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The Sacred Cow: Hinduism and ecology

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The Sacred Cow has a double meaning in the context of Hinduism and ecology. The Sacred Cow has been seen as symbolic of the ecological commitment of Hinduism, while metaphorically ecology has itself become a 'Sacred Cow' in the sense of an idea held to be immune to critical challenge. One cannot be seen not to be green, and ecological awareness has entered the rhetoric of religious leaders as well as politicians, though sadly not so successfully into their practice. It is now ten years since the Assisi declarations, yet as Seyyed Nasr points out very little has changed, 'either the views of the World Bank or of the various countries selling arms or bellowing smoke into the atmosphere. It [the Assisi Event] just made people feel better for a while' (Nasr, 1996: 6).

There are at least two different approaches which might be adopted on the subject of Hinduism and ecology, both of which are at least potentially valid and valuable: one is visionary, drawing upon the insights of the Hindu tradition to support the ecological agenda; the other is an academic assessment of the ecological credentials claimed by and/or for the religion. This paper adopts the latter approach.

The Vision of Hinduism as Ecologically Ideal

An example of the first approach was recently given by a group of first-year undergraduates studying both Hinduism and Global Futures. They gave an engaging and passionate portrayal of village life in ancient India, in tune with the changing seasons and in harmony with nature viewed as God's body and therefore sacred. A simple, sustainable, peaceful, vegetarian lifestyle was ruined by colonial invaders imposing industrialisation, motor transport, tourism, a cash crop economy and the reliance on the West. The solution to the eco-human crisis, on their analysis, was to rediscover the values and practices of the ancient Hindu tradition.

This picture of Hinduism as ecologically ideal is often part of the self-presentation of Hinduism in the contemporary world, for example in a pamphlet handed out at a Hindu festival in Milton Keynes preserved in the Open University Reader (Sivapriya, 1989). Here the portrayal of Hinduism is as a religion of life, love, unity, freedom, tolerance and ecological concern, 'it gives due respect to each and every creature'; 'the aspects of nature such as earth and living beings are seen as divine and connected to God'; 'animals and birds are venerated'; 'the whole universe is holy'

(Sivapriya, 1989: 75–76). Hinduism ‘takes great care of the science of the environment, forest development, welfare of wildlife and plants’; for Hinduism ‘cutting down the green tree is a sin’ (Sivapriya, 1989: 77–78). When we add that the same text claims that Hinduism is ‘the only religion which gives equal status and respect to womenfolk’ (Sivapriya, 1989: 76) we can see that this is a somewhat idealised and partisan presentation of Hinduism.

As another example, the ‘Understanding Hinduism’ exhibition at the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Neasden, London includes ‘Care for Animals’—‘Hinduism strives to preserve all species’—and ‘Care for Nature’—‘it [Hinduism] warns man not to disturb nature’—as two sub-headings of ‘Hinduism for the World’ (Cultural Festival of India, 1995: 13–14). Ecology is mentioned specifically in the section of the exhibition concerned with Swaminarayan where ‘Ecological Care’ features, listing tree planting, wells recharging and aluminium recycling (Cultural Festival of India, 1995: 23). Hinduism is described as a way of life with ‘a heart as big as the Earth’ which ‘teaches the world the true philosophy of Peace’; consistent with this portrayal are the principles that ‘a meat-free, Animal-friendly world would help restore the peaceful nature of man’ and ‘true peace will dawn only when man lives in peace with Himself, Nature & God!’ (Cultural Festival of India, 1995: 13–14.)

Certainly the portrayal of Hinduism as an ecologically sound tradition has done much to endear it to our students, especially those with counter-cultural sympathies, and has provided a strong motivation for its study, in schools as well as universities. However, our task is to advance an academic assessment of this portrayal.

Hindu Environmental Action

In order to contextualise the discussion, we begin by looking at examples of practical ecological activity undertaken by Hindus, which arguably means far more than positive scriptural quotations—given that access to scripture has been limited both by religious sanction and levels of literacy—or the rhetoric of declarations—given that oratory may not reflect or affect reality. In the language of liberation theology, praxis takes precedence.

Among the examples we have discovered are the Vrindavan project, Chipko, Trees for Life, the magazine *Resurgence* and the activities of the ISKCON and Swaminarayan movements.

Vrindavan, a town sacred to Krishna who played in its forests, is the focus of the World Wide Fund for Nature’s Vrindavan Conservation Project initiated in 1991 at the instigation of two devotees of Krishna, Sri Sewak Saran and Ranchor Prime. Ranchor Prime is author of the WWF book *Hinduism and Ecology* (Prime, 1992). The area around Vrindavan has been subject to much environmental damage from deforestation, industrialisation, pollution of the river Yamuna, unsuitable sewerage arrangements and inappropriate development. The project is involved with reforestation, water treatment and sanitation, restoring the pilgrimage sites and developing environmental trails in parallel with traditional pilgrim paths. It is also much involved with environmental education for both children and adults. It is supported in this country by the ‘Friends of Vrindavan’ charity, based in Leicester where there

is a large Hindu community. The charity is currently organising a sponsored cycle ride along the river Yamuna among other activities. This is a clear example of an environmental project springing from Hindu religious motivation. The aim of the WWF's Project is explicitly to 'encourage the protection and restoration of the sacred surroundings of Vrindavan and reinforce Hindu environmental values' (Friends of Vrindavan publicity leaflet, 1996).

The Chipko or tree-hugging movement, championed by Sunderlal Bahaguna, is an example of direct action to save the environment. As a protest against the deforestation of the Himalayas and consequent erosion and landslides, in the mid-1970s, villagers organised themselves, literally hugging trees to prevent developers cutting them down. The message was spread by folk songs and stories of Lord Krishna. Whether or not the initial motivation was religious, Bahaguna justifies his work with reference to the Bhagavad Gita and claims 'there are people in India who are very devoted to religion and that is the secret of success of the Chipko Movement' (quoted in Prime, 1992: 96).

Another example included in Ranchor Prime's book is the Trees for Life movement started in 1987 by Balbir Mathur. Mathur found that whereas some tree-planting campaigns had failed, in that the trees were subsequently neglected, the secret of success, as for Chipko, was a religious motivation. Trees were blessed and given out as *prasad*, and these trees were cared for. It also helped if the trees were fruit trees, fast growing, and given to the women of the family. Prime also claims Satish Kumar, the editor of *Resurgence* magazine and a pioneer of the Human Scale Education Movement. The concerns of Satish Kumar for a sustainable lifestyle and his critique of the evils of Western, industrial consumer culture are rooted in Hindu traditions of vegetarianism, generosity, self-control, sacrifice, meditation and renunciation of materialism. 'Ecological peace, social peace and spiritual peace—for the Hindus, environment embraces all three' (Quoted in Prime, 1992: 76).

Ranchor Prime himself is a member of ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness) and sees the self-sufficient rural communes, vegetarian and organic, of the Krishna devotees as models for an alternative, ecologically sound way of life. He is perhaps the leading spokesperson for the environmental values of the Hindu tradition in Britain today and has been actively involved in ecology as the Religious Network Officer in the United Kingdom for the World Wide Fund for Nature. As mentioned above, he has been an influential figure in the Vrindavan Project.

The Swaminarayan movement does not just theorise about the ecological credentials of Hinduism. Indeed, aluminium recycling played a particularly important part in fund-raising for the new temple and this was justified ecologically and spiritually, rather than simply financially. Moreover, the temple complex has been designed, constructed and operated in accordance with the ecological principles of sustainability, conservation and energy-efficiency while an activity associated with the temple project, 'a door-to-door campaign...promoting ideals for better living', has involved devotees in advocating 'Care for our Earth' (Swaminarayan Aksharpathi, 1995). The movement also sponsors tree-planting, well recharging and recycling campaigns.

These examples demonstrate the depth of commitment to ecology evinced by Hindus. It is also clear that many Hindus accept the attribution of ecology to

Hinduism while many others derive inspiration for ecology directly from their religious adherence.

Evidence from the Tradition Commonly Cited

Passing then from practical action to the claims made that Hinduism is an ecologically sound tradition, we analysed a selection of sources easily available to teachers interested in this topic. In addition to Ranchor Prime and the materials from the Swaminarayan Temple, there were other books available from the World Wide Fund for Nature, such as Martin Palmer's *Worlds of Difference, Faith and Nature* and *Genesis or Nemesis*, the Assisi Declarations, the collection of articles in the 1989 *World Religions in Education: humankind and the environment*, Holm & Bowker's *Attitudes to Nature* and Owen Cole's *Moral Issues in Six Religions*. Many ideas were repeated in every source.

Most writers used the example of cow protection as a symbol of Hindu concern for all creatures and of mother earth, often referring to Gandhi's oft-quoted admiration for this element of Hindu tradition (Palmer, 1989: 28). Also seen as significant are other sacred animals such as monkeys and snakes (Kanitkar, 1991: 108). All sources found great significance in the fact that Hindu gods have animal vehicles, such as Shiva's bull Nandi, Durga's lion or tiger, Ganesha's mouse or rat (e.g. Singh, 1986: 18). Similarly, that some gods have animal or part animal form, like Ganesh or Hanuman, and that some of the avatars of Vishnu are in animal form such as the fish, tortoise, the boar and the man-lion are adduced as evidence of the sacredness of the animal kingdom (e.g. Choudhury, 1994: 74). The very fact that the avatars of Vishnu descend to save the earth in some way or other from demons or other threats is seen as redolent with significance for modern campaigns to save the earth. Ranchor Prime in particular gives an ecological interpretation to the avatars (Prime, 1992: 36–52). The poison produced by the churning of the ocean is the poison of nuclear radiation; the demon destroyed by Varaha the boar is the rape of the earth by mining and drilling for oil; the demon Hiranyakashipu threatened cows and trees; the demon Bali was greedily claiming all the earth's resources for himself; Parasurama's attack on the Kshatriyas is an attack on the military-industrial complex; Rama and Sita live a simple, sustainable forest lifestyle in harmony with the wildlife; Balarama was concerned with the courses of rivers; the Buddha came to preach against animal sacrifice and for non-violence and compassion for all beings; Kalki will bring to an end the age of environmental degradation.

As a devotee of Krishna, Prime gives special attention to his life. The rural idyll of Krishna the cowherd is interpreted as a love of nature. The stories of the miracles of Krishna are given an environmental spin. When Krishna defeated the serpent Kaliya who was poisoning the river he was clearing up pollution. When Krishna swallowed the forest fire he was protecting trees and wildlife. When he demonstrated his superiority over the storm god Indra, he was making the point that humans must take responsibility for environmental conditions (Prime, 1992: 53–57).

Among the other commonly cited examples of Hindu concern for the environment are the fact that natural phenomena such as mountains and rivers are sacred,

that certain plants are sacred, that forests are traditionally the resort of hermits and sannyasis, that the earth itself is viewed as a goddess, and that Krishna used the example of the tree as a model of unselfishness, providing good things like fruit, shade and firewood for the sake of others.

Much is also made of the fact that the deities of the ancient Vedic pantheon were personifications of natural forces. An obvious favourite is the 'Hymn to the Earth' from the Atharva Veda (12.1), quoted by Karan Singh in the Assisi Declarations. The earth is praised as source of food, water and life and her continued blessing is sought.

There are many different creation stories within the Hindu tradition, and all have potential for an environmental reading. One of the most well known is that which tells of Vishnu asleep upon the cosmic ocean, and the creator god Brahma emerging from his navel. In the version told by Ranchor Prime, the interrelationship of all elements of the universe is stressed, and also that Vishnu entered into the material world, rendering all sacred. In the older myths from the Vedic literature, the world is divinely created by Prajapati, Lord of creatures, or Vishvakarman, the maker of all, or evolved from Hiranyagarbha, the golden embryo, or manifested by the holy power of Brahman. The famous hymn of the sacrifice of Purusha, or primal man, from parts of whom all aspects of the universe develop, like all these other myths, can be interpreted to mean that all parts of the universe are interrelated, and that all are sacred. Even the reverently agnostic hymn of Rig Veda 10.129 can be used to argue for a respectful attitude to the basic elements such as water. Martin Palmer (1988: 126) finds this passage a useful reminder of epistemological humility to humankind—we know so little, and should act accordingly.

In the ethical dimension, the concept of ahimsa, or non-violence is seen as central to the Hindu attitude to all living things, and a major contribution to the ecological debate. The debt here to Jainism, and the emphasis given to the concept by Gandhi, is stressed by Karan Singh in the Assisi Declaration (Singh, 1986). That many Hindus are vegetarian is quoted with approval and attributed to concern for animal life. The ascetic lifestyle, where the bare minimum for survival is taken from the earth, and Gandhi's ideal of a simple, self-sufficient lifestyle, are seen as precursors of the concept of sustainability (Prime, 1992: 58–69). The chastity of the sannyasi, hermit or devotee is seen as a contribution to keeping 'population...under control in an environmentally sound and healthy way' (Prime, 1992: 74).

The related concepts of karma and rebirth can be enlisted into the ecological cause. Karma reminds us that we cannot escape the consequences of our actions, which come home to us in cases such as BSE. Palmer (1989: 28–29) uses the example of the destruction of the rainforest to graze cattle for hamburgers which is damaging the environment for humans as well as wildlife. Reincarnation means that a short-term view cannot be taken. Maybe the environmental nemesis may not happen in our lifetime, the oil will last until after my death etc., but I will be reborn to experience the results. Several writers point out that rebirth may be in animal form, thus making it impossible for humans to view animals as simply there to be used. 'This hints at the acceptance of the idea that, in the strata of living creatures, humans are not necessarily put on a pedestal' (Choudhury, 1994: 74).

Turning now to the central philosophical concepts of Hinduism, the essential unity of all things and the indwelling of God in all things are often used to show that in Hinduism all things are sacred and to be treated with respect. If God is in all things, as some theistic philosophies teach, we must respect all things. If all things are one, as the non-theistic versions teach, then by harming the environment we are only harming ourselves. In books for children or non-specialists, little is made of the philosophical differences between the various schools of Hindu philosophy. Thus, 'because all life is part of the Supreme One, Hindus believe that every living thing is equally important in the great cycle of life' (Palmer, 1989: 27). Or again, 'an encompassing world view which looks upon all objects in the universe, living or non-living, as being pervaded by the same spiritual power' (Singh, 1986: 17). In this way, it is argued that in the philosophy, ethics, mythology, and symbolism of Hinduism there is much support for ecological concern.

A Critical Analysis of the Construction of a Hindu Ecology

However, when looked at with a critical eye, it is not always clear that the evidence adduced does really illustrate a concern for ecology. It is quite a large jump from the fact that in their iconography Hindu gods ride upon animal vehicles to making a claim for the ecological credentials of Hinduism. One could as easily argue that the gods are exploiting animals, especially when one thinks of Ganesh riding a mouse!

We would like to argue that although it is an important and admirable task to mine the traditions of Hinduism for support for the ecological project, we need to be clear about the processes taking place, and not read back an anachronistic agenda into the ancient texts and traditions.

A number of processes appear to be taking place in the construction of a Hindu ecology. One is a general glossing of references to nature into a concern for environmental issues. The mention of animals, plants and natural phenomena in positive contexts, such as the vehicles of the gods or the sacredness of the Ganges does not necessarily translate into environmental concern or action. Even if it has a positive ecological effect, protecting cows because they are sacred is not the same as protecting the environment because of a concern for sustainability.

Similarly, the traditional motivation behind asceticism and a simple lifestyle was not environmental but spiritual—leaving behind the things of this world to concentrate on the life of the spirit. The motivation behind vegetarianism is largely connected with notions of purity and pollution (e.g. strict Brahmins may avoid tomatoes because of their passionate colour) not from any understanding that land is more efficient producing vegetable foodstuff rather than grain for beef herds.

Even Gandhi's simple, self-sufficient lifestyle, although it has inspired many ecological projects, was more rooted in political considerations than environmental ones—all part of the movement to escape from Western rule.

There is a tendency to idealise the past, to look back to a 'Golden Age' as a model for the present and a hope for the future, as with our students' depiction of the Indian village idyll, and in some of the promotional material from Hindu sources. The circumstances were very different in ancient India, especially in terms of the

human population, who simply were not numerous enough to make the devastating environmental impact we now do. There is some evidence of environmental problems. One theory of the downfall of the Indus Valley civilisation is that an ecological disaster was brought about by the clearing of forests for domestic fuel, and for supplying energy for the brick kilns and metal smelting, eventually causing drought conditions. 'Ecology seems to...be the most dominant agent in causing the collapse of the culture' (Bhattacharya, 1990: 88).

The hymns of the Rig Veda certainly are concerned with admiring and praising natural phenomena personified as deities, but more with the aim of protecting humans from the awesome powers of the natural world, rather than any concern with protecting the natural world from humans. Even the much quoted hymn to the earth from the Atharva Veda is mostly about what humans can gain from the earth, for instance, 'may Earth afford us all that copious wealth for which we long' and 'may the Lord of life dispose for our enjoyment all her regions' AV 12:1.40, 43 (Panikkar, 1977: 127). And of course in ancient Vedic times, sacrifice of animals was an important part of worship. So perhaps simply returning to the lifestyle of ancient India would not solve all our ecological problems.

There is a tendency to disregard the diversity of the Hindu tradition, focusing only on those aspects useful to the argument. Not all Hindus are vegetarian. Against the few who practice chastity for religious reasons, there are the many who are encouraged to produce many children, equally for religious reasons, for instance, the duty to produce a son to discharge various ritual obligations including the shraddha or memorial ceremony. The need to maximise the possibilities of conception is evident in the penalties imposed on a father or guardian who fails to give a girl in marriage before she reaches puberty (traditionally, he was held to be guilty of the sin of destroying an embryo every time she menstruated before she was married). It is easy to blame industrialisation, urbanisation, pollution and all manner of other modern ills on the colonial oppressors, but perhaps this is only part of the story.

Most fundamental is the interpretation given to Hindu philosophy, which tends to overlook its diversity and stress unity and divine immanence. What does unite most major forms of Hindu philosophy is that the ultimate goal of life is spiritual liberation. The tradition delineates four legitimate goals of human endeavour, *viz.* dharma, artha and kama as well as moksha. Whereas the first three goals might conceivably include a concern for the material environment, it is clear that the fourth and ultimate goal transcends such concern. Whether this is a soul set free from the material world as in Samkhya, realising one's essential oneness with Brahman as in Advaita Vedanta, or dwelling with God as in the various theistic traditions, this at the least relativises concern for the physical environment, if not making it completely irrelevant. The renouncer who takes as little as possible from the material world is not doing so from respect for the material world, but in an attempt to liberate himself from it. In Samkhya philosophy, matter or Prakriti, is that which imprisons purusha or spirit. In Advaita Vedanta, concern for the material world is part of the illusion or maya which sees the material world as having any reality. The unity, or non-duality of all does not so much support the concern for individual species as deny their essential being. Theistic forms of Vedanta, although they may teach like

ISKCON, that God dwells in all things, in the last analysis see the material creation as the sport or *lila* of God, and with no ultimate significance. The final goal is beyond this world. Theistic teachings, can, as Humanists may argue, detract from the impulse for people themselves to take any action about the environmental crisis. God has descended to put things right in the past, perhaps we should leave it to him to do so again. To claim that 'Krishna is the only saviour of the environment' may therefore not necessarily be 'the best way to teach environmental concern' (Prime, 1992: 57).

The ecological agenda has arisen from a realisation of the damaging effects that human activity is having on the planet, a realisation that is relatively recent. It is often expressed in a manner that reflects the predominance of the Western worldview. Certainly the 'ecological armageddon' concept, that the world is hurtling towards destruction, for which human wrongdoing is responsible, springs from a Judaeo/Christian/Islamic interpretation of history, as many writers have pointed out (Palmer, 1988; Bocking, 1994; Netto, 1989). 'Modern environmental consciousness can be seen as a new, quasi-religious doctrine of the Western type' (Bocking, 1994: 163)...with the whale as its central symbol. The traditional Hindu worldview takes a far less frantic approach. There are many worlds, many universes, so why should we worry too much about one? Creation of worlds happens all the time, it is not such a big deal, or from one point of view is all illusory anyway. The cycle of creation, growth, decay and destruction is inevitable. It is widely recognised that we are currently in the cycle of decay, the Kali Yuga, when it is to be expected that things will deteriorate. Should we rush around trying to prevent the inevitable? This difference between the Western and Indian worldview was discovered among schoolchildren by Martin Palmer (Palmer, 1988: 65). Whereas Western teenagers tended to one of two views—urgent environmental activism or 'gentle hedonism'—we might as well make the best of it before it is destroyed—Hindu children were far more relaxed: 'They spoke quite easily about how Lord Shiva ends each world cycle by fire, and yes, perhaps this might be in the form of nuclear destruction this time, but so what?' (Palmer, 1988: 66).

It is easy to suspect in some of the examples of Hindu environmental action that the religious justification is an afterthought, and that the ecological agenda was set from outside the tradition by the West. This seems to be the case in the example of B. Mathur, who added a religious motivation to the goal of planting trees. The same may also be true of Chipko. Similarly, the enthusiastic way in which contemporary Hindus portray the tradition as essentially ecological seems more to be addressing the concerns and interests of a Western audience, than an issue which developed naturally and spontaneously from the Hindu tradition.

Swami Vivekananda and the Construction of Hinduism

Here it may be helpful to consider the life and work of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) who was an important figure exerting a profound influence over what is now understood to be Hinduism, as Eric Sharpe explains 'it was the Swami who first presented the world with an ideal picture of Hindu teaching as a totality'

(Sharpe, 1977: 65). By considering Swami Vivekananda's life and work, the interpretation of Hinduism as eco-friendly and the significance accorded this interpretation can be compared and contrasted with earlier statements which presented Hinduism in a positive light to a wider public. In so doing, it will be noticed that many ideas already mentioned are reconsidered in relation to Swami Vivekananda's pronouncements.

The speech given by Swami Vivekananda to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 is a convenient focus for discussion, especially because this 'short sketch of the religious ideas of the Hindus' (Vivekananda, 1986 1:19), as the Swami described the speech, has been credited with the creation of Hinduism by the editor of his Collected Works[1]. In this speech, the Swami referred to the scriptural basis of the religion, the nature of the universe, conditioned existence, the divine and experience of liberation. Having concluded his account of 'the common religion of all the sects of India' (Vivekananda, 1986 1:13), he continued by setting out the absolutist position of the Brahman-Atman synthesis. Following this, he turned, in his own words, 'from the aspirations of philosophy to the religion of the ignorant' (Vivekananda, 1986 1:15). In this section, the Swami addressed two questions which featured frequently in criticisms of Hindu religiosity, namely polytheism and idolatry. Responding to these accusations, he argued that 'in every temple, if one stands by and listens, one will find the worshippers applying all the attributes of God, including omnipresence, to the images' (Vivekananda, 1986 1:15). In the course of this argument, the Swami asserted that the Hindu accepted the validity of all religions, a universal vision of truth and hence tolerance. In this way, he concentrated on those characteristics he attributed to the Hindu which most differed from his stereotype of Christian arrogation of unique and exclusive truth and intolerance towards other religions. Indeed, the Swami's speech culminated in an outline of 'a universal religion' (Vivekananda, 1986 1:19) which conformed closely with his portrayal of the Hindu outlook[2].

When this speech is examined from an ecological angle, there are some aspects which can be seen as supportive. For example, that the divine 'is everywhere, the pure and formless One, the Almighty and All-merciful' (Vivekananda, 1986 1:11) and 'the constant basis of an ever-changing world' (Vivekananda, 1986 1:14) suggest the immanence of the divine. Other aspects are ambivalent such as the idea that 'God is the ever active providence, by whose power systems after systems are being evolved out of chaos, made to run for a time and then destroyed' (Vivekananda, 1986 1:7). Despite divine care for the universe, the cyclic model of creation and destruction and the emphasis on divine agency imply the inevitability of the end and the powerlessness of humanity to change its destiny. Still other aspects can be seen as opposed to ecology, most notably the description of the unliberated soul in terms of the confusion of spirit with matter for while the soul 'is free, unbounded, holy, pure, and perfect...somehow or other it finds itself tied down to matter, and thinks of itself as matter' (Vivekananda, 1986 1:9). There is no doubt here that nature, or at the very least the false identification with nature, poses a spiritual problem.

Thus this speech which summarised Hindu belief and certainly contributed towards the definition of Hinduism, even if it was not solely responsible for its invention, did not take ecology as one of its main themes or accord it any priority. Moreover, it is difficult to detect any clear ecological content or concern. The reason for this is that unlike claims of Hindu polytheism and idolatry and counter-claims of Hindu universalism and tolerance, ecology was not on the agenda of his time and so was not a subject of debate or a criterion of religious relevance.

The absence of clear ecological content or concern is confirmed by a survey of the Swami's other pronouncements. The Swami often set forth the neo-Vedantic view of the oneness of all that is as when explaining that 'the whole of this universe is one Unity, one Existence, physically, mentally, morally and spiritually' (Vivekananda, 1987 2:249). This meant that he denied any ultimate distinction between different life-forms, insisting, for instance, that 'as living beings, man, woman, animal, and plant are all one' (Vivekananda, 1987 2:381). For the Swami, this oneness was not only philosophical but also moral and practical. Since 'love for yourselves means love for all, love for animals, love for everything' (Vivekananda, 1987 2:301), he urged 'work incessantly, holding life as something deified, as God Himself, and knowing that this is all we have to do, this is all we should ask for' (Vivekananda, 1987 2:150). However, this characteristic neo-Vedantic engagement with the world was chiefly evident in a lively social conscience and an ethic of social service, not ecological awareness.

It is possible to find the Swami expressing sentiments which seem to be capable of sustaining an ecological reading, for example, his declaration 'sublime and awe-inspiring are the mountains; the gigantic rushing rivers rolling towards the sea, the trackless deserts, the infinite ocean, the starry heavens—all these are awe-inspiring, sublime, and beautiful indeed' (Vivekananda, 1987 2:203). Yet the Swami denied the universe the status of reality, instead he indicated 'you are creating the whole universe and drawing it in' and 'the sun, the moon, and the whole universe are but drops in your transcendent nature' (Vivekananda, 1986 1:403). Given the conviction that the universe is illusory, it follows that ecology is preoccupation with illusion, not reality, a subversive conclusion which undermines any ecological reading. Irrespective of whether an ecological message may now be read back into his pronouncements, and to do so would require exegetical ingenuity, it is anachronistic to look for an ecological message in the life and work of Swami Vivekananda because ecology was not an issue for him or his contemporaries.

A Recent Agenda?

The reason for looking in such detail at the teaching of Swami Vivekananda is to illustrate that as recently as the last century, a portrayal of Hinduism to a world audience did not consider ecological concerns, but issues that were important in that age. Thus the ecological interpretation of Hinduism postdates Swami Vivekananda. Indeed, this interpretation is not only comparatively recent in terms of the modern process of defining Hinduism as a religion but also the most recent in a series of interpretations of Hinduism to meet changing circumstances. In this case, the

changing circumstances are ecological awareness arising from Western disillusionment with industrialisation and its impact on the environment coupled with a loss of faith in the inevitability of progress and the benefits of science. This ecological awareness has now become so prominent in Western popular consciousness that Hinduism, in common with other religions, recognises the imperative to present itself as eco-friendly. Therefore, as ideological imperatives differ, so do interpretations of Hinduism. These interpretations tend to have a specific historical socio-political locus, shaped by the most momentous issues of the day which, by definition, are neither static nor constant.

Notwithstanding, there may be examples from the past which seem to be proto-ecological forms of Hinduism. One possibility is the Bishnoi sect, followers of Jambhaji Maharaj whose commitment to non-violence was such that in the mid-eighteenth century hundreds of them were martyred defending trees from felling (Palmer, 1988: 94–96). There is, then, a *prima facie* case for regarding the Bishnoi sect as an example of eco-religious activity (especially as there are striking parallels with Chipko) although further investigation is required to clarify certain points. Even so, it is extremely improbable that members of the sect would have considered themselves to be ecological as the concept did not exist. Furthermore, this sect appears to be exceptional in its outlook and, however worthy and inspiring, provides no basis for generalising about the Hindu tradition.

The Sacred Cow

We seem to have forgotten all about the Sacred Cow of our title. Hindu veneration of the cow is, as discussed earlier, frequently adduced as evidence of Hinduism's eco-friendliness. Furthermore, an ecological rationale can be offered for this veneration in that the cow provides food (milk and dairy products), disinfectant (urine) and fuel (dung) as well as acting as a draught animal. However, many scholars have questioned whether the utility of the cow is the sole or even a source of its sanctity, a sanctity which can be traced to the Vedic Aryans for whom the cow (but not the bull) was symbolic of plenty and prosperity. Other explanations focus, for example, on the connection with Krishna Gopala (Krishna the cowherd) or the association with non-violence. Whatever its origins, Hindu veneration of the cow means that the cow and all the products of the living animal are believed to be pure while all the products of the dead animal (meat and leather for instance) are believed to be polluting. The sanctity of the cow is demonstrated in the ban on cow slaughter and is celebrated in worship. Hindu veneration of the cow may be consistent with current ecological interests, however it is at best simplistic and at worst reductionist to see this as the basis of the concept of the Sacred Cow, a pragmatic measure subsequently given religious force. The sanctity of the cow had religious resonance long before ecology was recognised as an issue and will continue to have spiritual significance long after ecology has been superseded by other issues as yet unrecognised.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we are arguing that religions are not monolithic and static, but full of diversity, and constantly changing and developing in response to impulses from both within and outwith the tradition. The current construction of Hinduism as an ecologically sound tradition is an example of the latter process. In reconstructing Hinduism in this way, certain processes are taking place as described above—a selection of material to support the argument and a downplaying of counter-evidence, the glossing of nature into ecology, an anachronistic reading back of the ecological agenda into antiquity, an idealisation of both the past and present. In making this statement we are simply saying that, in common with all other traditions, Hinduism is facing a new agenda and reinterpreting tradition in the light of that agenda. We are not criticising this attempt—indeed, once any essentialist or normative view of Hinduism is abandoned, the ability to adapt testifies to dynamism and vitality. This should not blur the difference between the real and ideal, the actual and potential, scholarship and vision but nor should it blind us to the power of religion to support and sustain ecology. As Seyyed Nasr points out, we are facing an ecological crisis, and ‘the majority of the world’s population are...religious’ (Nasr, 1996: 18). Thus it is both extremely important and practically advantageous to the ecological project to take account of the support available from the religious traditions.

Notes

- [1] In the Introduction to the first volume, the editor wrote ‘of the Swami’s address before the Parliament of Religions, it may be said that when he begun to speak it was of “the religious ideas of the Hindus”, but when he ended, Hinduism had been created.’ (Vivekananda, 1986 1:x.)
- [2] The end of this speech included a tribute to the United States of America as the country which was to publish the message ‘that the Lord is in every religion’ and a prayer that the one spiritual reality, understood and entitled differently in different religions, would enable them so to do (Vivekananda, 1986 1:19–20).

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