Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History (South Asia Across the Disciplines)

By Andrew J. Nicholson

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Some postcolonial theorists argue that the idea of a single system of belief known as "Hinduism" is a creation of nineteenth-century British imperialists. Andrew J. Nicholson introduces another perspective: although a unified Hindu identity is not as ancient as some Hindus claim, it has its roots in innovations within South Asian philosophy from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. During this time, thinkers treated the philosophies of Vedanta, Samkhya, and Yoga, along with the worshippers of Visnu, Siva, and Sakti, as belonging to a single system of belief and practice. Instead of seeing such groups as separate and contradictory, they re-envisioned them as separate rivers leading to the ocean of Brahman, the ultimate reality.

Drawing on the writings of philosophers from late medieval and early modern traditions, including Vijnanabhiksu, Madhava, and Madhusudana Sarasvati, Nicholson shows how influential thinkers portrayed Vedanta philosophy as the ultimate unifier of diverse belief systems. This project paved the way for the work of later Hindu reformers, such as Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Gandhi, whose teachings promoted the notion that all world religions belong to a single spiritual unity. In his study, Nicholson also critiques the way in which Eurocentric concepts—like monism and dualism, idealism and realism, theism and atheism, and orthodoxy and heterodoxy—have come to dominate modern discourses on Indian philosophy.

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Editorial Review

Review

In this clear, analytical, well-documented, and well-argued book, Nicholson discusses the conflicts among the various systems of Hindu philosophy and the contributions of the late medieval and early modern thinkers in reconciling the systems and arriving at a unifying picture of Hinduism in Advaita Vedanta.

(*Choice*)

This path-breaking work is very helpful and a must read for scholars of Indian history, Hinduism and south Asian religious traditions.

(Vineeth Mathoor *Metapsychology*)

Nicholson has created a tour-de-force that puts India's premodern thinkers in conversation with its postmodern intellectuals.

(Christopher Key Chapple *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*)

In this marvelously clear, meticulously researched, and tightly argued book which promises to change the scholarly conversation on Hindu identity, Nicholson sets the record straight regarding the historical emergence of what is today widely known as Hinduism...

(Jeffery D. Long *Religious Studies Review*)

Given the enormous scope of its enquiry, the work is relatively concise, very accessible and therefore suitable for the advanced undergraduate or graduate classroom. More than this, it belongs on the bookshelf of anyone interested in the history, and historiography, of Indian philosophy.

(Reid Locklin *Sophia*)

Lucid and accessible, Andrew Nicholson's book offers an excellent model for South Asianists seeking to engage with the wider field of religious studies.

(*Journal of the Amer. Academy of Religion*)

Unifying Hinduism is an erudite, informative book.

(Kaif Mahmood *South Asian History and Culture*)

Review

Unifying Hinduism does much more than deal with the philosophy of Vijnanabhiksu, it questions in an intelligent and constructive manner how Indian philosophy has been studied in modern scholarship—and ways in which it has been done wrong.

(Johannes Bronkhorst, University of Lausanne, Switzerland)

Andrew J. Nicholson's courageous and challenging thesis is that processes of unification were at work in early modern India, particularly in the attempt by Vedanta philosophers to create hierarchies of philosophical schools, and these processes 'made possible the world religion later known by the name Hinduism.' *Unifying Hinduism* is a fluent, eminently readable, and absorbing study of a period in Indian intellectual history that fully deserves the attention it is now receiving.

(Jonardon Ganeri, University of Sussex)

About the Author

Andrew J. Nicholson is assistant professor of Hinduism and Indian intellectual history in the Department of Asian and Asian American Studies at Stony Brook University.

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