn't want to bring in a very healthy discussion about religion in the curriculum. Curriculums are being made so-called scientific and factual, which, however, is an impossible ideal because none of the so-called facts are free of ideology. [...] They are the demonstration of a particular kind of ideology, a kind of Nehruvian vision of India: the idea that India will suddenly become modern based on so-called scientific values. We are caught up in this kind of mood, a kind of mindset that goes back to our colonial past. We adapt all our resources and educational strategies to the models that are created and implemented in the West. We try to make up for lost time by trying to ape the West as far as possible. Gandhi and Malaviya were smart enough to see this and therefore they had thought of a very different kind of educational system that would be a kind of happy synthesis between the best values of Western modernity and the essential qualities of a traditional life. But in their haste to modernize India, to bring us on a par with the modern so-called developed countries, our policymakers actually left that educational model way behind.

In the new educational system, the British completely excluded religion. [...] Because of that, human beings have become like machines in today's education system. The ethical and disciplinary components of the *Gurukul* system are no longer included and available in the modern education system.

So these Western-educated intellectuals, from Nehru to the present time, have been replicating whatever was found fashionable or recognized as knowledge in the West. So therefore a lot of what was here in the East, that was closer to our needs, to our Indian value system, it was neglected and looked down upon.

Under the hegemony of colonial modernity our basic values were thought to be superstition; so, in the process, we lost a lot of traditional wisdom, traditional technology and traditional philosophy — and some of the best techniques were also lost because of our sluggish pursuit of the ideal subjugates. So in that sense we created an education system that gives a lot of value to the capacity of the individual to learn and earn in economic terms only.

Globalization has brought human beings together in a republic of consumption. It has tried to organize the society as a kind of contract among consumers. And globalization is actually the globalization of the market. Technology has enabled mankind to consume efficiently. At the same time it is also making a great dent on individuality. The capacity of the individual to reflect and think, think judiciously, and make ethical choices, is becoming very difficult. So the way technology

is progressing, and the way globalization is progressing, is going to affect human beings in a way that will make them less and less religious; because religion requires deep reflection. What technology demarcates, and the mass media is doing, is not allowing that space — not allowing that reflective moment where encounters with the self will be possible.

A great deal of emphasis is being given on technological education and management and to create people who will become successful in the market. [...] It is in the best interest of the multinational capital to produce individuals who are only bothered about becoming efficient consumers.

In the modern educational system we have made economic man, production of the economic man, the goal of education. The purpose of education has been to sort of lend a hand to the economy. So, in that sense, the aim of true education has been undermined after the independence in the country.

Our traditional system has been sidetracked during the last 250 years since the British were ruling us. Now the system is mostly influenced by the discourses that are developed in the Western world. And that world is not really in tune with our concepts and ideals. For the last 250 years all our traditions have been transformed, particular within the elite that the British Government created — what we call the ‘middle classes’, for whom religion is not the same as it is for most Indians. For them, ‘religion’ is religion in the Western sense, meaning diverse sects such as Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. [...] But from the Indian point of view, this is not religion; religion is *dharma*.

### Subtheme iii: Religion in the education at BHU

A majority of informants thought that some form of religious education should be re-introduced into BHU’s curriculum so as to bring BHU education back in line with ‘Malaviyaji’s’ original pedagogical ideals:

I think instead of just having this so-called secular education, we should have a kind of comparative religion curriculum in the very beginning and bring about a change in learners about the values of human beings, make them conscious of their true potential, which is not confined to only become efficient consumers in the market society, but as worthy human beings. [...] I think the curricula should be expanded in this way in order to really incorporate some of the best insights of comparative religious studies; and students should be made aware of their rich cultural heritage and the proper way to study religion and the values religions have been promoting in human society across the ages. These things should form a part of any healthy curriculum; [...] I think all religions should be taught and they will see that most of the religions talk of the same universal values in different ways. [...] This university was founded along those lines.

I think that some understanding of the major religions of the world should be there: their basic tenets and their common human values, their ethical systems, and then gradually, their philosophical contents [...] All disciplines should have some components of religious studies in their curriculum.

There should be a compulsory course for every student, like earlier there was a compulsory requirement to qualify in the Gita-Course in order to obtain the final degree. In the same way, 'religion-study' (*-śikṣā*) should be made compulsory for all students. And by 'religion-study' I mean that it should be general and not reflective of any particular religious tradition, especially in this country, which contains so many religions. And there should be more emphasis on their common 'values'.

Religious studies is very important; it is very important to have a value education because without having the values component of your knowledge you cannot really develop true knowledge of anything. Religious studies should be taught, no doubt about it; because in society it is important that people should learn about values, ethics, religion *etc.* [...] Comparative study is very important [...] it should be based on historical, sociological, economical perspectives [...] and one should study how religion functions in the society.

Ideally, every discipline should have components of religious studies. [...] The importance of religion in making society and in development of human life should be made an integral part of studies in all disciplines; [...] that would provide religious studies relevance in contemporary situation.

Religious issues have been of increasing interest and importance lately, so our teaching should be in-tune with its time, it should make religion relevant. If you do not walk with time, you would be left far behind. [...] Things should be made relevant and up to date as far as teaching is concerned. Lack of religion has been the biggest lacuna here with us [at BHU].

It should be like a compulsory subject in my opinion. Students of every discipline should study that paper. Students should be given value education [along] with their traditional mainstream courses: this is the purpose. [...] The main thing is that they should be taught religion and human values from the graduation level, irrespective of their main subjects.

Religious study should be there! Comparative religious study should be there! Every student should know about the comparative religion. Religious study is a very, very important thing; it is a very essential component of any education.

My conclusion is that that if people are to become secular in the real sense, not in that shadowy way, they must have a really good knowledge of comparative religion. They must study religions.

DISCUSSION<sup>21</sup>

The aim of this preliminary study has been to determine if, how and to what extent the resurgence of religion in society, brought about by the processes of modernization and globalization (Kärner & Aldridge, 2004; Lambert, 1999), has influenced BHU views about the place and role of religion and religious studies. Most informants believed that, especially over the last several decades, religion and religiosity have increased rather than decreased, both in society and at BHU, with many expressing a negative attitude towards the former development and a positive attitude towards the latter. Most of them were clear about the fact that what is meant by ‘religion’ in India — that which received their positive response — differs markedly from what is normally meant by ‘religion’ in the West. For them, religion means *sanatana dharma*, and by this they mean a set of universal human values of transcendent origin that are inherent in all human beings, and thus independent of any given religious tradition in the Western sense; or, as expressed by B.K. Matilal, ‘by the term [*sanatana-dharma*] [...] I understand nothing short of moral virtue’ (Matilal, 2002: 50).

When it comes to the teaching of religion, most informants are positive towards teaching about religion in primary and secondary school. They believe it would be good to teach it both as history of religion or comparative religion in the Western sense (*i.e.*, knowledge about the basic doctrines, *etc.* of the various religious traditions) and as basic religious (human) values (*i.e.*, *dharma*). Only a minority mentioned that it would be good to include social scientific studies of ‘lived religion’ (Orsi, 2003; McGuire, 2008) and the social and political roles of religion in Indian society.

All informants were aware of, and positive toward, Malaviya’s dual goals of education at BHU. They also agreed that the goal of molding students to become good and wise Hindus (Indians) had been diluted and more or less lost over the years. The majority argued for a return to a stronger focus on ‘character cultivation’ in the education programs at BHU. The reasons given for its decline include the introduction of Western ideas and ideals through colonialization and modernization, and the fact that these had been taken over by India’s post-independence political leaders, especially Nehru.<sup>22</sup> A further reason is that they have been written into the statutes of the University Grants Commission (UGC), which has been assigned the task of promoting education

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<sup>21</sup> In the discussion section we will make a few claims regarding the views of our informants that are not brought out in the above analysis. Everything claimed here, however, is clearly stated in our empirical material.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. C.K. Raju, *Escaping Western superstition* (n.d.) accessible at his private website: <http://ckraju.net>.

that is in keeping with the preamble to the Indian Constitution, which asserts that India is a socialist, secular democratic republic.<sup>23</sup>

While all the informants knew about Article 28, Clause 1 of the Indian Constitution, which mandates that there should be ‘no religious instruction in state educational institutions’, none seemed to know about Clause 2, which exempts ‘endowed universities’ such as BHU from the requirements of Clause 1. In other words, our informants seemed to believe that in order to be eligible for UGC subsidies and academic accreditation, all Central Universities, including BHU, must offer a ‘secular’ curriculum that is reflective of the classical Nehruvian model.

Moreover, none of them seemed familiar with the various educational commissions that have been discussing the teaching of religion in Indian schools and universities since 1938.<sup>24</sup> This is interesting since several sections in the reports from these commissions seem open to the idea that non-confessional teaching about religion is compatible with the constitutional claim that India is a secular state, with ‘secularity’ merely meaning ‘neutrality and impartiality of the state in matters of religion’. In keeping with this understanding, religion can be taught not only comparatively, in the traditional Western sense, but also as a means of instilling students with moral values and spirituality in the Malaviyan sense — something that some of these commissions went so far as to recommend.

This leads us to believe that while most informants seemed clear about the distinction between the ‘Western’ and ‘Indian’ meaning of ‘secular’, they nonetheless assumed that it was some version of the former that had been really intended, and surreptitiously achieved, by Indian politicians (not the least Nehru) and the UGC. As such, this intention was seen by most informants as being the primary cause of the decline and disappearance of various kinds of religious education and research (with the main exception of studies of historical religious texts) in all departments, with the possible exception of the Faculty of Sanskrit Vidya Dharma Vijnan Sankaya at BHU.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> However, the words ‘socialist’ and ‘secular’ did not appear in the original 1947 text; rather they were added to the Preamble in a 1976 Amendment (Madan, 2003: 63).

<sup>24</sup> The Zakir Hussain Committee (1938); the University Education Commission (also known as the Radhakrishnan Commission (1948); the Sri Prakasa Commission (1959), and the Kothari Commission (1964–1966).

<sup>25</sup> These opinions to some extent echo Rajiv Malhotra’s claim that: ‘The present essay deals with [...] Religious Studies, which is growing rapidly in the US and in many other countries. Unfortunately, this is not so in India, where a peculiar brand of ‘secularism’ has prevented academic Religious Studies from entering the education system in a serious manner. Therefore, most Indians do not have the necessary competence in this academic field to be able to understand how it differs from both (i) religious instruction that one expects to find in a temple, church or mosque, and (ii) political or popular ideological depictions of religion in the media’ ([http://creative.sulekha.com/risa-lila-1-wendy-s-child-syndrome\\_103338\\_blog%233%233](http://creative.sulekha.com/risa-lila-1-wendy-s-child-syndrome_103338_blog%233%233)).

Another reason for the loss of Malaviya's ideal of 'cultivation' that was mentioned by most informants was that the students themselves had been adopting and/or accepting Western, capitalistic, individualistic/egoistic norms and values (Westernization). And curbing this process among students was often sighted as the reason that value (*Dharma*) education needed to be introduced at the university.

The majority of the informants thought that the loss of Malaviya's original ideal of student cultivation was indeed a loss, and thus advocated bringing it back into the curriculum. When it came to how that should be done, however, their opinions diverged, with some advocating the idea of comparative religion (so as to 'develop mutual respect for all the worlds religions' and 'curb communitarian tensions') and most others advocating what they claimed to be Malaviya's original ideals: 'cultivating' morally good individuals on the basis of the traditional Indian wisdom from the Vedas — *i.e.*, to infuse students with human values that are characteristic of *sanatana dharma*. One reason given for advocating the latter was that it would not come into conflict with the restriction mentioned in the Constitution and promoted by the UGC, since *dharmā* (according to them) is not religion, but rather universal human values.

One way of understanding these results is to remember that due to the forces of both 'hard' (technological, economic) and 'soft' (ideological, philosophical, cultural) modernity, India has undergone tremendous changes at a breathtaking pace over the last 30 to 40 years (Berger, 1997; Dev, 2015; D'Costa, 2012; Sander, 2015). Earlier we argued that when the economic and technological structures of a society undergo change, its embedded social phenomena (of which religion is one) undergo change as well, acquiring new forms, functions, meanings and modes of expression in order to remain functionally relevant within its new context.

It is also widely assumed among social scientists that, apart from everything else, modernization/globalization tends to create the precise conditions for religion to once again become attractive, both as religiosity and as social and political mobilizer (Karner & Aldridge, 2004; Sander, 2015; Sander & Andersson, 2015). Samuel Huntington<sup>26</sup> summarizes this complex interplay between globalization and religion as follows:

In the early phases of change, Westernization thus promotes modernization. In the later phases, modernization promotes de-Westernization and the resurgence of indigenous culture in two ways. At the societal level, modernization enhances the economic, military and political power of the society as a whole and encourages the people of that society to have confidence in their culture and to become culturally assertive.

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<sup>26</sup> For a more detailed description of various analyses of the relation between (post-) modernity and globalization on the one hand, and religion and religious resurgence on the other, see Sander & Andersson, 2015.

At the individual level, modernization generates feelings of alienation and anomie as traditional bonds and social relations are broken and this leads to crises of identity to which religion provides an answer (Huntington, 1996: 75–76).

Because hard-globalization processes often lead to neo-liberal ideologies in economics (with all that this entails), they tend to shake up certainties, unfreeze orthodoxies and foment revolutionary sentiments, especially when combined with processes of soft globalization. On the individual level, they tend to produce anomie, various forms of deprivation and feelings of uncertainty, thus giving rise to counter-reactions. Traditional religion and forms of morality are some of the many drivers of these counter-reactions since they claim to provide certainty in a world where secular certainties are being constantly undermined. Karner and Aldridge argue, in this regard, that ‘the social and psychological implications of globalization and postmodernity reveal the continuing or, more accurately, revived cultural relevance of religion’ (Karner & Aldridge, 2004: 9, 24; Berger, 1999; Lambert, 1999). It is this process of accepting the ‘content’ of hard modernization/globalization on the one hand and reacting against or trying to replace its soft ‘content’ on the other that constitutes the basis for the above mentioned theories of multiple modernities/globalizations — the attempt to supplant Western norms, values, manners and customs with traditional, domestic ones (Vedic, Islamic, *etc.*) (Sander & Andersson, 2015; Sander, 2015).

The almost unanimous opinion about the need to reintroduce Malaviya’s ideal of ‘moral cultivation’ seems reflected in the fact that the IIT at BHU has for some time required all students to attend its Human Values Courses. The main argument for the reestablishment of these courses involves a rejection of the ‘common assumption’ that ‘with enough knowledge and technology, one can manage planet earth’ — an assumption that is deemed both wrongheaded and counterproductive. To counteract this assumption, the aim of these courses is ‘to enable students to discriminate between the valuable and the superficial in real situations in their life’ and ‘to bring out the human values that we all possess inherently’, which, if achieved, will enable the students ‘to understand the essential harmony in the world around them and to empower them to participate proactively in its dynamic’ rather than ‘get oriented with the defaults in society viz., emphasis on superficial and non-essential glamor, consumerist lifestyle, and false sense of satisfaction (of dejection) in competition and one-upmanship’ (Kumar *et al.*, n.d.). The basic idea behind these courses is that ‘a better human being is also a better engineer’.<sup>27</sup> This general argument was repeatedly echoed by informants (professors) from different faculties and departments, *vis-à-vis* their own subjects.

<sup>27</sup> We also heard these arguments in interviews and discussions with several faculty from the IIT.

It is here worth noting that the leadership of these courses claims that human values cannot be taught by means of traditional university pedagogy (lectures, book study, *etc.*), but instead require a ‘practical pedagogy’ that helps students to discover their innate values (Mahmood, 2005). The main part of the course is conducted through a mentored weeklong workshop consisting of discussions and analysis; and our informants’ descriptions of the pedagogy that is employed to elicit this inherent understanding of ‘right’ moral knowledge and virtuous conduct seems very much like Socratic *maieutic*.<sup>28</sup> The general idea that it is ‘praxis’ that enables one to achieve ‘correct’ or ‘right’ knowledge (or, perhaps, ‘insights’) was strongly echoed at the Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies.

Concerning the aim of this article, which is merely a part of the larger study, it is fairly clear that the views of faculty about the place, function and role of religion at BHU have been moving towards a specifically Indian form of modernity, in tandem with India’s modernization/globalization. All our informants, regardless of their teaching subject, generally agreed that Malaviya’s ideal of ‘moral cultivation’ as an essential part of good academics and a means by which to create good Indian citizens, had become devalued over the years; they all also agreed that it was important to once again include some form of this teaching in the university’s curriculum, considering this to be in keeping with the fact that, over the last several decades, the need for and interest in religion and religiosity had increased in the Indian society and among the Indian population, including the student population of BHU. Like Westernization in general, a Western type of secularization, meaning one that keeps religion out of other societal and social spheres (including educational institutions), seems to have fallen into more and more disfavour among members the general public.

As our project progresses, further understanding of this turn toward *Dharma* education is something we intend to pursue through the lens of multiple modernities. The especially strong focus of the present Modi government on hard modernization/globalization, on the one hand, and Hindu culture (*e.g.*, astrology, Ayurvedic medicine and yoga), on the other, seems to indicate that a particular form of Hindu modernity with global aspiration is on the rise.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This is in line with Matilal’s understanding of dharma as ‘moral virtue’ (quoted above) as well as with discussions from Aristotle onwards about how one can go about teaching moral virtue (Crisp & Slote, 1997; MacIntyre, 1985; Statman, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> An interesting discussion has been initiated by Rajiv Malhotra (Malhotra, 2011). This book contains a foreword by Prime Minister Modi himself; see the December 2012 issue of *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, which is devoted in its entirety to an evaluation of the book and its thesis (cf. Gáthy & Juhos, 2013).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The next step in the research process is to analyze all the interview material from BHU, something we intend to complete during fall 2015. During spring 2016, a similar interview study at Pondicherry University will be finished, and we will then initiate a comparative study of both universities. The result will be a book on the present and possible future situation of religious studies in India.

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