Presidential Address:
Too Little and Too Much:
Reflections on Muslims in the
History of India

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I want to begin this evening by recalling my immediate predecessor as AAS president from the South Asian field, Barbara Stoler Miller, whose untimely death in 1992 took from us a distinguished Sanskritist, a gifted teacher, and a generous

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Were I to acknowledge all those who have influenced me in a talk as general as this, the notes would exceed the text—though I regret not doing so! I want to make two general acknowledgments. First, I am grateful to a set of people with whom I have interacted now over at least two decades and who were present once again as I thought about this talk—Catherine Asher, Sandria Freitag, David Gilmartin, Thomas Laqueur, David Ludden, Gail Minault, and, as always, Thomas Metcalf—joined by "newcomers," whom I count on to be equally constant—Aditya Behl, Nasser Hussain, Ted Margadant, Clarence Walker, and Aram Yengoyan. With special thanks to Veena Oldenberg for giving me a hard time.

Second, as befits this occasion, I note with appreciation the multiple sites of intellectual exchange that exist under the aegis of the Association from which I have —once again—benefited. The 1994 Annual Meeting in Boston offered panels on South Asia that were unusual for their coherence, seriousness, and sophistication: papers on such diverse topics as inscriptions from the precolonial period, architecture, miniature painting, contemporary gender roles, and political parties probed the complex issues related to religious nationalism. I also benefitted from two regional meetings where I myself spoke on related issues: the New York Conference on Asian Studies at New Palitz (16 October 1993) and the Southeast Conference on Asian Studies at Hilton Head (15 January 1995). The latter, coinciding with the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., stimulated reflections on "majoritarianism" and citizenship in the U.S. and India. I am particularly grateful to Steven A. Hoffman, Martha Kaplan, John D. Kelly, and Philip Oldenberg, all of whom generously shared their own relevant materials with me after the New York meeting. The pages of the Journal have been, of course, invaluable for articles and reviews. And, finally, a warm thank you to the staff and the Secretariat and especially Carol Hansen for innumerable exchanges on substance and practicality that led to the use of Miskin's "Noah" for the Annual Meeting program cover, her related design of the tote bag motif, and—following David Wyatt's lead in 1994—a subject for the talk itself.

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colleague whose absence we mourn. In my address I continue themes taken up by Barbara Miller four years ago (Miller 1991) as well as by Stanley Tambiah, as president from the Southeast Asian field, the year before (Tambiah 1990). Then, as now, scholars across the disciplines—whether, like Barbara Miller, a scholar of classical texts; or like Stanley Tambiah, an anthropologist; or myself, a historian of British India—have struggled to understand the religious nationalism of South Asia, one of whose most tragic outcomes has been an accelerating violence against the Muslim minority.

A striking characteristic of recent public life in India has been an intensified use of historical narratives to define the nature of India’s people and draw the boundaries of citizenship. A few years back, these histories began swirling around an obscure mosque in Ayodhya, built in 1528. The mosque was physically destroyed in late 1992 by organized Hindu activists, men and women, who tore down the mosque stone by stone. These activists argued that the mosque builders had themselves destroyed an ancient temple, built on the very site of the birth place of Lord Ram, a god whose drama of exile and perfect kingship, always well known, had swept India in a televised serial a few years earlier. They insisted that they could not await the decisions of an ordinary court to adjudicate rights to the land: their claim transcended mundane legality. Terrible conflict followed the destruction of the mosque. Most of the victims were Muslims.¹

The version of history implicit in the destruction of the mosque was one deeply engrained in its basic outline in what we call “common sense,” current not only in India but outside: There was once a Hindu Golden Age; Muslims came as foreign invaders; Muslims were oppressors who ultimately ushered in a period of decline. Versions of this narrative had been current in the independence movement and had justified, for some, the separate state of Pakistan. This history had, moreover, long been a subject of contestation in independent India, as historians like Romila Thapar from the late 1960s on had struggled to make explicit the implications of such narratives for India’s public life (Thapar et al. 1968; Rudolph and Rudolph 1983; Hoffman 1993). What has been new in the past decade has been the revival of this narrative as sanction for an explicit program of public action, a revival that inter alia called for mosques, especially when presumed to have been built on the sites of earlier temples, to be removed and for Muslims to assimilate—in some sense—or leave. Arguments from history have been taken to transcend other sources of morality and even institutions as basic to civil life as courts.

Historians in India have recently renewed debates about the political implications of their scholarly practice for public life (Gopal 1991–92).² A new issue has been raised by the work of historians, including some among the so-called “Subalternists” (Prakash 1994), who have chosen not to work within the old nationalist narrative but to reject the great teleological “metanarratives,” including the nationalist narrative, completely. Critics of this radical approach, in turn, have asked if such work, by destabilizing the conventional narrative, has not opened the field precisely for Hindu

¹For background to the crisis brought on by the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya, see the important collection edited by S. Gopal (1991), and for comments on the situation after the destruction of the mosque see the special issue of South Asia, “After Ayodhya” (1994). See also two forthcoming edited volumes, one on communalism edited by David Ludden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press) and one on the new role of women in religious nationalism edited by Amrita Basu and Patricia Jeffrey (Delhi: Kali for Women.)

²My focus on India rather than Pakistan in these comments is a response to the use of history in India’s public life, a use that has substantially receded in favor of Islamic and other discourses in Pakistan (Metcalf 1987).
nationalists to utilize history for their own "supremacist" ends (Ghosh 1995). Would it not be better to revitalize a liberal nationalist past? Such issues have engaged politicians, put members of the Indian History Congress on the cover of the Indian equivalent of Time or Newsweek (India Today), and stimulated discussion among diaspora Indians, many of whom have embraced what seems an authentic historical heritage as part of their Hindu identity. ¹

Those of us who study India outside India must also recognize the extent to which our scholarly work has typically reinforced the fundamental assumptions and parameters within which the old nationalist and "the new Hindu history" (Pandey 1994), alike, operate. It is primarily to us in the American academy that I direct my comments this evening and thus call attention to the politics of knowledge entailed by our own conduct of scholarship. This knowledge is as much a part of American public life as it is of Indian public life, defining by presumed contrast who "we" are, and, in parallel cases like Bosnia, shaping our responses to international affairs. ²

Colonial and Nationalist Narratives

Two major scholarly projects have begun to wrench us from the problematic received narrative of Indian history. The first, and more complete, has been to recognize, in India as everywhere, the extent to which the writing of history since the nineteenth century has been intimately tied to the project of the nation-state. Today's public narrative, we now realize, while new in its emphases and its use, has roots that can be clearly identified as part of colonial practice that forged a powerful outline of the history of India, a history that simultaneously contributed to the construction of Britain's own history of itself.

In that colonial history, India was already a bounded entity inhabited by two religiously defined communities. And in that India, British historians imagined Hindus as the original inhabitants and Muslims rather as they, the British, imagined themselves: as foreign rulers, as imperial rulers, who arrived as successful conquerors. Muslims served as a foil against which the British defined themselves: by saying that Muslims were oppressive, incompetent, lascivious, and given to self-indulgence, the colonial British could define precisely what they imagined themselves to be, namely, enlightened, competent, disciplined, and judicious. At the same time, they imputed to Muslims certain qualities they admired, like qualities of masculinity and vigor, in

¹The letters to the editor of India West have been filled with such historical discussion over the past year. Hinduisms Today (Dec. 1994; posted on H-ASIA 28 Nov. 1994) produced a new chronology of India which stimulated considerable Internet discussion. The push for a single ethnicity is also evident in discussions over the Aryans who are, conventionally, seen as foreign invaders. The new Hindu historiography identifies the Aryans not as Indo-Europeans but as indigenous Indians who carry culture and language to Europe; this revisionism is the goal of the American Institute of Vedic Studies. See "400 at YUVA Spring Conference" in India Abroad, 6 June 1994.

²As I first talk for publication, a reporter on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" asks a historian to comment on President Clinton's statement that Bosnia-Serb hostilities represent "intractable" differences going back some "nine hundred years"—the same kind of essentialist continuities so familiar from the narratives of Indian history. The historian scoffed at the 900 years, dismissed the comment as "nonsense," suggested that events of World War II were the relevant time frame for the current hostilities, and attributed this false historicism to looking for an excuse for inaction (19 July 1995).
contrast to the allegedly effeminate Hindus. Such stereotypes shaped policy and legitimated British presence to themselves, and, for a considerable period of time, to many of those they ruled as well (T. Metcalf 1994, 138–44).

This was not done subtly. The long standard translations of the Persian histories of the precolonial period, The History of India as Told by its own Historians, some eight volumes published in the decade from 1867–77, invited the reader to selections purporting to show the “intolerance” of the Muhammedans, a story “of idols mutilated, temples razed, of forcible conversions and marriages, of proscriptions and confiscations, of murders and massacres, and of the sensuality and drunkenness of the tyrants who enjoined them.” Lest the point be missed, Elliott, one of the editors, added, “[The translations] will make our native subjects more sensible of the immense advantages accruing to them under the mildness and equity of our rule . . .” (Chatterjee 1993, 101). Little wonder that British records, often produced through such lenses, as Gyan Pandey has shown, cannot be taken as a guide to contemporaneous events labeled “Hindu-Muslim riots” (Pandey 1990), let alone, following Richard Davis’s work on Somnath, as an accurate record of events of earlier centuries (Davis 1994).

But why did this colonial narrative in its basic outline take hold? In part the explanation rests in a range of colonial practices in British India that systematically institutionalized a nation of communities, above all what were deemed the two great communities of Hindu and Muslim. These practices, embedded in what Peter Hardy has called the very “idiom” of British rule (Hardy 1972, x), included the measurement common to the modern state, including the census and ethnographic surveys, highlighting religion as they did not do in Britain itself. This arithmetic in turn provided grounds for claims to education, employment quotas in the army and in government services, and electoral reservations (Cohn 1987; Fox 1985; Lelyveld 1978, Chap. 2; Chakrabarty 1994, 147–48). How could leaders of the presumed communities not project their existence into the past as they competed among themselves and with each other (Freitag 1989)?

Many Indian nationalist leaders found it useful, specifically, to accept the notion of an Indian Golden Age that ended with the presumed oppression of Muslim rule (Chandra 1992). This explained the British takeover and the need for regeneration. Such a story enhanced cultural self-pride since there had been, after all, a Golden Age, and its existence offered hope for the future. Like the colonialist history, it revolved around self-conscious communities of “Hindus” and “Muslims” as “the master cleavage,” in Susanne Rudolph’s term, at the heart of contemporary history and politics (Rudolph 1995). Whether “secular” or “communalist,” these histories have etched ever deeper the essentialism of an India composed of two eternal groups. Historians of the nationalist movement, moreover, have identified mainstream Indian nationalism as having increasingly espoused cultural Hinduism as a source for common symbols of unity and a way to broaden the base of support beyond the English educated elite (Kaviraj 1992; Chakrabarty 1994, 154).

There are both scholarly grounds and political incentives to insist on the “construction” of contemporary identities and thus to challenge their claim to being natural and primordial. Nation, caste, language, and above all religion, are, in their politicized and enumerated form, contingent and recent. Indeed, it is the excavation of the contingent nature of such identities as much as anything that distinguishes recent scholarly work from the positions often taken by the older histories or by lay people, whether politicians or journalists or expatriate engineers propounding their version of history in newsgroups on the Internet.
Although substantial and sophisticated scholarship in recent years has shown that the conventional historiography of India is deeply implicated in the political context of British India, the categories and the narratives of that historiography still serve as the implicit framework not only of history but of the humanities and social sciences generally as they deal with India. We teach courses on “civilization”; we assume that there are enduring continuities to being “Hindu” or “Muslim”; we attribute explanatory value to these essences in historical settings; and we extrapolate from them to bounded sociological categories (Ludden 1994). Even Peter van der Veer, writing on contemporary religious nationalism, admits, despite his intention to avoid “reifying” the object of his discussion, “I am certain that parts of this book will have fallen prey to the very essentializations my argument attempts to problematize” (van der Veer 1994, xiv).

But most writing evinces no such self-consciousness. Samuel Huntington’s much discussed article published two years ago, summed up by its title “The Coming Clash of Civilizations?” seemed plausible to most people as it predicted a greater awareness of difference, and hence conflict, among contending bounded and coherent civilizations, like “Islam” and “Hinduism” (Huntington 1993). On “Islam,” V. S. Naipaul’s Among the Believers (1981) discovered precisely what he set out to find. It is these often implicit assumptions in relation to Islam I describe in my title as “too little and too much.”

One cardinal assumption of the civilizational approach to culture and society is its focus, as Edward Said, above all, has made clear, on pristine texts and presumed “authenticity” (Said 1978). In the case of the history and culture of Muslims of South Asia, or indeed of Asia generally, that has been an element conducive to scholarly neglect. To be sure, the issue of “too little” is one which perhaps everyone in this room identifies: Asian topics in general are in fact not given the attention we feel is their due. I think everyone moreover has at least one graduate school story, often in the mode of the misguided obduracy of the older generation ultimately proven wrong by the younger (at least in the younger’s opinion). My story is relevant to the amount of attention given to my subject. Early on I was asked by a senior professor what I planned to specialize in, and I answered that I intended to work on Indian Muslims. His reply—no doubt intended for my welfare—was a splutter: “Muslims! Why they are no more than 5 percent of the population and they simply do not matter.” I remember the percentage because it was so wrong, but the point was not really the number. The point was the assumption that “civilization” and “high culture” mattered, and that to study Muslims outside their area of origin in the Middle East was irrelevant.3 One sought to study the “authentic,” the “pure,” the “textual.” This tradition of scholarship, in short, fit India’s Muslims perfectly into the narrative of “foreignness” and “inauthenticity” outlined above.

But “too little” can have a second, although related, interpretation. Too often the history of Muslims is reduced to Islam in the sense of taken-for-granted assumptions in which words like “monolithic,” “militaristic,” “simple,” “fanatic,” “egalitarian”

3On the issue of the neglect of Islamic issues in Southeast Asia see the review essay by Roff 1985. The Joint Committee on the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council on Learned Societies, which worked for about a decade beginning in the early 1980s, took as one of its premises the importance of studying Islamic issues not exclusively in the Middle East but across Muslim societies generally. Among relevant publications are Metcalf (1982), Roff and Eickelman (1987), and Eickelman and Piscatori (1990).
resound. This textually based, narrowly defined Islam is "too little" to describe the complex and varied practices and loyalties of actual Muslims, yet "Islam" is made into the single most important causal variable for whatever Muslims do. "Too little" in this interpretation becomes "too much."

In colonial history, "religion" in general is taken as central to defining the fundamental properties of non-European cultures—societies that are backward, irrational, and medieval. By the nineteenth century, the West is meant to be beyond religion in public life: religion is, in these formulations, limited to spiritual matters, to private life, ultimately to something like a life-style or hobby; only the marginal or the reactionary would bring religion into public life. In nineteenth century Europe, moreover, "the economy," "the society," "public opinion" are taken as major forces in history, with "religion" only one force among many: in a place like India, by contrast, "religion" is typically taken as the central or only force. Societies understood to be dominated by religion become, in this account, like the West in an earlier period. The British histories of India, in keeping with this theory, identified three periods of Indian history: the Hindu, the Muslim, and a third not defined by religion at all, the British. Despite critiques of this periodization and approach, a great deal of what is taught on South Asia even today focuses on "religion," especially as embedded in texts as the defining marker of "civilization." This essential religiosity then becomes the speciously plausible explanation for religious politics and ethnicity in the contemporary world, instincts, as it were, that well up without the guiding control of Western or, in Central Asia, Russian colonialism.

**Alternatives**

Historians of the colonial period have, thus, shown definitively the limitations and political implications of the history forged in the context of colonialism and nationalism. What then can take its place? The second scholarly approach I alluded to above seeks precisely to offer new approaches to the medieval and early modern period, implicitly offering an alternative to "religion" or "Islam" as the preeminent explanatory variable in such areas as policy, social allegiance, and creative expression—the use of Islam I have called "too little" and "too much." The following examples are meant to be suggestive of the kind of work being done—and needing to be done.

First, we need to understand better the organization and ideology of Muslim politics, especially given the presumed truism that there is no difference between religion and politics in Islam. What could that possibly mean? The fact that actual Muslims have lived under every conceivable form of polity suggests the limitations of that claim. Stephen Humphreys' well-chosen word to describe the common relationship between Muslim political leaders and religion is *indifference*. In most Muslim-ruled polities throughout most of history, the nature of ritual practice, codes of law, spiritual orientation, or whatever has been irrelevant to the state. The religious leadership has lent legitimacy to those polities that maintain a framework of institutions within which Muslims can lead their religious life; they expect patronage to mosques, schools, and shrines but not control of what goes on. But non-Muslim populations expect patronage to their institutions as well.

Use of a term like "tolerance" or "secularism" to describe this arrangement on the part of any ruler, Muslim or not, is anachronistic: there were always preferences and hierarchies. But there were assuredly not, in the normal course of events, attempts
by Muslim kings and sultans to legislate theology or enforce some "orthodoxy." Claims of deviance were leveled at opponents at times of political conflict, while celebrations of ritual and moral conformity were offered as praise, but that is a far cry from any notion of "an Islamic state." And rhetoric of heroic feats against the infidels may be no more than a form of panegyric to communicate that a king should be thought of as good.7

Indeed, far from kingship or any other political structure being intrinsic to Islam, a theorist like the fourteenth-century Delhi-based Barani argued that the sultan put his soul at risk precisely because kingship, in this case, required what was un-Islamic—attitudes like arrogance, for example, and the compromises of political life (Hardy 1984). "The Islamic State," let alone the resources to impose it, is typically a variant of nationalism and hence a profoundly modern idea.

Loyalty, not a distinctive Islamic ideology, held the state together. Under the Mughals, a Hindu Rajput who was loyal was praised; a Muslim who was disloyal was subject to jihad. The Mughals' initial conquest in the subcontinent was of other Muslims. Loyalty was a Muslim virtue, but it was also a Rajput virtue. Conversion was not required to be part of the Muslim state. "Islam" does not provide a blueprint for organizing a state; it does not by itself explain political action; it does not predict participation or enmity in relation to the state.

These issues signal the need for precision in calling anything "Islamic." We need always to ask what is meant when that term is deployed. Often an institution or practice is indeed regarded by participants as "Muslim" or "Islamic," but is nonetheless not specific to Muslims. The case of "loyalty" as an attitude was just noted. The institutions of the Mughal state were bolstered by an Islamic ideology but were in their basic structures similar to those of early modern agrarian empires in China and elsewhere. A wide range of techniques, crops, and objects in general are often called "Islamic" simply because they are associated with populations that are predominantly Muslim, but such a use implicitly evokes essentialized religion. In each of these cases, alternative adjectives, and hence categories, would stimulate more contextual, more historical analysis than the overused modifier "Islamic."

A second thicket in precolonial history is social identity and the deep dead-end tracks carved through it by the categories "Hindu" and "Muslim." These are hard routes to avoid; but some recent scholarship is suggestive in showing the significance of ethnicity, rather than religion per se, as a category; the presence of a multiplicity—not a binary opposition—of competing groups; and, in general, the varied shifts and contingencies of alliances among elites.

6Khalid Masud (1984) persuasively argues that misapprehension in part derives from mapping the colonial bureaucracy onto the Mughal. Thus the mujtahid who gives pronouncements on religiogal guidance was not part of a hierarchy offering binding judgments as often depicted but individuals, sometimes with state patronage, offering advice.

7Thus, Richard Eaton notes, Ibn Battuta, the great traveler of the fourteenth century, described someone with no reference to his military feats as a fighter on the Islamic frontier (a ghazi); that quality was imputed to him only in later panegyrics (Eaton 1994). Similarly, in the defeat of Vijayanagar in 1556, the Qutb Shahi ruler himself claimed that he established a mosque on the remains of a temple. Yet inscriptions show that five years later that same Qutb Shahi was granting villages to support the same temple (Talbot 1994).

8This argument is persuasively made in a study of the Rajput mansabdar of Aurangzeb, Bhimsen (Richards 1984).

9Marshall Hodgson's use of such neologisms as "Islamicate" or "Persianate" signaled this issue very well but never caught on (Hodgson 1974).
In the kingdom of Vijayanagara, texts of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, as Philip Wagoner has shown, do not use the term “Muslim” at all but rather “Turk,” tursubka, an ethnic group whose religion is only one of its many characteristics. Turks, Telugu Brahmins, and others, as he puts it, moreover, “interact in the same social space” (Wagoner 1994). Making a similar argument from Telugu inscriptions, Cynthia Talbot found the Turks identified by such terms as ashvapati, the lords of the horses, one of multiple—not binary—competing groups, like the “lords of the elephants” in Orissa, or the Telugu warriors themselves, “lords of men” (Talbot 1994).

Talbot also found, however, that in the period of initial conquest the Turks were described as mleccha, a term often translated as “foreigner” but in fact also used for hill dwellers or indigenous “tribes,” and as yavana (“Ionian”), used since the time of Alexander the Great for those who came from the northwest. These texts describe the Turks as creators of chaos who overturned images, destroyed temples, and slaughtered Brahmans, exactly, Talbot argues, as do texts that describe any triumph of the “lower orders” over Brahmans. Overturning or capturing temple deities was common to all conquerors since temples were so clearly part of claims to sovereignty.10 Muslims were, in short, assimilated to known categories; they were not the unique foreign category some later ideologies made them out to be.

Vijayanagar’s neighboring and rival state of Bijapur, whose Adil Shahi rulers had strong Persian connections, mirrored Vijayanagar in its political organization and ethos, even sharing a name, “Bijapur,” that like “Vijayanagar” meant “city of victory.” Wagoner has identified inscriptions that show Turks serving Vijayanagar and Brahmans serving Bijapur. In these texts, dated over many decades, institutions of whatever provenance appear to be understood as equivalent. Thus, a mosque inscription in Vijayanagar calls the building a dharmasala, a charitable rest house, since a mosque would have been a place of rest for travellers; the merit for building it is assigned to the non-Muslim overlord, the Shaivite king.

To be sure, being Muslim mattered in a wide range of ways, fostering networks among different kinds of elites and shaping many aspects of daily personal life. But loyalties were often highly specific. Scholars often emphasize that what we call “Hinduism” historically had no single organization or doctrine; and, anthropologically, until the twentieth century, the same statement could be made about Muslims, given the affiliations that have existed around sufi saints or shrines, sectarian groups, law schools, or lineages (Mujeeb 1967; I. Ahmad 1981). As Peter Hardy wrote over twenty years ago, although the British may have thought of Muslims, in the words of Lord Dufferin in 1888, as a nation characterized by “monotheism . . . iconoclastic fanaticism . . . animal sacrifices . . . social equality and . . . remembrance of the days when, enthroned at Delhi, they reigned supreme,” this image, Hardy insists, “would have startled the Muslims of [the] earlier, pre-British period.” Those Muslims spoke a variety of languages, excluded the humble from their mosques, and many often owed their primary loyalty to devotional cults at shrines and temples. Muslims were, as Hardy puts it, scarcely “more monotheistic than their non-Muslim neighbours” (Hardy 1972, 1–2).

10A lively debate ensued at the 1994 Boston meeting on this subject: Lloyd Rudolph noted that Aurangzeb, painted as the great destroyer of Hindu temples in the received historiography, in fact built far more temples than he destroyed. C. M. Naim pointed out that rival Muslim powers destroyed the ritual centers of their opponents: for example, the Mughals destroyed the gate to the Jami’ Mosque of the Sharqi dynasty in Jaunpur. Richard Eaton’s paper described Shaivite sacking of Jain temples. Eleanor Zelliott suggested that Hindus tended only to take over images of rivals while Muslims destroyed them.
Two key dimensions of these identities distinguish them sharply from those that have emerged in recent times. One was that they were primarily local, even face-to-face. Thus, in the book honored today with the Ananda Coomaraswamy Prize, Richard Eaton dramatically shifts our image of “conversion,” the very word so laden with our Pauline notions of individualism, doctrine, and instantaneous and total change, that the term itself perhaps needs to be dropped (Eaton 1994). In Bengal and Punjab, what we call conversion is above all allegiance to Sufi intermediaries. In these settings, Sufi elders often served as agents of agrarian change, entrusted with rights to land as they oversaw its being brought under settled agriculture. They served as intermediaries to regional and central political authorities, mediating between recently sedentarized communities and large-scale polities. Similar processes took place in areas of non-Muslim rule with Brahminic caste leaders and, later, under colonial rule with Christian missionaries as intermediaries. In the Bengal case, a closer identification with Islamic symbols did in fact eventually emerge, but that was very gradual and in fact most marked only in the colonial period (R. Ahmed 1981).

Neither the pull of presumed egalitarianism nor the push of “the sword”—the usual stereotypical explanations of conversion to Islam in South Asia—produced the new networks of patronage and loyalty, perhaps devotion, that we speak of as “conversion.” Indeed, a Muslim allegiance was not dramatically visible. As is well known, only with the first British census in 1871 did anyone discover that the majority of the Bengali population was Muslim: up until then numbers did not matter, the concept of “majority” meant nothing, and no value was placed on those of some shared identity over a large area acting in concert.

A third vexed area in discussion of the precolonial period is that of so-called cultural “syncretism,” a term used to describe religious styles and art, for example. The term implies that the categories “Hindu” and “Muslim” are fixed, a notion already argued as problematic, and that bits of both in some sense mix. It encourages what one might call the “vertical fallacy,” that it is possible to make lists, even contrasting lists, of what is “Hindu” in one column and “Muslim” in another. It also tends to call “Hindu” or “Muslim” elements in the culture that may be neither or both.

Thus Catherine Asher has argued that architectural styles, labeled as Hindu or Muslim in the colonial period, in fact initially participated in a shared “taste” with no archaeology of origin ascribed (Asher 1992; Metcalf 1989). Or, put differently, the significance was typically not linked to religion in any narrow or exclusive sense. Thus, to use the Vijayanagar example again, a ruler who patronized Shaivite deities also built public buildings with domes and arches, in the style of the northern Muslim...

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11 The other source of the Muslim population is sometimes alleged to be descent from invaders or settlers, an origin indicated by the claim to status as “saiyyid” or “shaikh.” Even if dismissed as ahistorical, does this claim indicate a sense of “foreignness,” as is sometimes alleged? The meaning and import no doubt shifted in different contexts, but one hypothesis surely might be that the significance had about as much geopolitical import as did the Rajput claim to descent from the Sun or the Moon.

12 The fluidity of the earlier systems, and the multistrandedness of identities, should give pause to those who, ignoring the power of the modern nation-state, have proposed a revival of Ottoman style self-regulating millets as the solution to India’s current social dilemmas, at considerable cost, however, to individual choice.

13 Compare the arrangement of artifacts in the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C., where in a recent installation the South Asian gallery was divided into a Muslim and a basically Hindu half. Thus the great courtier ‘Abdu’r-Rahim Khan-i Kahan would have found his pen case in the Muslim half, the painting he patronized of the Ramayana hung not with other miniatures of love and separation, but across the boundary in the “Hindu” half.
rulers, and, even more intriguingly, dressed in public settings as a "sultan," all this to participate in what was less "Islamic," than a shared discourse of rulership (Wagoner 1995).

If there is a "vertical fallacy" associated with "syncretism," we might also posit a "horizontal fallacy," following Peter Brown's identification of the postenlightenment "two-tier" theory of religion. In this theory, rational monotheism is a higher form of religion and therefore maps onto the upper classes and the educated; superstition and "syncretism" represent more primitive religion and are presumed characteristic of the humble (Brown 1981). By this reckoning, the upper classes are "good Muslims"; the rural and uneducated Muslims, more immersed in local cultures, are taken as deviant. If Islam is considered foreign, the lower orders are, therefore, "more Indian."

Indeed, when I mentioned to colleagues at last year's meeting that I was to pick the cover design for this year's annual meeting program, I was advised to turn to folk art—in a sense to choose something not "too Islamic"—or to hedge the problem by using an object from the Indus Valley Civilization. I was intrigued by this advice but I decided simply to search my memory for something visual I had seen and loved.

I chose Miskin's late-sixteenth-century Noah's Ark, certainly an example of "high," not "folk," culture (Figure 1). Yet this painting at once represents a central Islamic symbol and a work specific to this geographic region. It could not have been done anywhere else but the Mughal court. This is so even though it is impossible to extricate any element and label it "Hindu." What is Indic is not limited to folk art. The Mughal paintings have a vitality, an individualizing of animals and humans, a use of color and in some cases perspective, that set them apart from the Persian miniature tradition from which they derive (Welch 1978, 56–57; Okada 1992, 125–36; Beach 1981, 124).

Miskin's painting spills over with animal and human energy in a continuum from the water to the ark to the air. In this perfectly balanced composition, aloof from the teeming decks and men overboard around him, sits the Prophet Noah at the center, transcendentally intent on his companion, who holds some holy book. It is perhaps not too fanciful to recall Shiva Nataraj with his perfect balance and tranquillity within a circle of moving flame. Thus a central, normative symbol of Islam, the prophet, takes on new meaning in a new cultural world. The powerful image of the prophet is profoundly enriched in the Indic context by some combination of assimilation and resistance that takes shape in creative expressions like these.

But the story is more complex: the painter is not a Muslim but Miskin, son of Mahesh, and we can only guess at the content of the multiple meanings a painting like this would have had for the many different audiences it delighted in Akbar's court (Behl 1995). Not least, Noah is visually an emblem of the king, recalling countless compositions of the haloed ruler seated with advisors, his smaller sons ranged at his side, the pivotal figure in relation not only to humans but to creatures generally. The king is bound to his subjects not by the shared "identity" of the culturally homogeneous modern state but by ties of protection and obedience—just like Noah with his disparate elephants and cats. The painting thus turns out to be, in part, a subtle representation of the kind of early modern polity sketched out above.

But if one leaves aside architecture and art, what of texts where the labels "Hindu" and "Muslim" are actually used? Clearly these terms carry a wide variety of meanings of which one example may suggest the need for specific, contextual studies. Some thirty years ago Aziz Ahmad described a selection of texts he labeled "epic and counter-epic," arguing that in them we find a genre divided down the middle: "a Muslim epic of conquest, and a Hindu epic of resistance . . . planted in two different
Figure 1. *Noah's Ark*, attributed to Miskin, India, ca. 1590, Mughal, Akbar period. Colors and gold on paper: 28.1 x 15.6 cm. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.
cultures; in two different languages; in two mutually exclusive religious, cultural and historical attitudes each confronting the other in aggressive hostility” (Ahmad 1963, 470). Before heaving a sigh of relief that we can go back to the simple story we all, so to speak, grew up with, let me call attention to two important recent studies, Richard Davis’ of the construction of the Somnath legend (Davis 1994) and Aditya Behl’s study of one of these texts, the Padmavati (Behl 1995).

This text, written in Awadhi by a Muslim, Malik Muhammad Jayasi, in about 1540, purports to tell the story of the victory over Rajput Chitaur of the evil king Alauddin Khilji, who is driven by desire for the beautiful Padmavati. Ahmad concludes that Jayasi, located as he was some distance from the court, “in all simplicity” must have accepted the Rajput legends and hoped “to tell a good story which would appeal to his fellow-villagers, the large majority of whom were Hindus” (Ahmad 1963, 475–76). Any Muslim using the vernacular (even after centuries) and steeped in local symbols and stories, must, in short, have been a bumpkin—echoes of “the horizontal fallacy” sketched out above.

And indeed Behl and Davis give us a very different picture. Jayasi’s patron was a Hindu, but the dedication of the poem was to the sultan, Sher Shah Sur. The poem, far from simple, is a complex allegory shaped by nath yogic and Sufi cosmology. The so-called “epics and counter-epics,” as Davis explains, are in fact rhetorically similar and appealed to an elite cosmopolitan audience constituted in part by patronizing, writing, and hearing texts like these. In this poem, the villain, to be sure, is the Muslim king, but “Islam” conquers. In the poem’s brilliant concluding pun, “Chitaur becomes Islam”: the town, Chitaur, is in ashes, but “chita” (mind) and “ura” (heart), consumed in the fire of love, reach the annihilation of the Sufis, whose doctrine Jayasi espoused (Behl 1995, 6). “Islam” and “Hinduism” are, then, not the binary at all but rather true Islam, in the person of the Rajput hero, and false Islam, in the person of the conqueror (helped by a Brahmin advisor and a Rajput assassin), who are all ignorant of the path of asceticism and love. This is a story of resistance to a Turk, a sultan who is an enemy of Islam/truth/the divine. It is not the Hindu-Muslim gap that expresses the void between the divine and the worldly, but the gap between those who seek the spirit/beauty and those who merely conquer and conspire. This was perhaps a story to put Sher Shah Sur in his place—as the Chishti Sufis liked to do. But far more important, it was a story that profoundly enriched Sufi teachings by the utilization of local legends and histories, the deployment of new symbols to describe the quest for the beloved, and a new depth in understanding the arduors of the Sufi path through the sophisticated theories of yogic discipline available in the culture at large. In literature, as in architecture and art, new work, rooted in diverse social and political contexts, points us beyond the static dichotomies that have shaped historical narratives too long.

These brief comments on aspects of state, society, and art enlarge definitions of Islamic practice to include, for example, loyalty, temple patronage, courtly painting, and epics about Rajput heroes. At the same time, they show that Islam, especially when reduced to a narrow list of “beliefs,” cannot be used to explain everything. A stereotypical Islam offers us little guidance to understanding the nature of Muslim politics or the dynamics of their societies, including, perhaps surprisingly, even the process usually labelled “conversion.”

Concluding Reflections

Why do these proposed corrections matter? The situation of Muslims in India today can be compared to the situation of African-Americans in the United States.
This may seem preposterous: Muslims were once rulers, builders of the Taj Mahal; India is bordered by two states with primarily Muslim populations; India has had presidents of Muslim background. Yet Dipesh Chakrabarty, in part to de-exoticize India, has recently argued that the term “communalism” to describe ethnic relations in India should in fact be replaced by “racism.” Chakrabarty points to the everyday behavior that in Europe or Australia would indicate racism, for example, informal unwillingness to sell property to Muslims (Chakrabarty 1994)—to which one could add references to Muslims as dirty or having too many children, or, as in the American South, the remnant left when the smart ones go north. No analogy is perfect: others have found anti-Semitism a useful parallel. One can also link Indian Muslims, Copts, Ahmadis, and Bahais who are labeled in their respective countries as the cosmopolitans, people of mixed loyalty with links to outsiders, secretly privileged and powerful, in short, the language once used of European Jews. In all these cases minorities are forced to play roles not of their own choosing, not least that of foil against which the unity of others—Hindus, the nation—can be constituted, and injustices of class and wealth obscured. The history that identifies Indian Muslims as aliens, destroyers, and crypto-Pakistanis, with its profound moral and political implications for citizenship and entitlements, is critical in sustaining that role. It presumably cannot be successfully challenged until, as has happened only partially and very recently in the United States in relation to African-Americans, the social and political interests that sustain belief in fundamental difference are changed.

The professional historian may thus, for the moment, have little chance in offering correctives, the more so since the debate within India has been drawn between the “authentic” on the one hand and the “deracinated secularist” on the other. Indeed, some of the latter have evinced a grudging admiration for the “post-modernism” of the Hindu nationalist response to the devastating critique of their claims about the presumed ancient temples of Ayodhya: that not facts but beliefs about what happened alone matter.

Ayodhya was, in fact, not the site of an ancient temple. A temple was almost certainly not destroyed to build the mosque: the first written reference to that claim comes not in the contemporaneous records where it might be expected but in a nineteenth-century colonial gazetteer. Ironically, the inscriptions on the mosque spoke not of conquest and destruction but of Babar’s justice as a building that reached the heavens and of the mosque as “a resting place for angels.”

Bal Thakeray, leader of the Shiv Sena, is quoted, speaking of Muslims, that if Muslims “behaved like Jews in Nazi Germany,” there would be “nothing wrong if they were treated as Jews were in Germany” (Sen 1993, 28). See also, A History of India (Kulke and Rothermund 1986, 300), a widely used text: “Like Shylock in The Merchant of Venice, Mohammad Ali Jinnah had asked for his pound of flesh. . . .”

An especially significant contribution, widely reprinted, was a collective statement by a number of historians at Jawaharlal Nehru University (Gopal et al 1989).

Thus K. R. Malkani: “Perhaps these ideas about Rama, and his birthplace, are just concepts. It is possible that Rama never existed. The birthplace of Rama reflects the dreams, hopes, and values of Hindus. To the average Hindu, Rama very much existed and Ayodhya is his birthplace. That is what matters” (Sen 1992, 39).

Similarly, the inscription at the entrance of the mosque implicitly stressed the insignificance of any worldly building, built after all, “in the name of that One who”—note the nonsectarian terminology—had created all the worlds and was himself beyond place (la mah-ani), and with praise of the “joy of the prophets of both worlds (do jabani),” this world and the next. This building in contrast was merely “a home in this world” (khana dar jaban) in the time of Babar, the qalander, not a conqueror or marauder, but a mendicant man of God, who knew good fortune (for the Persian text, though without translation, see Srivastava 1991, 86).
town developed as a center of devotion to Ram in the context of Muslim rule and with the patronage of Muslim rulers (van der Veer 1994).

Muslims did destroy temples, even if not in this particular case; Hindu nationalists claim a right to destroy mosques in revenge. But note the difference of the latter claim. The Hindu activists speak for a nationalist ideology that denies diversity. The precolonial states, by contrast, incorporated diversity. The difference is summed up by the goal of destroying all mosques (Verma 1991), to which end books have been published cataloguing hundreds of targets. Earlier, rulers used destruction in limited and strategic ways or—to use an Indic term—looted religious buildings for their wealth. The meaning of destroying a monument is no longer the same, and we need to counter a history that suggests that it is.

Histories will always be rewritten. One reason is the relatively straightforward one that new material will be unearthed—the scent of untapped source materials that makes historians salivate. But a second reason is that the world changes. History is ultimately a pragmatic science: in a wide variety of ways we write and read history precisely because at some level it is used to make sense of the past for the present.

In the nineteenth century it was useful for colonialists, and, later, nationalists, with their own emphases, to write a history of difference, a pragmatic benefit that continues for religious nationalists today. On the verge of the twenty-first century, in a world of increasing interdependence, others of us need a history of connections among disparate settings (Tilly 1994), of mobility across space (Ghosh 1993; Ludden 1994), of analogous institutions that are not "Western" or "Eastern" (Dale 1994), of engagement with other geographic areas in our disciplines that belies Orientalist specificity (Khalidi 1995). Such history is also, of course, produced in a political context. Even so, historians can insist that, in the end, some history is better than others. The postmodernist Hindu nationalist argument that only belief matters is, in this perspective, bad history.

Historians need to tell a new story about South Asian Muslims—for themselves and whoever can hear them. That history has been doubly marginalized by legacies of European orientalism and Indian politics. More of us need, above all, to take Muslims into account—an end to the neglect I've tagged "too little"—and all of us need to build a history that does not make "Islam" prior—the stereotypical thinking I've called "too much." We need scholars who, unlike my generation, do not study Muslims alone. And, instead of creating difference, we need to draw boundaries around common human experiences and, above all, around common social and political structures, situating Muslims squarely within the complex world of opportunities and constraints, motivations, and tastes they shared with everyone else.

List of References


18Susan Bayly's study of South Indian Christians and Muslims (1989); Ritu Menon's forthcoming work on abducted women during Partition; and Paula Richman's on Tamil Muslim poetry are outstanding examples of such inclusive work.


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