



“Reciprocal Illumination” of Hinduism, Human Rights, and the Comparative Study of Religion: Arvind Sharma’s Contributions

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Abstract Arvind Sharma has made immensely significant contributions in the fields of both comparative religion and the study of Hinduism through his methodology of “reciprocal illumination” and his prominent role in international conversations on women and religion, religion and human rights, freedom of religion, and religious tolerance and conflict. Aware of the power of religion and its negative valuation, especially post-September 11, he displays a deep commitment to fostering inter-religious understanding, arguing for religion as an essential and positive partner in envisioning and actualizing human flourishing, upholding human dignity, and engaging in global ethical cooperation, and equally he demonstrates Hinduism’s potential contribution both to these endeavors and to moving the field of comparative studies beyond its Western, Christian, and colonialist origins and assumptions. This essay details these contributions and Sharma’s place as an interpreter of Hinduism for those inside and outside the tradition in our time.

Keywords Arvind Sharma · Hinduism · comparative religion · world religions · human rights · women and religion · women in Hinduism · freedom of religion · religious tolerance · conversion · proselytization

An insider to Hinduism, both as an immensely productive scholar of this tradition and as a self-described “comparatively religious Hindu,” Arvind Sharma (2011a) is equally a consummate scholar in the comparative study of religion, with an immense knowledge of multiple religious traditions complementing his expansive expertise in Hinduism. Aware of the power of religion, for better or worse, he is deeply committed to fostering interreligious understanding, arguing for religion as

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an essential and positive partner in envisioning and actualizing human flourishing, upholding human dignity, and engaging in global ethical cooperation. He simultaneously argues persuasively for Hinduism's potential contribution both to these endeavors and to moving the field of comparative studies beyond its Western, Christian, and colonialist origins and assumptions. He continues to play a leading role in international conversations on religion and human rights, freedom of religion, women and religion, and religious tolerance and conflict—issues with real world consequences, enriching the study of Hinduism through his focused exploration of these issues in Hindu contexts. Though his extraordinary body of work is exceptionally wide-ranging, this essay will focus on Sharma's reciprocally illuminating contributions to the comparative study of religion and the study of Hinduism in these areas.

Comparative Studies: “Reciprocal Illumination”

Repeatedly drawn into comparative projects as “a”—and even sometimes “the”—voice of Hinduism, Sharma asks: “What if one compares things not in order to judge one item in terms of another, but to see how our understanding of the items themselves is enhanced in the process, or even in some other dimension of religious life that one did not have in mind to begin with” (2005a: 247). He calls for “reciprocal illumination” as both the method and goal of such a comparative enterprise, writing for a range of audiences, bringing Hinduism into the conversation as an equal partner, broadening the field for others as well, and challenging existing conceptual frameworks, established binaries and typologies, and much more.

Though one might begin comparison with either a perception of similarity or contrast, Sharma proposes a close reading that allows for the emergence of novel insight, as each side of the comparison resituates perceptions of the other, whether the terms be intrareligious or interreligious or ostensibly secular and religious. He suggests further that methodological approaches might also be illuminated in their application to diverse religious phenomena, potentially transformed in the encounter even as understandings of religious traditions and the category of “religion” itself may be. In so doing, Sharma eschews “epistemological reductionism” of any kind, whether theological or methodological, as well as forms of “ontological reductionism” in which “one item of comparison is considered just an incomplete version or illustration of another” (2005a: 247). Key to his project is bringing other religions, voices, perspectives, categories, and people into such conversations, thereby challenging the dominance of Western academic and monotheistic religious hegemony, even in their most subtle forms, in the comparative study of religions.

To achieve such reciprocity and innovation requires a deep commitment to consultation and collaboration. Many of Sharma's published works emerge out of such exchanges—a question asked, a proposal made, a chance remark, in formal structured encounters or in informal settings. He develops his arguments in consultation with scholars and practitioners of diverse traditions and academic and social locations and in respectful dialogue with all those who have written on the subjects he tackles, acknowledging both the strengths and limitations of these works

and situating his claims in relation to them. The many coedited volumes that bear his name exemplify this commitment, as does his mentorship of younger scholars, that their voices too may be heard, and his engagement of those who may not yet have considered a particular theme within their discipline or tradition of expertise. In such an approach, true diversity is embraced as an abundant wellspring of inspiration, innovation, and illumination, and Sharma’s participation ensures an integral place for Hinduism within it.

In 1993, Sharma edited the volume *Our Religions: The Seven World Religions Introduced by Preeminent Scholars from Each Tradition*, released as a contribution to the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions. The first such Parliament, held in Chicago in 1893, was a watershed gathering of people from around the world and across religious traditions, each presenting their tradition to others with the goal of furthering interreligious understanding and appreciation, Svāmī Vivekānanda (1863–1902) famously among them. A hundred years later, the second Parliament would continue this goal with an additional initiative to draft a global ethic, spearheaded by Christian theologian Hans Küng. The type of introduction to religion Sharma edited for this occasion has become a norm in the three decades since, but at that time it was truly groundbreaking, and Sharma himself authored the chapter on Hinduism. He would offer non-Hindus a compelling view of Hinduism, one both erudite and engaging, that focused on the practice of contemporary Hinduism with reference not only to India but also to American and Canadian society and to history and current political events, published as it was in the wake of the destruction of the Babri Masjid and rise of militant Hindu nationalism.

The brilliance of the essay lies in Sharma’s ability to interweave an immensely complex religious heritage into a coherent, richly contextual vision of Hinduism that might be set alongside presentations of other world religions, even while challenging standard definitions and ways of categorizing religion at the same time, revealing Hinduism’s potential to contribute in important ways to comparative study and its significance in the contemporary world. Though perhaps not entirely escaping the danger of over-simplification in his characterization of Hindu-Muslim relations across Indian history, Sharma does not shy away from addressing militancy in Hinduism, starting his essay with the assassination of Mohandas K. (“Mahātmā”) Gandhi (1869–1948), and examining the nuanced and shifting understandings of “religious tolerance” therein and the particularities of “secularism” in the Indian context—no small feat in such a limited format. All the authors in this landmark volume were male and the traditions the standard “world religions”—Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but Sharma would also contribute tremendously to opening up this range of traditions and to bringing women’s voices and experiences into the comparative study of religion.

Women and Religion/Hinduism and Women

Even before the publication of *Our Religions*, Sharma had already edited a parallel, equally groundbreaking volume on *Women in World Religions* (1987) presenting a historical analysis of women’s place and status in these same traditions, with the

addition of “Tribal Religions” and with all the chapters written by women scholars. The reception and interest in this book would lead him, in collaboration with colleague Katherine K. Young, to initiate a journal, *The Annual Review of Women and Religion*, to further the study of women and religion by providing a venue for more focused analysis of specific phenomena, issues, and themes, both within and across traditions. The journal would run from 1991–2002 producing six issues, and more edited volumes later followed.

In 1994, Sharma edited *Religion and Women* (1994a) enlarging the scope of the first (1987) volume to include women in Native American religions, African religions, Shinto, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, and the Bahai faith. A third volume *Today's Woman in World Religions* (Sharma 1994b) would build on the presentations of the first volume to examine the contemporary context of women in the traditions covered therein, addressing, in the words of Katherine Young, “how the women’s movement is affecting traditional religions and civilizations throughout the world” (1994: 1), while exploring what women are actually doing today as participants in these religions. The volume would conclude with an essay by Rita M. Gross (1994), surveying the first twenty-five years of sustained focus on the study of women and religion and assessing the state of the field. *Feminism and World Religions* (Sharma and Young 1999), *Women Saints in World Religions* (Sharma 2000a), *Her Voice Her Faith: Women Speak on World Religions* (Sharma and Young 2002), and *Fundamentalism and Women in World Religions* (Sharma and Young 2007) would ensue, and importantly include chapters on women in Hinduism that served to challenge pervasive portrayals of Indian women as victims of religiously sanctioned oppression and violence.

In the first of these volumes, *Feminism and World Religions*, Vasudha Narayanan deals with the problematic use of the term “feminism” in Indian contexts and chooses to focus on “women’s struggles for creating and making available, either directly or indirectly, opportunities that will enable themselves and others to live and die with a sense of fulfillment, in the large and loose areas that come under the rubric of religion” (1999: 31–32), and on Hindu “women of power,” whether they be “devotees, deities, performers, reformers,” or others. The second, *Women Saints in World Religions*, would focus on well-known and exceptional women “saints,” with Janābāi selected as the Hindu example in an essay written by Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande (2000). Narayanan would again write the chapter on Hindu traditions for *Her Voice Her Faith*, a volume that invited women scholars who were also practitioners to write of their own traditions in ways not necessarily encompassed by standard religious studies accounts in an academic mode, offering a much more intimate look at lived religion. Narayanan notes, “As a Sri Vaishnava Hindu woman, I grew up associating my tradition with culinary customs, distinctive names for foods, performing arts, rituals, and localized pilgrimage centers” (2002: 13). Accordingly, she chooses to focus in her essay on “homes, weddings, temples, and funerals” and on the ways in which women exercise agency in their ordinary religious lives (13). And in *Fundamentalism and Women*, Eva Hellman (2007) offers a careful analysis of the ways in which Hindutva appeals to women, opening up opportunities with respect to positive affirmation, empowerment, involvement, and

economic opportunity even while also drawing distinct boundaries on acceptable behavior, placing limits on their exercise of authority, and stifling dissent.

Sharma would also edit two volumes focused on women and religion specifically in India: *Women in Indian Religions* (2002), intended to provide historical context for the contemporary challenges for women within the many religions of South Asia, and *Goddesses and Women in the Indic Religious Tradition* (2005b), a more focused study of women’s religious practices and experiences in relation to goddesses in Hindu contexts as well as Tibetan Buddhism. In the first he would include an essay about “feminine presence” among the Santals written by Madhu Khanna (2002), illustrative of India’s Ādivāsī or so-called “tribal” communities, again broadening the conversation beyond the usual suspects and including women in the Bahai tradition as well. The essays in the second volume, Sharma suggests, point to a “hermeneutics of surprise,” challenging at least “academic expectations” for how the interrelationships between women, goddesses and Hinduism should go (2005c: x).

These volumes contributed significantly to the study of women and religion, both in comparative analysis and within traditions. Sharma would lend his enthusiastic support, as well as his considerable academic reputation and editorial skills, to this project. In doing so, he humbly acknowledges his own limited (yet arguably extremely important) role in bringing this focus into what had been a quite restricted field of view in the comparative study of religion and in countering negative bias with respect to the place of women in India, rooted in colonialism and continuing in global media as well as academia.

For the most part Sharma would promote women scholars in this endeavor. However, just after the first edited volume of this series appeared, he published a small book in immediate response to the dramatic and tragic immolation of the young Rājput widow Roop Kanwar (in 1987) and her subsequent public veneration as a *sati* (Sharma 1988). Others would offer anthropological, sociological, and economic analyses of this shocking event, which appalled so many and resulted in films being banned and festivals outlawed that seemed to glorify the practice. Sharma’s volume would offer historical and religious background—scriptural support and condemnation; religious opposition to the practice; Hindu, non-Hindu, and Western reactions to it; and Indian opposition to British interference in their religious practices even while they might support social reform. Importantly, he would lift up both Rammohun Roy (1772/74–1833)’s counsel to William Bentinck, the first governor general of British-occupied India, against the British prohibiting the practice because it would incite Indian ire against such religious interference (irrespective of opposition to the practice and support for social reform) and Roy’s masterful deployment of the *Bhagavadgītā* in his arguments for its abolition on thoroughly Hindu grounds. The volume also includes two essays by Ajit Ray on Christian and Indian responses to its legal abolition in 1829 and an essay by Alaka Hejib and Katherine K. Young in which they seek to provide an orthodox Hindu perspective on the phenomenon. Characteristically, in this volume Sharma seeks to broaden the discussion through a careful reading of history and textual sources and his insistence that *religious* voices from within the Hindu tradition be taken

seriously, revealing indigenous opposition to the practice as well as providing context for understanding it in religious terms.

In the wake of his considerable editorial work in the field, in 2000 Sharma would more broadly consider “a general theory of women and religion” (2000b: 168). In doing so, he notes “how thoroughly secular our approach to religion has become” (168), with an emphasis almost exclusively on how religions oppress women. Yet the principal goal of religions is not this but rather to be “avenues of salvation, of emancipation, for human beings” (169), and he challenges us not to lose sight of either but instead to maintain both soteriological and sociological analysis. He also cautions against either overstating or understating the differences between men and women, keeping both gendered difference and shared humanity in view. In conclusion he writes:

If we consult our experience in the matter, then both these statements seem to have the status of facts: (1) that the religious structures associate with religion have often compromised the rights of women; and (2) that these same religions have brought salvation; or if not salvation, then solace; and if not solace, then certitude; or if not certitude, then at least larger structures of meaning, to millions of their followers, men and women. As we move toward a general theory, then, we must necessarily take both of these facts into account (178).

For Sharma the solution is both/and rather than either/or, with “religion” and “women” given equal weight and attention rather than prioritizing one over the other.

In turning his own attention to the study of women in Hinduism, Sharma argues for fresh readings of familiar figures and texts that reveal religious support for women’s rights and empowerment. In an essay entitled “Satī, Suttee, and Sāvitrī,” he suggests that this often-invoked triumvirate of ideal women might “represent a seamless intensifying ideal of Hindu womanhood, in which a wife’s position is by her husband’s side in every circumstance” (Sharma 2011b: 20)—Satī immolating herself after her husband Śiva is insulted, the “Suttee” joining her husband in death and reincarnation, and Sāvitrī restoring her husband’s life after accompanying him into the land of the dead. But Sharma argues alternatively that Sāvitrī offers a “*countermodel*” to Satī and Suttee (20; emphasis in the original).

In a series of inversions, Sāvitrī is born in response to prayers and *mantras* recited for a son. Understood to be a gift from the goddess Sāvitrī, the girl child is named after her, with this name also associated with arguably the most important *mantra* (traditionally forbidden to women to recite). When no husband can be found for her (with possible suitors all too intimidated by her brilliance), her father tells her to choose her own husband, which she does, insisting on marrying him even when it is predicted that he will die after a year and against her father’s entreaties. When he does die, she challenges the lord of death Yama to restore him to life. Her austerities and devotion to her husband impress him, and he eventually offers her a series of boons, anything except her husband’s life. She asks for the restoration of her father-in-law’s sight, strength, and lost kingdom, as well as for sons for her father and for

the flourishing of both families. Pleased, Yama then offers her a fifth boon, without qualification, and so she asks for her husband’s life, and he cannot refuse.

As Sharma points out, “Sāvitṛī is doing what the Suttee does—bringing blessings to both the families. And she is doing all this while staying alive” (2011b: 28). Further she does it through meditation, austerities, devotion, and persistence. Sharma also points out that both Satī and Sāvitṛī choose their own husbands, raising the possibility that this is, or should be, preferable rather than parental selection and that true devotion to one’s husband might require such choice. In closing he asserts:

[B]oth narratives, as they have had such a profound impact on Hindu perceptions of ideal womanhood, need to be reclaimed...and re-envisioned in ways that affirm the traditional spiritual power/energy (*tapas*) that have been associated with women of profound ascetic capacity, but also in ways that recognize the necessity of women’s self-agency and authority that should be the natural outcome—as it is for men—of the exercise of this capacity (30–31).

Illumination comes with such attention to detail, innovation available at the heart of tradition, when familiar narratives are read with openness and a willingness to allow alternate insights to emerge. Sharma finds this to be the case not only with Sāvitṛī and with respect to the rights of women, but more broadly in a wide range of narratives and with respect to human rights. His support for women’s rights is clearly part and parcel of his larger scholarly and personal commitment to upholding the dignity of human beings and to elucidating religion’s, and particularly Hinduism’s, essential role in making this a reality.

Religion and Human Rights

Sharma would become a prominent leader in the global dialogue on religion and human rights. While realistically acknowledging that “religions become a negative force in human life when they work against each other and come in conflict, and... they become a positive force in human life when they come together and work together,” he commits himself to the latter (Sharma 2008c: 187). To this end, he participated in the drafting of a “Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World’s Religions” by the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University. This endeavor was an outgrowth of the New York-based project on “Religion and Human Rights” and its 1994 conference on the “Dialogue of Religion and Human Rights” and was prepared for initial presentation at the 1998 World Congress on the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” held in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of this document by the United Nations. The declaration by the world’s religions was intentionally a working document, with both scholars and faith communities invited to comment on it, and under constant revision, drawing diverse constituencies into the conversation around human rights in a collaborative mode.

Sharma would present the document and promote the ongoing engagement of religion and human rights in subsequent venues—at an international conference on

“Human Rights and Responsibilities: The Contribution of the World Religions,” held at Loyola Marymount and Chapman Universities (1999); the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Capetown (1999), Barcelona (2004), and Melbourne (2009); the International Association for the History of Religions meetings in Durban (2000); and a series of global congresses on the “World’s Religions After September 11,” which he himself convened in Montreal (2006, 2011, and 2016), as well as an associated conference highlighting Asian perspectives held in Delhi (2009). He would also serve as co-chair of the American Academy of Religion’s “Consultation on Religion and Human Rights” from 1996–2002.

The global congresses, organized in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 2001, focused particularly on the positive potential of religion in our contemporary world, as a needed counterbalance to those who would declare religion unequivocally violent and destructive in its wake, indeed as a “poison” in our time (Sharma 2008b: vii). The first congress, which took up the theme “Can Religion be a Force for Good?,” would generate five volumes of essays, including the plenary sessions (Sharma 2008a) followed by thematic volumes on “Religion, War, and Peace,” “Religion and Human Rights,” “The Interfaith Dimension,” and “Spirituality” (2009). The congress itself would cover additional topics as well, bridging secular and religious concerns, perspectives, and actors as well as multiple religious traditions. Another volume would also emerge out of the Delhi gathering (Sharma and Khanna 2013). The theme of the second congress was “Peace through Religion,” and the third, “From Faith to Interfaith,” incorporated the discussion theme “Fanaticism: Cause and Cure.” Together, these gatherings and the resulting publications contributed tremendously to understanding of the roles of religion in our contemporary world, enriching comparative study, and advancing interreligious awareness, appreciation, and engagement, not least through the adoption of the much-revised “Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World’s Religions” by the delegates in 2016. Importantly for Sharma, this evolving declaration project unequivocally “demonstrated that people with different religious and cultural backgrounds can work together in pursuit of a common goal” (2008c: 188) and that religion can indeed be “part of the solution” as well as the problem.

In addition to editing two collections of essays focused particularly on the positive resources religion might bring to human rights (Runzo et al. 2003; Sharma 2009), Sharma (2006) would take on the question of whether human rights is a Western construct, exploring more deeply differing notions of “universality” but also posing a challenge to those who might dismiss the call for human rights by simply writing it off as “Western.” He details thirty-six dimensions of such an argument in turn, examining the validity of each and exposing biases and limitations that are indeed present in the discourse. Yet he also makes a clear distinction between the failings in the discourse and the affirmation of human dignity and a range of rights and obligations that have been recognized across history within diverse cultures, religions, political systems, etc. In his concluding chapter, he continues his interrogations, exploring what a difference it might make if instead of beginning with the rights of citizens as Western human rights discourse initially did, we ask what the rights of *human* beings are (in addition to political, social, and economic beings). He further identifies the thoroughly Western conception of

religion “*as involving exclusive adherence to one religion*” that underlies human rights discourse especially relating to freedom of religion (263; emphasis in the original), a theme he would address in detail in a subsequent volume.

In closing he identifies an additional dimension of the discourse: “*Human rights are Western in the sense that human rights discourse in the West is reluctant to include the righting of historical wrongs within the parameters of this discourse, even though such violation of human dignity is recognized as such around the world*” (Sharma 2006: 267; emphasis in the original). This, in his view, is essential in our time

when terrorism fuelled by historical grievances poses a global threat to the human rights of its victims and compels states to abridge the rights of [their] citizens as they prioritize security over liberty...historical wrongs...felt by the rest of the world to have been perpetuated during the period of Western ascendancy over the rest of the world (269).

This wide-ranging consideration of the “Westernness” of human rights discourse is indeed “a contribution to the dialogue of civilizations” (as the subtitle of the volume contends), and through it, Sharma gives those engaged in human rights much material for thought, coupled with explicit calls to action in the joint task of ensuring individual and collective human flourishing.

Freedom of Religion: Western Bias and Asian Interventions

In his interrogation of Western discourse on human rights, Sharma (2006) offers alternate understandings of freedom of conscience and religion in Hindu contexts and divergent interpretations of the term “universal.” The Western conception stresses homogeneity and uniformity and is associated with conquest, repression, and conversion—flattening out difference. In contrast, he argues, the Indian value stresses commonality among separate elements, is associated with quest rather than conquest, and allows for both intrareligious and interreligious diversity.

At the global congress on “The World’s Religions after September 11: Asian Perspectives,” held in Delhi in 2009, Sharma (2013) expanded his analysis of religious freedom and the conflicts that have arisen around this aspect of human rights discourse and in real life situations in our contemporary world. Herein he examined both differing concepts of “religion” and of “freedom,” including exclusionary versus nonexclusionary belonging, missionary versus nonmissionary religions, and the issue of conversion. With respect to “religion,” he contrasts the imposition of monotheistic exclusionary conceptions and claims to superior and sole truth that underlie notions of “freedom from restrictions” with alternate conceptions of religious belonging that affirm the possibility of multiple affiliations and inclusive and nondiscriminatory participation, the freedom to retain one’s religion(s) free from coercion, and the maximization of knowledge to yield the greatest degree of true “freedom of choice.” Following this logic, to achieve the latter he proposes that the study of the world’s religions should be included in education systems around the world (even as he had earlier advocated its importance in India [Sharma 1996: 90–93]).

In so doing, he flips the tables to ask how our notions of freedom of religion might be impacted if power relations were reversed and a broader range of understandings of both religion and freedom considered.

Sharma develops these ideas in greater detail in *Problematizing Religious Freedom* (2011c), including proselytization in Christian missions as a case study, while also addressing Native American religious freedom. This is clearly not merely an academic exercise, but rather, as he notes, “the key role assigned to religious freedom in the contemporary world carries with it the intellectual and moral obligation that it be examined as closely as possible, especially in terms of the problems which may come in the way of its full realization, the better to discharge the responsibility of securing it” (3). Herein he brings the insights of comparative religion to bear on human rights discourse, arguing “that one’s concept[ion] of religious freedom cannot be divorced from one’s concept of religion itself” (11). Accordingly, he addresses first the inability within comparative religion to establish a singular definition of “religion” that is both specific enough yet broad enough to encompass all that we recognize as religion and then the historical roots of the term, with “Western Christianity” as its primary referent, leading to a particular conception of religious freedom, one intimately tied to a notion of religions as “mutually exclusive entities,” and thus to conversion and proselytization (29). He also examines legal views of religion from the perspective of the state, particularly in Canadian and United States’ rulings related to the free exercise of religion, noting how “the concept of religion got increasingly diluted in a secular context, and religion came to be defined more and more in terms of conscience” (65–66), such that other dimensions could be largely subsumed under other fundamental rights of association and expression and the like.

Having interrogated the term “religion,” Sharma then turns to “religious freedom” itself, to elucidate dimensions of this freedom, associated with “choice” and “freedom from restriction,” noting two distinct senses: “(1) the freedom to change (i.e., convert) from one religion to another or (2) unrestricted access to religions without the need for undergoing such a change (or conversions)” (2011c: 76). The “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” he asserts, assumes an exclusivist definition of religion and so does not address the second. The word “change” was later amended in the “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” in favor of the words “to have or to adopt” to accommodate the Islamic identification of abandoning one’s Muslim faith as apostacy, yet Sharma argues this discourse continues to carry assumptions of religious exclusivity and privileging differing “creeds” as definitive of religions as well as of the clear “institutional distinction between the sacred and the secular” (79, citing Oxtoby 2002: 450). And it fails to address the right to be free *from* conversion.

In this regard, Sharma contrasts “proclamation” with “proselytizing,” the former enhancing freedom of choice through knowledge, the latter “arguably limit[ing] the religious freedom of others” (2011c: 80). He suggests that religious freedom might be expanded to become more truly universal (in the sense not of uniformity but of accommodating diversity) by including the freedom to retain one’s religion free from coercion and denigration and by protecting its *nondiscriminatory* manifestation, such that exclusive belonging is not a requirement for participation (with the

exclusionary Christian eucharist used as an example of such discrimination against those outside one’s religion) (90–91). In this context he reiterates his claim that education about the religions of the world would also go a long way toward enhancing true freedom of choice.

Sharma then turns to potential contributions to understandings of both religion and religious freedom from the points of view of different religions of the world, most of which importantly do not have direct cognates for the term “religion.” From indigenous perspectives, extreme religious persecution has been a fundamental part of their experience, such that religious freedom must include freedom from proselytization, return of sacred objects and lands, and reparations. From the point of view of Hinduism, it must include freedom to belong to multiple religions simultaneously without the need to renounce one for the other. Buddhism, with its avowedly nontheistic content, troubles the categorization of religion as belief. Here Sharma raises the parallel between religion and ideology, and more specifically nationalism, leading him to posit provocatively that if one can change one’s religion, why not one’s nationality just as freely (2011c: 102). Chinese traditions require an expansion of the understanding of “religion,” particularly in relation to morality as these are inseparable in Chinese contexts. Judaism, for its part, brings into consideration group as well as individual rights and their potential conflicts. Christianity has contributed much to current understanding of both religion and religious freedom—rooted in its initial minority status, claims to exclusive and absolute truth, and consequent missionary zeal. And within Islam, Sharma argues, freedom extended to all those who were part of the Abrahamic revelatory tradition, with others equally subject to conversion efforts.

He then turns to “anticipations of religious freedom” in these religious traditions, pointing to the concepts of *adhikāra-bheda* (differences in religious inclinations/paths related to a person’s capacities or inclinations) and *iṣṭa-devatā* (the deity of one’s choice for worship, devotion, etc.) within Hinduism; to Buddhist *upāya-kauśalya* (skillful means) espousing a freedom in the method of teaching in accord with the individual’s spiritual state, coupled with the explicit freedom to accept or reject teachings based on personal experience and the insistence that they not be accepted based on external authority; and to the Chinese teaching of *san-jiao heyi*, affirming the unity of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism and the embrace of all three in practice. In the Abrahamic monotheisms, he points to the Jewish ideas of the “Noahide Covenant” and the “Righteous Gentile”; in Christianity, to more recent wrestling with religious pluralism and the notion of the “anonymous Christian”; and in Islam, to conceptions of the “People of the Book,” accommodating Jews and Christians but also in practice Zoroastrians and monotheists in general. Sharma concludes “while all religions may not possess an identical concept of religion, all religions seem to contain currents of religious tolerance which anticipate the concept of religious freedom in some measure” (2011c: 124).

The chapters that follow address conversion and proselytization directly. Regarding Hinduism, Sharma turns to Gandhi’s oft-quoted position that conversion is not only unnecessary but also undesirable and even incomprehensible, given that all religions are equally true and that one may draw from any and all without the need for exclusivity. Modern Hinduism’s stance, Sharma summarizes as follows:

Modern Hindu thought, by and large, is opposed to the phenomenon of conversion either from or to Hinduism, on the ground that it places the relationship among religions on an unduly competitive and even negative basis. Each tradition should endeavour to change the life of its believers, to make a Hindu a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim and a Christian a better Christian, as has often been said, instead of trying to convert others to Hinduism, Islam or Christianity. In keeping with this attitude, modern Hinduism discourages people from *converting to* it, no less than discouraging people from *converting from* it (2011c: 180; emphasis in the original).

Though also a missionary religion, Buddhism does not focus on accepting intellectual doctrines, but rather on commitment to a moral code, taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and the Saṅgha, and, for some, entry into a monastic community, though with the freedom to come and go. In contrast, Confucianism has expanded in influence through exemplary individuals who drew others to them by their actions and through education. Taoists at times competed with Buddhists and Confucians for social and political dominance, but at other times blended with them in emergent syncretic religious formations. Judaism, while not encouraging conversion, accepts it, though once converted one is bound irrevocably to the commandments. Christianity, with its much more intense focus on conversion, and Islam, with its global spread through both individual and state actors, receive the most attention in this regard.

Thus, focusing on proselytism in the context of freedom of religion, Sharma points to the distinction between “(1) *my* right to change my religion and (2) *someone else’s* right to ask me to change my religion” (2011c: 155; emphasis in the original), the former much more widely embraced than the latter. He details arguments against proselytization, before turning to the complex situation of India, and particularly to the work of Sarah Claerhout and Jakob De Roover (2008) to radically challenge conceptions of freedom of religion arising from very different understandings of religion and the relationships between them in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism in contrast to Christianity and Islam.

Sharma goes on to explore in more detail fundamental differences in religions, beginning with distinctions commonly made between missionary and nonmissionary traditions, suggesting that the description of the former (Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism) as “universal” and the latter as ethnic, tribal, or the like be discarded. Alternatively, he points to two senses of “universal,” that of *accepting* converts and that of *seeking* converts from around the world. Religions of the latter ilk are more accurately identified as proselytizing religions. Sharma contends that “proselytization complicate[s] the issue of religious freedom” in a host of ways, from being in itself “a form of *religious violence*” or “*religious misrepresentation*” in its denigration of other religions and claims of superiority for one’s own to its association with commercial enterprise and imperialism, its individualist bias and contribution to family and political conflict, and its targeting of vulnerable cultural, religious, and/or socioeconomic groups (2011c: 182–85; emphasis in the original). These potential complications are magnified when the power differentials between

those proselytizing and those on the receiving end are considerable, with persuasion all too easily crossing over to coercion.

He points further to other ways of distinguishing these two types of religion. While so-called missionary traditions grow “electively,” nonmissionary religions grow “organically.” Thus the former might be described as “associational” and the latter as “communitarian.” This distinction leads to very different understandings of religious freedom:

The communitarian religions would...interpret...[religious] freedom as their right to be able to maintain the religious community intact and free from being preyed upon, while the associational religions would interpret religious freedom as both the freedom to change one’s religion or to ask someone [else] to change one’s religion (Sharma 2011c: 189).

Another fault-line identified between different types of religions lies between Western and Asian religions. In contrast to the Christian assumptions imported into much of comparative study and human rights discourse, Asian religions do not insist on hard and fast boundaries between religions such that belonging is necessarily exclusionary, nor do they make sharp divisions between religion and philosophy or between religion and culture. Sharma suggests that Hinduism incorporates freedom of choice of the form of the divine one worships (one’s right to choose an *īṣṭa-devatā*) as well as forms of exclusivity in choosing to take initiation into a particular teaching lineage. Other Asian traditions similarly affirm both multiple religious belonging and exclusionary forms (for example, Nichiren in Japan). To accommodate such an alternate view of religion, Sharma suggests that the relevant articulation of religious freedom should affirm the right to “choose” one’s religion rather than “change” it. Indeed, he asserts:

In the Asian cultural context, freedom of religion means that the person is left free to explore his or her religious life without having to change his or her religion. Such exploration need not be confined to any one religion, and may freely embrace the entire religious and philosophical heritage of humanity (Sharma 2011c: 212).

He asks whether in fact human rights discourse is prepared to incorporate such an alternate Asian view of religion and its corollary “that when it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change” (212), as Gandhi among others had so clearly affirmed.

A case study of Christian missionizing follows, with Sharma first asking, “*Must Christians missionize?*” If so, then, “*What would be the proper paradigm for pursuing Christian missionary activity today?*” (2011c: 217; emphasis in the original). He offers a sympathetic reading, noting historical shifts in both missionizing and Christian notions of belonging with the globalization of Christianity itself, that may also be traced back to the earliest followers of Jesus, including Paul, who simultaneously identified as Jews. In a subsequent chapter he also reprises the past and ongoing struggles of Native Americans to resist state sponsored attempts at conversion, and indeed cultural genocide, and to practice their religions freely, even in the face of the U.S.’s strong constitutional commitment.

In conclusion, Sharma asserts that human rights discourse must deal decisively with the issue of conversion and proselytizing. “*Followers of proselytized religion are justified in imposing restrictions on the proselytizing activities of the proselytizing religions, in order to prevent the violation of the principle of non-interference in the pursuit of one’s religion*” (2011c: 256; emphasis in the original). At the same time, he stresses that these restrictions must be constantly negotiated to stabilize “an inherently unstable situation,” as one party seeks freedom to “extend its frontiers” and “to share” and the other, freedom “[to] patrol its own borders” and “to be left alone” (256). Neither party should be privileged above the other, and changing power dynamics must be taken into consideration. Drawing on Hinduism, as well as a full range of Asian religions and so-called primal traditions, Sharma definitively demonstrates how limited the current discourse is and how concepts of religious freedom might change with alternate understandings of religion itself, change essential to truly upholding the right to freedom of religion for all. And he powerfully articulates the perspectives of those who would claim their rights both to embrace nonexclusionary and multiple religious identities and not to be subjected to proselytization, Hindus importantly among them.

Human Rights in Hinduism

Sharma would also publish two key monographs (2003, 2010) more specifically exploring the potential reciprocal illumination that might arise from investigating Hinduism itself in terms of human rights and human rights more broadly from a Hindu perspective. The first offers a conceptual approach to human rights in relation to “classical Hinduism,” covering roughly 400 BCE to 1200 CE. He intentionally chooses this period of Hinduism as “the form least likely to be amenable to human rights discourse” to demonstrate potential compatibilities and resources (Sharma 2003: 3). He begins by connecting legal, moral, ethical, and religious views of human rights to the conception of the four motivating principles affirmed in Hinduism: *kāma*, *artha*, *dharma*, and *mokṣa*, exploring correspondences and ending with the identification of *dharma* in its universal aspects (*sādhāraṇa-dharma*) as the most appropriate Hindu foundation for human rights. At the same time, he points to the limited effectiveness of India’s Constitutional Bill of Rights, which acknowledges no such foundation, as well as provisions in Hindu texts for abrogating *dharma* in times of emergency (with direct reference to Indira Gandhi and the post-9/11 United States). Reviewing the history of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” subsequent conventions, and the generations of rights (civil and political; social, cultural, and economic; and developmental and environmental), Sharma explores the connections of rights and duties both in terms of individuals and communities and identifies a range of examples from Indian history and Hindu texts that address the rights of refugees, just war, the prevention of genocide, etc. He suggests, in contradistinction to those who would claim Hinduism has no rights language and stresses only duty, that “*Hinduism tends to accord greater recognition to the rights that others have in relation to us as compared to the rights we have in relation to them*” (34; emphasis in the original).

Sharma addresses the caste system head on, taking on the popular assumption that this system is completely antithetical to human rights even as he explains something of the complexity of this social ordering particularly for those outside the tradition, including the crucial distinctions between *varṇa* and *jāti*. He examines a range of views on the potential seeds of “rights” in the privileges of caste, for example, that of the son of a king to rule his father’s kingdom. And he presents precedent for privileging *dharma* over *varṇa* in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. There, “the ‘one Being,’ which failed initially to flourish...successively produced the *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya*, and *Śūdra*” but still did not thrive (Sharma 2003: 61). True flourishing was only achieved after the subsequent creation of justice to restrain the arbitrary power of the king/state. Sharma also compares caste to citizenship, as birth-based ascriptions with some interesting parallels, leading him to assert in this context that free migration across national borders should also be included as a human right.

He concludes, “The concept of *varṇa* can be viewed as a system of balancing duties and privileges. Human rights can be brought into relationship with both sides of this scale. The point at which Hindu thought makes its own contribution to human rights discourse is when it proposes that the discourse must view rights and duties as an integrated whole” (Sharma 2003: 65–66). He goes on to find evidence in the *Mahābhārata* and philosophical and devotional texts for an assertion of common humanity (*mānava-jāti*), such that “(a) none can belong to a special class because (b) all belong to the same class” by virtue of our shared characteristics and concerns and what may be a privilege for those of a “higher” *varṇa* should thus be generalized as a right for all (69).

Sharma then maps articles from the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” onto the Hindu understanding of four life stages (*āśramas*), discussing education and marriage provisions and noting that this United Nations document deals primarily with the stages of active engagement rather than the later stages of withdrawal from the world and that human rights discourse might fruitfully be expanded in this direction. He also examines human rights in terms of the understanding of the four *yugas*, drawing on a range of textual sources to argue that, though the age in which we find ourselves is recognized as the last and most “degenerate” of the four, the Kali Yuga—a characterization which might ostensibly lead to a “passive resignation” in the face of environmental degradation, escalating violence, etc. (Sharma 2003: 88)—textual evidence can be found to support the conclusion that caste privileges and prohibitions no longer hold in this fourth age. To make his point, he draws on the controversial episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa* in which, as king, Rāma beheads the *śudra* Śambuka for practicing austerities, forbidden to his *varṇa*. Though generally cited as sanctioning caste oppression, Sharma notes his sage advisors’ distinction between Rāma’s time, the third age, and the Kali Yuga when such restrictions no longer hold and suggests provocatively that this “could well be a highly convoluted Hindu way of saying that universal human rights will prevail” (92). And indeed, in contemplating Hinduism “for our times” elsewhere (Sharma 1996), he argues:

Hinduism must be shaped by those whose religion it is, by the masses and not the classes. It should be a free association of independent and equal individuals....The doctrine of varṇa should now apply to the individual instead of society and that of āśrama should span a day of life rather than a lifetime (2003: 94).

And even in classical Hinduism he finds intimations of such a possible future.

While Sharma readily notes that human rights discourse fruitfully helps “to expose the shortcomings of Hinduism to popular attention” (2003: 137), and thus importantly paves the way for such change from within, his focus in this volume is conceptual, so he returns to the category of *dharma* and to the interlacing of rights and duties. In so doing, he identifies two specific contexts in which “[*dharma*] doubled for rights: (1) when the person in a hierarchically lower position in terms of...power appealed to *dharma*...[and] (2) in times of crisis, one acquired the right—as *āpad-dharma*—to perform certain actions one was not entitled to in normal times” (151). *Dharma* is thus historically and potentially able to hold both sides of this duality in tension, and he proposes the possible use of *dharmādhikāra* to combine tradition and modernity (with *adhikāra* the accepted term for “rights” in contemporary discourse).

With respect to what human rights discourse might add to understandings of *dharma*, Sharma concludes that

by detaching the concept of a right from that of [a] duty in its own evolution, [human rights discourse] alerts us to the danger that duty discourse can subvert rights assertion and thus makes two contributions: (1) it alerts us to this danger in modern Hindu discourse and (2) it enables the rights component of the duty-rights coupling in the term *dharma* to be clearly grasped (2003: 151–52).

With regard to Hinduism’s potential contribution to human rights discourse, he notes first its immense relevance in regard to enlarging understandings of religion as a category and significantly for issues of religious freedom (as noted above), but also problematizing the notion of “universality” and fostering a more bottom-up immanent approach to reaching “a negotiated universal” that might be more inclusive, and thus more widely embraced (Sharma 2003: 156). The incredible breadth and depth of Sharma’s understanding of Hinduism greatly enriches this volume for those both within and outside the tradition with an extraordinary range of examples from both the writings of contemporary scholars and leaders and the textual traditions of classical Hinduism. There is a playfulness to his interventions akin to the Hindu concept of *līlā* but also an immense seriousness, opening up a vast array of new avenues for consideration of both human rights and Hinduism.

In a second study, Sharma (2010) turns to Hindu narrative traditions as a primary location of Hindu ethics or reasoning about morality, in the flexible and complex ways that narrative makes possible. He invokes stories in much the same way a Hindu religious teacher might in delivering a *kathā* or a grandmother in offering advice or correction to a child. He does so elsewhere also, but here the narratives take center stage. The telling of tales is at least one of the languages people use to speak of ethics more broadly—a language, richly deployed in Hindu traditions, that

allows for the nuanced consideration of contextual complexity, competing moral claims, and the consequences of actions and choices for all concerned. Succeeding chapters move through several specific rights—religious freedom, rights to property and livelihood, women’s rights in marriage and in relation to the study of the Vedas, rights of children and of animals, egalitarianism, law and morality, and more. In so doing, Sharma introduces the reader to the discourse of human rights in manageable bites, then explores these concepts in Hindu contexts through the lively medium of story.

Many of Sharma’s examples are well known and loved. The epic *Mahābhārata* looms large as a narrative source with its many embedded tales in addition to the main storyline. Yudhiṣṭhira’s gambling away not only of his kingdom, his brothers, and himself but also of their wife Draupadī generates a particularly extended discussion of a wide range of rights. From the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, the story of the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu, who was intent on persecuting followers of Viṣṇu including his own son Prahlād, opens up issues of both freedom of religion and parental rights to determine the type of education children receive. Tales of Śakuntalā and Ratnāvātī join that of Sāvitrī to demonstrate women’s rights to choice in marriage, introducing readers to the variety of types of marriage recognized by Hindus in the process. Significantly, although many of these narratives are familiar, Sharma provides extended translations of the textual sources so that readers may themselves engage in close reading, encountering the characters and their tales anew, with the dialogues particularly revealing as well as problematizing with respect to issues of rights. And for those unfamiliar, these passages provide a wonderful entrée into Hindu narrative worlds.

In the final chapter, Sharma (2010: 123–24) begins with a story of Alexander the Great encountering the defeated Indian king Porus, who comes before him with regal dignity. When Alexander asks him how he would like to be treated in defeat, he says “in a kingly way.” When asked to elaborate, he says all is already encompassed in this request. Alexander is so impressed that he does indeed treat him thus. This tale becomes the jumping off point for a discussion of human dignity as a foundation for human rights, one which is arguably stronger than mere legality, transcendent to a degree but able to bridge secular and religious constituencies. Of the relationship between dignity, rights, and duties, Sharma suggests:

Human dignity has to do with dignity that inheres in oneself as a human being and possesses a dimension of interiority as relating to one’s self-perception. The *external* recognition of this dignity by another constitutes the basis for human rights. Respecting them devolves on the other party as *its* duty. In this way, human dignity, human rights, and human duty become intertwined in a web of relationships (127; emphasis in the original).

Sharma suggests further that the concept of human dignity can also hold together our identities as unique individuals, “*like some others*” as members of groups and “*like all others*” as human beings (130; emphasis in the original), in a way that might allow us to more fully address all three aspects of all those involved in considering issues of rights and responsibilities in particular contexts. Sharma proposes that such a “model of human dignity, human rights and human duties...

perhaps enables us to engage issues of human rights in a new way” (131). At the very least, it may help us to more fully understand problems arising in the discourse, and thereby contribute in a more roundabout way to finding potential solutions.

In this concluding chapter and across much of Sharma’s works, he focuses on problematizing reified categories and unquestioned assumptions—definitions of religion, conceptions of religious freedom, assertions that religion is indisputably violent or incompatible with human rights, and much more. He does so by providing a wide range of evidence for consideration, offering his own readings and interpretations but crucially also inviting readers to make their own. The concepts and narratives that he provides in these two volumes on Hinduism and human rights are most decidedly such an invitation to consider both, issued not only to those engaged in human rights discourse and the comparative study of religion, but also those who want to understand Hinduism more fully, including human rights from Hindu perspectives, whether as insiders or outsiders to the tradition.

A Call for Religious Tolerance from Hinduism

One of the salient features that emerges across Sharma’s discussions of human rights and comparative religion, as well as the global congresses he convened post 9/11, is the theme of religious tolerance as an antidote to religious violence and as a particular characteristic and contribution of Hinduism. Interrogating the distinctive Hindu understanding of tolerance, Sharma suggests that it arises from a “consciousness of universalism” rooted in a “belief in the universalism of consciousness” (1996: 62). Such tolerance does not simply mean “approval” for criticism is consistent with it, nor is it “the absence of conflict” (62) or “the absence of preference” (65). It “does *not* mean that a religion may not be missionary,” and it is “*not* to be confused with defeat or docility or folly” (66; emphasis in the original). Rather it is a dynamic and emergent “attitude which seeks unity in diversity; harmony in discord; the universal in the particular; the common in the different; the integrative over the disruptive” (65), not always achieved but always aspirational and intrareligious as well as interreligious.

Yet tolerance should have its limits, maintaining a critical stance against the lack thereof. In this regard, Sharma makes the following proposal:

In the contemporary Indian setting, Hindus must develop *intolerance of intolerance*, and promote tolerance outside its own religious frontier by identifying and emphasizing elements of tolerance in other religions. My study of comparative religion suggests that [the] two strands can be identified in almost all the major religions of the world: a conservative one and a liberal one. This is true even of Hinduism. The difference lies in the relative strength of these forces, not in their absence or presence. Hinduism in our times therefore must aim at initiating an alliance among the liberal elements of all the religions of the world and in this way express its intolerance of intolerance and enhance tolerance of tolerance in a religiously pluralistic world. This is how Hindu pluralism can make a positive contribution in the context of a

religiously plural world...[converting] tolerance...from a passive concept into an active one (1996: 69; emphasis in the original).

Sharma made this proposal in 1996, and in the decades that followed he would embrace this project, initiating just such alliances and seeking to enhance tolerance through knowledge and reciprocal illumination across his impressive body of work.

His commitment would culminate in the publication of an expansive history of tolerance across the world religions (Sharma 2019). In this work he seeks to provide a solid foundation for pursuing religious tolerance, grounded in the religious traditions of the world themselves by “identify[ing] attitudes towards religious tolerance in the interstices of the lived history of a religious tradition, when it had to actively face a religiously plural situation” (x). He takes each religious tradition in turn, moving beyond a limited focus on scriptural/doctrinal resources (too often used in the manner of proof-texting to argue either/or) and eschewing an episodic focus on particular historical examples or geographic regions. Instead, he seeks to create a more comprehensive “*narrative of...tolerance*” that takes seriously the teachings and lived historical experiences of people within religious traditions, examining tolerance (though at times necessarily also its absence) and employing the triad of “exclusivity, inclusivity, and pluralism” to identify differing attitudes toward those of other religions in encounter and in different strands of tradition and historical moments (xi; emphasis in the original). He is also clear that by tolerance, he does not mean merely putting up with something objectionable but rather either “*qualified [or] wholehearted approval or acceptance*” (5; emphasis in the original). And he seeks to offer balanced presentations of each tradition, providing precisely the kind of “critical source book” (x) so needed to counter both negative stereotypes and all too rosy pictures of given traditions and to provide “a sound academic and intellectual footing” for dialogue among those who would pursue religious tolerance in our time (xii).

The book is divided into Abrahamic (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), Indic (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism), and East Asian (Confucianism, Daoism, Shinto) religious traditions with a comparative chapter in each section following those on specific traditions. The chapters on individual traditions are each a *tour de force*, beautifully interweaving an immense body of information with a commitment to the truth (*à la* Gandhi) and an eloquence that draws the reader into encounter, opening new windows onto the religions presented therein. In the writing of each, he has been, as always, consultative and respectful, seeking out those who are scholar/participants in these traditions as he writes, and he proves himself once again a consummate storyteller as well as scholar.

Sharma’s comparative discussion of Abrahamic traditions focuses on those who would label monotheism as inherently intolerant, troubling this categorization as well as exploring monotheism/polytheism as these have been applied to Hinduism. In the chapter on Indic religions, Sharma explores “historical evidence for the permeability of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism” (2019: 403) and the relatively recent identification of these as mutually exclusive religions, particularly under British rule, as well as ways Hindus and Muslims manifested “syncretic” (410) positive appreciation of each other’s traditions, particularly but not only in *bhakti*

(devotional) contexts, with love of God recognized across fluid religious boundaries. He concludes, “all this seems to point to the tolerant ethos which permeated the Indic religious world by and large, in which one may divide in order to distinguish, but not distinguish in order to divide” (413). In his comparative discussion of East Asian religious traditions, he highlights the way in which multiple religions are interwoven in the lives of individuals, in both China and Japan.

In conclusion, Sharma offers three implications of this vast study. First, he argues, states need to craft policies with respect to religious tolerance, given that religion clearly refuses to remain in the private sphere to which secularism would relegate it. To facilitate ready acceptance of such state policies, he returns to his call for education in world religions “in such a way that the inclusivist and pluralist dimensions of the...world religions remain in full view of the reader” (2019: 494). Secondly and significantly, he does not call for a forced renunciation of the superiority or completeness of one’s own tradition in relation to others and for pluralism as the only option. Instead, he suggests that tolerance needs to be fostered in such a way that people might retain their religious commitments while treating others with appreciation and respect. And across the chapters of the volume, he has provided ample evidence of both pluralism and inclusivism in the history and writings of these many traditions, thereby situating tolerance *within* religion rather than imposing it from without. Thirdly, he notes that in Asia defining the term “religion” in exclusivist terms (both as the assertion that one’s religion is the only right one but also more importantly the claim that one can belong only to one religion at a time) may in fact undermine religious tolerance as it has existed there. He concludes, “Let us not forget that exclusivism is close to fanaticism. Fanatics are blinded by the intensity of the luminosity of their own religious tradition since they stand too close to it, instead of seeing the whole world transfigured in its light” (495).

This volume is indeed an extraordinary contribution to the study of comparative religion and to the fostering of religious tolerance in the sense of deep appreciation of religious traditions and ways of being religious around the world. Sharma has provided the text for precisely the kind of education he champions. Further, in detailing the history of religious interactions in India—encounters in which Hinduism features prominently—he offers India as a case study for tolerance (and at times intolerance) in a multireligious society. Aspects of his work on human rights and freedom of religion are also woven through the book as he again points to the very constricting and indeed destructive nature of defining the term “religion” in exclusivist terms and to diverse approaches to conversion and proselytization and multiple senses of religious belonging. In doing so, he brings his scholarly discussion back again and again to the real-world challenges we face as a global community.

Sharma has done much to expand the field of comparative religious studies and to bring Hinduism and women into this discourse as full partners with much to contribute toward a more inclusive understanding of what we call religion and to global conversations on human rights, including but not limited to freedom of religion. On the nature and centrality of tolerance in Hinduism, Sharma boldly claims: “Hinduism’s *raison d’être* should continue to be tolerance...and its mission

in the world should remain what it has always been—the acceptance of all the religions of the world by all human beings as the inalienable religious heritage of every human being” (1996: 94). Arvind Sharma is one of the strongest and most sustained voices embodying this goal in our time.

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