Philosophical Confessions

Dr. Tinu Ruparell

It is an honour and pleasure to be the Lil Faider Interfaith Scholar-in-Residence at Beth Tzedec this year. Hopefully I can communicate to the congregation something about Hinduism, as well as learn more, myself, about Jewish faith and tradition. I think I am correct in saying that I am the first interfaith scholar in residence to be an academic rather than a member of the clergy. This might give my contributions a little different flavor than my illustrious predecessors, though I hasten to add that I will try not to lecture too much – and I can promise that there won't be any exams. So perhaps I should try to introduce myself a bit more in this context.

I am currently an Associate Professor in the University of Calgary's Department of Classics and Religion, a position I have held for 15 years. Prior to that I taught in the UK for five years, at the Universities of Liverpool and Hope University College, and at the University of Cambridge where I did my PhD. My work focusses on Hindu Philosophy, Interreligious Dialogue, and Theories of Interpretation (Hermeneutics). I also used to be a scientist, so I also keep one foot in that world through teaching courses in Science and Religion, as well as lecturing on Humanities in Healthcare at the Cumming School of Medicine.

While I have a bit of an eclectic background, I would consider my main training to be that of a philosopher. Now before you recoil in horror, prepare to fall asleep or try to find where you put that bottle of hemlock, let me assure you that I don't spend my time (or much of it) thinking 'big thoughts' nor, despite my fondness for tweed, sitting in large armchairs pontificating about obscure topics while waving a pipe around for dramatic effect. I am a philosopher in the same way that *all* of us are: I like to ask questions to learn more about the nature of whatever captures my interest. Actually we are all born philosophers – just observe any child under the age of 10 to see a pure, inquisitive mind in action.

We all want to know more about what interests and concerns us, and being 'trained as a philosopher' just means subscribing to slightly more rules about how we should ask these questions. I happen to think these rules are, by and large, good ones - but your mileage may vary. Some of these rules are logical and others are more practical, so philosophizing is really just a particular practice of asking questions within these rules and conventions. This practice sometimes goes by other names: critical thinking, conceptual analysis, rationisation … but it all boils down to asking lots of questions and seeing what

kinds of responses they may elicit. Notice I said 'responses' rather than 'answers' because, as everyone knows, philosophy provides precious few answers. So why do philosophy? Well, the questions are pretty interesting and quite often revealing, and sometimes questions are far more important than answers since they bid us to reconsider things we may have accepted too blithely. Moreover, asking such questions helps to shape one's character toward being better able to distinguish good, helpful, honest, delightful and useful beliefs and practices from the morass of nonsense and fluff (I could use more earthy language here) in which they are often mired. Philosophizing might also provide us some tools to better understand ourselves, our environments and others. Finally, since all human beings are born philosophers, it gives us a potential connection to those who appear very different from us, yet share common, human predicaments. We all want to know more about what interests and concerns us, and doing philosophy *together* can build strong bridges between inquisitive minds, regardless of where we come from or which religion we follow.

So philosophy is best done as a conversation (it is no coincidence that so many philosophical works are written as dialogues), and what I hope we can do this year is to enter into several conversations. Firstly we might consider Hinduism not so much as a religion (I will explain later why this is such a problematic term for Hindus) but as a very long, ongoing, quite voluble at times, meandering and delightful conversation. Hinduism commits its practitioners, observers, texts, traditions, critics, authors and interpreters to a conversation-already-in-progress. While this conversation can sound like an argumentative cacophony at times, hopefully we will see that it can also yield Truth, Beauty and Goodness as well. The second conversation is that between Hinduism and other faith traditions: Judaism of course, but also others. No religion can be understood in isolation since we always bring with us various contexts and presuppositions. So by engaging in a conversation with Hinduism, (as well as learning about its internal conversations) we will necessarily be comparative and reflective: we will see how Hindu faith traditions are both the same as and different from other traditions, as well as what they show us about our own beliefs and practices.

So I invite you to philosophize with me this year. Together we can ask questions, consider responses, and reflect on what both may teach us. In the process we might understand Hindus and ourselves a little better, and at least we can have some good conversations along the way.

Dr. Tinu Ruparell

Getting our Groove Back

by Dr. Tinu Ruparell

Autumn is a time of renewal, the anticipation of new beginnings.

Like many students and parents alike, for me the fall is when the new year really begins. The beginning of another school year with new school supplies, new books, new clothes, new courses, new friends…even a new iPhone to look forward to! Every year I await the influx of students back to the University. The air is filled with nervous, hopeful energy as the too-bright heat of summer fades into the cool colours of autumn. It is a feeling of simultaneous familiarity and trepidation which enervates the mind and clears the cobwebs off of the soul. For the returning students and professors alike it is also a resumption of familiar routines, a friendly smile from old acquaintances and colleagues, the comforting fit of putting on a well-worn, old jacket. It feels like getting back into a groove where one is both secure in the path ahead while anticipating the surprises in store.

This feeling of familiar anticipation is recapitulated in that other aspect of the autumn: festival season. The fall is redolent with the promise of some of the major Hindu religious festivals of the year. There are a large number and variety of Hindu festivals throughout the year, but the autumn marks the festivals that most Hindu families mark in some way. I remember looking forward to evenings spent with my friends and family in community celebrations of *Navratri* (lit. nine nights). Over nine nights between September and October, Hindus celebrate the female divine form through recounting in prayers, fasting, music, worship and dance the activities of the Goddess Durga. I will leave for another time the subtle ways in which Gods and Goddesses are understood in Hinduism. For now, suffice it to say that the goddess Durga is understood to symbolize strength, purity and power. She embodies the divine triumph over forces of evil, darkness and ignorance, and during Navratri Hindus celebrate the stories wherein she destroys the forces of evil which would visit misery to all. My memories of Navratri include nightly games of touch football outside the community halls and school gyms where my parents and elders celebrated Navratri with hymns of worship to the Goddess, garbha (a type of dance), culminating in a final prayer service (puja) which signaled the distribution of sweets that marked the end of the night. As I grew up, the interior festivities took on more importance than the touch football and I began to appreciate the music, dance and prayers (as well as the sweets, of course).

Navratri is followed a month later by Diwali. The festival of lights, Diwali lasts five days, ending with the Hindu New Year (the Hindu calendar is ending its 5117th year this October). Whereas Navratri celebrated the divine feminine power, Diwali is associated with the story of Rama, a male deity whose defeat of the forces of evil is recounted in the epic story *Ramayana*. In that story, Diwali marks the triumphant return from exile and war of Rama to his kingdom of Ayodhya, and the institution of a golden age of prosperity and piety. Diwali is celebrated across India with the lighting of lamps, decorating one's home, exchanging gifts, lots and lots of food, and fireworks. As it also marks the new year, prayers of thanksgiving are offered for the blessings of the past year as are supplications for prosperity and health for the coming year.

As mentioned above, there are a great many local and pan-Indian Hindu festivals throughout the year, and as I am not a specialist in rituals and history, I won't recount them all here. Indeed, as a philosopher I sometimes don't pay sufficient attention to history, and given the cyclical nature of time in Hinduism, history itself is understood differently than it is for the Abrahamic and East Asian traditions. What is interesting for me, especially in fall, is the repetition, the periodicity of these festivals. In fall I am reminded of how we celebrate again and again these rituals and festivals, how they both mark familiarity as well as anticipation of the new year to come. Like the yearly return of students to campus or the feel of an old favourite jacket, marking these rituals comforts us. They place us in a timeline and a groove whereby we are reconnected with our collective past in order that we can anticipate the future. Moreover, in celebrating these events, year in and year out, we are shaped by the groove that this repetition forms. We are literally placed in time and space, according to these repeated celebrations and observations. The religious life is assuredly inconstant: we often find ourselves tossed and turned by the events of the day and it is easy to lose our bearings and connections with our communities. When we have lost an awareness of ourselves due to this constant change, rituals and festivals ground us and place us. We regain our groove. We remember the same stories and perform the same rituals: the singing, prayers, dances, gift-giving and making and eating of special foods … all of these are repetitions aimed not only at marking time, but also at re-newing and re-creating ourselves.

Dr. Tinu Ruparell
Lil Faider Scholar-in-Residence

The One and the Many

by Dr. Tinu Ruparell

The philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead is credited with the statement that, "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." (Whitehead, *Process and Reality*). Given that an overriding concern of Plato (and indeed almost all Greek philosophy) was the proper delineation of the One and the Many, it follows that most of philosophy in the West has really been a sustained examination of this distinction. What makes things unified and what makes them different? And what is the nature of unity and diversity *per se*? These questions are by no means isolated to Greek thought; all philosophical traditions grapple with this fundamental question. After the question of "why is there anything at all?," the One-Many question is perhaps our most basic.

Hindus have long thought about this as well. Their various images of creation all seek to respond to how there came to be many beings/things in the universe out of the primordial One Without a Second. In the Chandogya Upanishad (6:2) we see Brahman itself metaphorically think "being One let me become many," and thus the universe comes into being as a self-emanation of the ultimate reality (Brahman). This gives us a clue as to a basic tendency in Hindu thought and practice: that the appropriate response to the issue of one and many is "Both!" Hinduism is a religion of *Both-And*.

This is not to say that Hindus never make distinctions and note differences. Any perusal of Indian religious texts and commentaries will yield a plethora of lists which delineate (for example) all the forms of matter (at least 9), the fundamental categories of existent things (as many as 24) and even the number of kinds of kisses (15). Hindus like to make lists to categorize all manner of things, but this does take away from an emphasis that difference and unity exist within one another, that is, the One and Many mutually interpenetrate.

No better example of this is to be found than in the Hindu understanding of gods and goddesses. Famously, Hindus are said to believe in 330 million deities. The exact number is really not the point, let's just say that '330 million' is a way of saying 'an infinite number.' That there are many deities in the Hindu pantheon doesn't, however, mean that Hindus are polytheistic: it is a common myth that Hindus believe in many Gods. Rather, Hindus believe that there is One ultimate, transcendent, divine reality which they term 'Brahman'. This ultimate reality is

truly beyond all language and thought. Brahman cannot be adequately described, only differentiated from everything else. When the sage Yajnyavalkya was asked to describe Brahman (or the true self) he said it is *neti... neti ...* (not this …. not this…) (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 3.9.26). Elsewhere, Brahman is described as the unseen Seer, the unheard Hearer, the unthought Thinker, the ununderstood Understander. By this it is meant that Brahman is not anything in the universe but rather the *source and foundation* of the universe itself. Brahman stands as the beginning, middle and goal of all entities, and that includes (most importantly) our selves and all of the deities. So when one considers all of the various gods and goddesses of Hinduism, what is being expressed is the limitless nature of Brahman itself. The infinite pantheon of Hindu deities are all symbols for the limitless qualities of Brahman. Brahman is *both* One Without a Second, *and* the 330 million deities through which our frail human minds struggle to conceive of this ultimate reality.

One aspect of the large number of gods and goddesses of Hinduism bears mentioning. Not only do these deities each have their own myths and roles in the wider context of Hinduism; since they are all accepted as various different symbolic representations of the unrepresentable Brahman, it doesn't much matter which deity becomes the object of one's devotion or regard. Indeed it is not at all uncommon for someone to devote themselves to prayer and worship of the Divine through one god at one time or stage in life, and another god at another time or stage. Nor is it wrong to pray and offer worship to many deities at the same time or place. Most temples (both at home and public) will have many representations (or *murtis*) of Divinity. Moreover, depending on one's temperament and needs, one might ardently devote oneself to only one deity, as that god or goddess may speak to one's deepest being. Many Hindus will thus become lifelong devotees of that form of the Divine, but this will not mean that for them the other forms of Brahman are lesser – only different. For the devotee, all manifestations of Brahman are legitimate: they are different but the same, Many and One. This *Both-And* mindset can be quite difficult at times. It means that there are unresolvable tensions, ironies and questions in Hindu understandings of the universe and our place in it. But it is also quite a strength for the tradition, allowing it to change, develop and adapt, while maintaining unity and continuity: Many in One and One as Many. *Both-And*

Dr. Tinu Ruparell
Lil Faider Scholar-in-Residence

The Sound of the Universe

by Dr. Tinu Ruparell

By His utterance the universe came into being
- BrihadAranyaka Upanisad 1.2.4

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.
- Genesis 1:3

An interesting commonality between Hinduism and Judaism is their views on the nature of sound and language. For both traditions, the word, or rather sound, is a fundamental category in our understanding of God and divine activity. In the beginning of the Book of Genesis, God speaks and light comes to be. Similarly, the Ultimate Divine Reality manifests itself as the divine sound, (Shabda-Brahman) AUM, through which the universe is born. Sound is a fundamental aspect of our knowledge of the divine as well. The sacred scriptures of each tradition were (and are still) an oral tradition which only rather late in history were committed to writing. The languages of Hebrew and Sanskrit have special significance as both the languages of their respective scriptures but also of ritual, prayer and worship. In our visually obsessed culture, with so much of our time spent viewing screens or various sorts, it is helpful to remember the importance of sound, both oral and aural, in the way we understand our selves and our place in the universe.

As mentioned above, the sacred syllable AUM (OM) is understood by Hindus to be an audible form of the ultimate reality, Brahman. As such it reflects an aspect of reality as the divine cosmic order (*rta).* The primordial essence of sound is also understood to be manifest as the divine feminine (*Shakti*) which is the energetic source and foundation of creation. Thus sound itself marries cosmic order and primordial energy to bring about the entire universe. Creation was literally sung into being and continues to resonate the eternal and infinite nature of sound in its very fabric. It is because of this that the ancient sages (rishis) were able to hear the primeval wisdom that is the Vedas (literally wisdom or insight). Thus the revealed scriptures of Hinduism – the Vedas – are said to be *smriti*: that which is heard.

The importance of sound in Hinduism ripples out to all aspects of Hindu belief and practice. All words are reflections of the Divine Word (Shabda-Brahman) and thus have creative capacity. Words give birth to their meanings which 'burst -forth' at their utterance. As sound is itself eternal, the meanings of words and sentences are thus also eternally connected to their phonemic sounds. Thus in

using language we are creating aspects of reality, recapitulating the original creation. Language use may be heard at its most pure and essential in ritual utterances of Vedic verses, but all language bears the mark of its holy origins. The tongue is indeed the most powerful muscle: we literally create and recreate the universe every time we speak. This might seem rather abstract and obscure, but we can see speech-acts at work throughout our communication. When I promise something, I create an expectation in the hearer of my promise and commit myself to a future action. Similarly when I thank someone, I re-cognize a relationship between us of obligation. When I state a fact, my utterance incrementally adds to my world-view and that of my hearers. Words don't simply communicate, they create. Hindu theologies of sounds/words are built on this insight.

It is not only in the primeval sacred syllable nor in words that the divine is manifest; music is understood by Hindus to carry the divine presence. The classical style of Indian music referred to as *sangita* (vocal music, instrumental music and dance) is understood to embody Nada-Brahman, or Brahman as extended sound (music). Sangita is used in the ritual recitation of parts of the Vedas as well as to accompany the performance of certain prayers, rites, ceremonies and even performances of religious stories. Here the communicative aspect of sound (in addition to its creative aspect) is used to facilitate Hindu ritual and practice.

A further aspect of divine sound is heard in the use of story. Humans are said to be story-making animals and the religious traditions of the world are surely evidence of this. Every tradition narrates itself through story, and indeed we understand our own lives through the stories we tell others and those which others tell about us. The two great stories of Hinduism the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* each have religious foundations where they are, like the original Vedas, recounted by ancient sages (rishis) and deliver wisdom through which we come to an understanding of the nature of ourselves and the universe. The use of words in these great stories weaves together a fabric of meaning for our lives from the threads of the universe of which these words are the constituents. Sounds, words, scriptures, music and stories are thus the very Being of our beings. These sounds are the ways by which we learn, teach, communicate and love, and according to Hindus, ultimately receive liberating wisdom.

Dr. Tinu Ruparell
Lil Faider Scholar-in-Residence

Avatara and Incarnation

by Dr. Tinu Ruparell

Does God visit the earth? What is the nature of God's presence in creation? If God does visit us, why? In this season such questions are, despite all of the Santa-themed capitalism, never too far from mind for the religiously inclined. Hindus have sophisticated and rich views on God's appearance on earth. The concept used to think about this is *avatara* which literally means "descent" and appears in many forms through the various families of Hindu tradition and practice.

The notion of a divine descent or appearance in our world stretches into Vedic sources where the deity Indra is said to have the power to appear in any and multitude material forms, but the main development of the idea occurs much later into the late classical and medieval periods (6c-13c ce), and this mostly in the Vaishnavite schools (those who follow the deity Vishnu). In texts as diverse as the Bhagavata Purana, the Pancaratra and the Bhagavad Gita, we see a divine descent or incarnation when God is needed to protect the good, destroy the wicked, reestablish dharma, teach the paths to salvation, and free his devotees from the ceaseless round of rebirth. (*Bhagavad Gita* 4:5-9)

Now this might strike some as strange. Hindus understand the Divine Godhead as Brahman: suffused throughout the universe (though not exhausted by it). Indeed the Upanishads teach that the universe and all in it (including us) *is the same as* Brahman, the divine ultimate reality. If this is the case, then why is it necessary and how is it possible for Brahman to exist in one place, at one time, in an earthly, material form? This 'scandal of particularity', to borrow a phrase from Christian theology, seems to contradict the idea that the divine is everywhere and thus in no particular place, and it raises questions as to the nature of an avatara. Are avataras really material or only apparently so? Are they subject to all of the imperfections and entropic realities inherent to matter? Are they born, do they die? Before moving to these questions I should note that the idea of avatara has been elaborated and theorised to respond to the question of how the divine reality could be at once universal and particular. In the *Pancaratra* (1) Direct avataras, emanate directly from God as material human beings subject to all material realities; (2) Entranced avataras animate creatures into whom God enters; (3) Grouped avataras appear as multiple entities in order to manifest cosmic and salvific functions; (4) Inner controller (antarayamin) avataras inspire and direct from within (particularly humans) to aid action towards wisdom; and (5) Worship avataras descend into consecrated images and symbols for the sake of worship. All of these forms of divine descent try to answer the question of how a transcendent divine reality could

at the same time be immanent in/as creation. This theological conundrum is in no way unique to Hinduism; every religious tradition which wants to maintain that God engages with creation must grapple with these philosophical puzzles. The concept of avatara responds through a robust doctrine of divine immanence.

So with that theological caveat duly noted, let me return to the 'scandalous' part of avataras. There does seem to be something unfair about the idea that God periodically incarnates in particular times and places in order to protect the good and vanquish the evil. We naturally wonder what it would have been like for those historic humans, alive during a divine descent, to be able to experience God's physical presence on earth, while secretly resenting the fact that this does not seem to be the case in our time and for us. Questions of rebirth aside, Hindus have an interesting way of thinking about this. Avataras, as a divine descent, are not only God's periodic and particular earthly manifestation, but an act of the divine concern for and commitment to our material, imperfect nature. Brahman takes material form in order to share our imperfection, while at the same time being the perfect horizon which we all seek and to which we travel. God comes down in order to *be with* us: to teach, protect, inspire, and vanquish – yes – but also merely to be with us in compassion and love. Humans are social creatures and we need to be with others to truly come into our own being; we need the love of fellow human beings in order to be and become our selves. But this does not mean that we thirst for the company of humanity *per se*, that is humanity in a general sense. Rather we seek the company of *particular* human beings. We seek friendship with the individual person, and delight in their uniqueness, individuality and particularity. Amazingly, it is as we grow more deeply aware of just this unique, individual, particular person that we discover their, and our, universal humanity. As we deepen our relation and commitment to the unique and particular way in which a particular person exists, we also become most our compassionate, unique and loving selves.

This begins to make sense of the scandal of particularity. It is only through the particular that we discover the universal. God's divine descent as an individual, unique human avatara, bound in particular space and time, ironically allows us to discover perfected human nature and our true selves in the divine incarnation. In this way the Divine descends to become imperfect humanity in order to raise imperfect humans towards the divine. Moreover, God's descent to the material, earthly realm is the Divine commitment to and reminder of the holiness of all of creation – to be found in nature, our neighbours and our selves.

Dr. Tinu Ruparell
Lil Faider Scholar-in-Residence

Becoming Hindu

by Dr. Tinu Ruparell

How does one become a Hindu? As an ethnically based religion (according to census data 80% of Hindus live in India and 99% of Hindus live in south and southeast Asia), for the vast majority of its history the answer was that one was *born* Hindu. So does that mean one cannot *become* a Hindu, that is, convert to Hinduism? The question of conversion is a somewhat tricky issue for Hindus, fraught as it is by the centuries-long history of colonialism and forced conversion. A simple answer is that to become a Hindu one only has to live a Hindu way of life. However the pluralist foundations of Hindu belief and practice may give us useful tools in thinking more broadly about interreligious relations, conversion and religious belonging.

As usual, to begin with we should try to define terms as clearly as possible. By religious conversion I mean a more-or-less wholesale change in one's religious identity. This can be 'horizontal'- that is a move from one religious tradition to another, distinct tradition - as well as 'vertical' - by which I mean a transformation *within* one tradition from a nominal to a more committed religious identity. We don't always talk about vertical development within faith *as* conversion, but clearly such growth can be transformative. Conversion in the horizontal sense is more familiar, however it can sometimes hide interesting questions as to the reality or authenticity of conversion as well as the possibility of multiple religious belonging – an issue I will return to below. Conversion (in both senses) thus refers to a subjective change within the adherent, but the issue of religious conversion may also implicate proselytism, by which I mean the attempt by a religious group or individual to convert others to their beliefs and/or practices. Often discussed under the rubric of 'mission', proselytism is the part of religious conversion which is problematic for many Hindus

While a discussion of Hindu responses to colonialism is far beyond the scope of this article, it will come as no surprise that proselytism by Christian and Muslim groups or individuals in the context of colonial power often resulted in forced conversion of Hindus to those traditions. Coercive conversion is properly anathema to Hindus and all faithful people of good will, but what about non-coercive proselytism, that is sharing of one's religious understanding with others? Surely if one feels that one has found the answer to a significant religious conundrum, it would only be natural to want to share this discovery with others. Hindu responses to this question are interesting and perhaps very useful for our multicultural and religiously plural contexts. The following exchange between an American tourist and a Hindu sage vividly illustrates the Hindu, pluralist view. After confessing that while he cannot claim to be a very good Christian, the tourist implores the sage to nevertheless accept him as a student and allow him to become a Hindu. The sage replies:

"It is no [accident] that you were born a Christian. God ordained it that way because by the samskara acquired through your actions (karma) in previous births your soul has

taken a pattern which will find its richest fulfillment in the Christian way of life. Therefore your salvation lies there and not in some other religion. What you must change is not your faith but your life."

"Then, Sir," exclaimed the American, beaming with exhilaration, "Your religion consists in making the Christian a better Christian, a Muslim a better Muslim, and a Buddhist a better Buddhist. This day I have discovered yet another grand aspect of Hinduism, and I bow to you for having shown me this. Thank you indeed."

The key idea here is that while sharing religious insights across traditions is by all means to be encouraged, the aim of proselytism should not be horizontal conversion. The missionary should aim first and foremost to help the Hindu be a better Hindu, the Christian a better Christian, the Jew a better Jew, and so on. So vertical conversion (within a tradition towards becoming a more authentic adherent) is a laudable goal for proselytism but horizontal conversion should be discouraged. Gandhi gives two practical reasons for avoiding horizontal conversion: firstly it does not promote peace between the faithful. Religious identity is not only a matter of intense personal importance but also impacts communities. For Hindus (as well as others) one does not 'own' one's religious identity alone. It both constitutes and is constituted by the religious lives and identities of others. With such a communal understanding of what it means to be Hindu, conversion out of Hinduism to some other tradition may be a blow to the community of faithful and likely will undermine peaceful interreligious relations between communities. The second reason is that Hinduism is tremendously flexible and pluralistic. On this view, conversion is simply not required for Hindus as there is nothing stopping a committed Hindu from learning from the teachings of other religions and even participating in some of their practices and communal life. In this way one can be a Hindu who follows the teachings of Jesus, the Buddha or the prophets and teachers of other religions. While such multiple religious belonging and practice may be problematic for some non-Hindu traditions, it is less so for Hindus. So long as one does not break from one's Hindu religious roots and communities and the forms of life they engender and sustain, one can follow the beliefs and practices of other faiths, as long as they aim you toward Truth and help you flourish as a human being. This last caveat may restrict the Hindu's agreeing to certain 'other' religious beliefs or practices, but this is a matter for the individual Hindu to decide.

The ideals of pluralism and non-violence (ahimsa) are very evident in Hindu attitudes toward religious conversion. While some fundamentalist Hindu groups may insist on trying to 'bring back' Hindu converts from their new traditions, this is a rather eccentric, modern invention and the broader tradition is much more sanguine toward such conversion. In general Hindus try to recognize and respect the rootedness of one's religious identity in the soil of its upbringing while at the same time encouraging openness to humbly follow Truth wherever one finds it – first in the native forest of Hinduism and then also in the gardens of other traditions.

[1]T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism,* (Bombay: Chetana, 1971), 294.

Dr. Tinu Ruparell
Lil Faider Scholar-in-Residence

A Spray of Colour, 'Fat Tuesday,' Intoxication and Religious Revelries

by Dr. Tinu Ruparell

I don't know about you but I, for one, am quite ready for spring. As an avid skier, I normally enjoy the winter season and we are blessed in Calgary with the wonderful mountains to the west in which to play in the snow. Perhaps I am getting old, but this year, winter seems to have overstayed its welcome. Just when a spell of warmer weather bids us to get outside, a cold front with another dump of snow swoops in to remind us that we are not yet done with the freeze.

So it is with heightened anticipation that I look forward to the spring festivals of Holi, Purim and Easter. Holi is the Hindu festival of spring, celebrated throughout India with the throwing of water balloons and coloured powders. It is a favourite festival for kids as they get to run a bit wild and get very, very messy. But there is a deeper meaning to spring festivals: they sanction a form of religious revelry. Besides being a commemoration of religious events and a moment to set things right between friends, family and neighbours, spring festivals such as Holi turn the tables of religious structures and expectations, ushering in (at least for a short time) a spirit of gaiety, silliness, pandemonium, anomie, and play. Holi is a chance to let off some steam, to celebrate the end of a grey winter with a bit of inappropriateness: a Dionysian revolt against the pressures of Apollonian life.

These kinds of celebrations are deep within religious traditions. Ernest Becker argues that periodic releases of this kind, set in the context of religious myth, are essential to our mental and spiritual health. They give form to and release the constant pressures between our all-too-human natural desires and our transformed ideal natures. To deny these periodic outbursts would denature our better selves, so at springtime, when nature is at its most fecund, these festivals sanction and bring to the surface what is otherwise controlled, buttoned-down, suppressed but never vanquished. These lawless, improper and irresponsible Dionysian forces, when let loose completely, can in fact be rather dangerous and frightening – witness the reaction from polite and upright ballet-goers when in 1913 Stravinsky famously expressed these forces audibly in his *The Rite of Spring* – so religious spring festivals seek to shape the exuberance of release into more creative and joyous forms. Not only is play encouraged among old

and young, high and low, but traditional hierarchies are overturned so that the equality of all people is emphasized. The day before Holi is a time to remember the saving of the great devotee of Vishnu, Prahalada, from a trial by fire. It is also a day to forgive and forget, both debts owed as well as slights suffered. Holi is a thus a kind of rebirth, a return to our childlike selves with its carefree joys, amidst the rebirth of vernal nature.

But even blowing off steam can be difficult for some. We are so trained to be adults that partaking in a bit of silly play is well-nigh impossible for many. Spring festivals are thus also often associated with a bit of drink. For Hindus, intoxication is generally frowned upon if not explicitly forbidden, but at Holi not only are sweets and treats a traditional part of the holiday but in some places *bhang* (edible cannabis) is sometimes added to traditional drinks and foods. The use of *entheogens* (substances or practices used to facilitate religious experience) is a fascinating aspect of religious practice and a part of virtually all religious traditions, and at Holi their use is, if not common, at least accepted.

So this spring, take the opportunity to shake off the grey of winter: enjoy the beautiful flowering of nature by indulging your childish and silly side. Remember God's grace to one and all, repair broken relationships, celebrate with a party, throw some coloured powder on a friend or a stranger (even better if they are very respected!), eat and drink to your heart's content, let your guard down and enjoy a bit of divine play. *Holi hai!*

Dr. Tinu Ruparell
Lil Faider Scholar-in-Residence

If you would like to read Torah, Haftarah or lead services please contact
Cantor Russ at cantorruss@bethtzedec.ca
or 403-255-8688 Ext 4.

Hinduism and the Scientific World-view

by Dr. Tinu Ruparell

Over the last semester I have been teaching a course on atheism. While it might sound a bit odd to teach such a course in the context of a Religious Studies department, the historical dance across the centuries between belief and unbelief, theism and atheism, faithfulness and skepticism, has perhaps shaped, as no other single factor, how contemporary religion is now understood and practiced. Two things have become very clear through the weeks of this course. The first is how much this discussion hinges on the Abrahamic traditions and, more specifically, on Christianity. Contemporary writings from the likes of the so-called 'New Atheists' read as if there has been no thought given to these questions outside of English-speaking western Europe and North American countries in the last 100 years. Even a little bit of thought reveals this perspective to be risibly narrow and chauvinistic. The second is how atheism is more-or-less implied by a scientific worldview. Again, a little reflection would show that the two are not identical. In some of my lectures over the year I have already talked about the nature of atheism in Hinduism (as an orthoprax tradition, one can easily be a good Hindu and not hold a theistic concept of God), but in what follows I want to consider the broader question of how Hinduism is related to a scientific world-view.

Of course definitions are always important to get right at the beginning. I won't try (again) to define Hinduism here, but science can be defined as the practice of interrogating and explaining the natural universe through repeatable and falsifiable empirical observation and experiment. Science is thus primarily a method – a way to gain knowledge of the universe – however it has also come to stand for the world-view arising from this method: one which only countenances general principles derived from a naturalistic understanding of the world, that is, a universe devoid of the supernatural, which would include, of course, God as commonly understood.

The first thing to say then is that, on this count, Hinduism and science are quite compatible. As stated already, there are numerous atheistic strands of Hinduism. Furthermore, those branches of Hindu thought which are theistic may at first appear to clash with science but on further analysis reveal no such contradiction, since their Gods are but symbolic manifestations of the inexpressible, absolute, non-theistic, one-without-a-second, or *Brahman*. Moreover, Hinduism is a naturalistic religion in the sense that all parts of the universe, save Brahman, are thought to be phenomenal, non-supernatural elements. In principle all of the universe is accessible to experience, however where European scientific traditions generally limit scientifically valid experience to gross

sense data (such as that given by vision, touch, smell, taste etc.) plus logic and inference, Indian scientists add to these the possibility of experiencing the universe through subtle sense data. These subtle elements of the universe are accessible not through the normal senses but rather through inner reflection, meditation and apprehension. On account of this view, ancient Hindu scientists posited that atoms (paramanus), the mind (manas) and ego (ahamkara) were all material entities perceivable through deep reflection. Additionally, elements such as space, sound, form, inherence, universality and particularity are all natural elements of the universe accessible through naturalistic, scientific method.

Secondly we should note the long history of Hindu science. By far the crown of Hindu science must be mathematics: the language of science. Not only did Hindus give the world its numerals (which were introduced to Europe by Al Khwarizmi in the 12th century), including the concept of *zero*, the mathematician Mahavira discovered the notion of imaginaries in the 9th century, a lynchpin making possible vast areas of modern mathematics and physics. Ancient Hindu mathematics were well known to be extremely sophisticated, particularly in the measurement of the cosmos, as Hindu mathematicians had long known that the age of the universe was not in the thousands or even millions of years, but in the several billions. Pre-modern Hindu science also made important discoveries in medicine, biological evolution, psychology, metalurgy, empirical methodology, chemistry, surgery and horology, while modern Indian science has excelled in cosmology and quantum theory, as well as pure mathematics and computer science. While I certainly do not want to claim that Indian science was paramount, the discourse about science and religion tends to neglect the important contributions made by non-western scientific traditions.

Much has been written about the 'mystical East', much of it by Orientalist western scholars pronouncing their views on the 'essence' of Indian thought, but also by Indian authors of dubious credentials hoping to exploit the ignorance and credulity of many people searching for meaning. While no doubt some of what they have to say may have value, it bears remembering that Hindu thought is understood by most Hindus as a form of *scientia,* that is, critical, testable and useful knowledge. It is sometimes popular to think that science and religion live in two different worlds, science concerning itself with the what? and how? questions, while religion the who? and why? This view was popularized by the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould as the 'non-overlapping magesteria' (NOMA) model. The very brief sketch of some aspects of the Hindu-Science relationship I have presented above should, perhaps, make us re-think this idea. Perhaps science and religion are not so different. At the very least Hindu science should give us pause when we consider what 'religion' can contribute to the scientific world-view and vice versa.

Dr. Tinu Ruparell
Lil Faider Scholar-in-Residence

Worldly Hinduism

by Dr. Tinu Ruparell

There are four recognized, appropriate ends or purposes of life for Hindus, called the *purusharthas*. Three are worldly – by which I mean that they can only be realized in the messy, this-world, embodied and social state – and one which seeks to transcend this world, though what we mean by 'transcend' in this case is a bit complicated. These four ends of life are *artha, kama, dharma and moksha.* Let us for the present put aside moksha, which literally means 'release', 'enlightenment' or 'liberation' and connotes freedom from the ceaseless round of birth and rebirth (*samsara*), in order to consider *worldly* Hinduism – that is, what it means for Hindus to live in our ever-challenging world.

So to definitions: *artha* refers to those principles and necessities required for a flourishing human existence. At the individual level this may include material prosperity, health, social connection, and security, among other goods. At the societal level, artha refers to the institutions, laws, policies and structures required to facilitate the satisfaction of individuals' desires and needs, while maintaining justice and propriety for all. Thus artha refers to all of the elements needed for a flourishing existence at the individual and social levels. Worldly success hinges on artha, and is sometimes held to be synonymous with it.

Kama refers to sensory and emotional desire, wish, longing, enjoyment and delight. Both our desire for sensual pleasures, as well as those things which provide such enjoyments, are tied together in kama. More recently, kama has been tied to sexual desire due to the popularity of translation of the *Kamasutra*, however only about 20% of this text deals with sexual pleasure. The vast majority of it is a philosophical analysis of desire in all its forms; its proper purpose and defense against its critics. Kama includes all aesthetic pleasures, be they derived from music, art, architecture, nature, poetry, friendship, affection and love. These worldly pleasures are what gives existence is enjoyment, flavor and delight, particularly within the context of and consistent with right practice of artha and dharma. A life without kama would be a soul destroying drudgery. A life with kama is delightful and joyous.

Finally dharma is that which upholds a just and morally righteous human life, consonant with the foundations of all existence. Often glossed as 'duty' it connotes more a sense of propriety, appropriateness, right-ness and harmony. One's life should always be guided by dharma: these are the principles by which one lives a humane existence, fulfilling our roles in creation to the best of our abilities, and thus perfected as a creature. Dharma is

notoriously subtle and difficult to divine at various points in our lives – the entire epic of the *Mahabharata* may be seen as an extended treatise on how to discern and live according to dharma – and as such is inextricably woven together with the exigencies of worldly affairs.

So the worldly ends of Hinduism dive deeply into the messy, imperfect particularities of living. Hinduism is not an 'other-worldly' or mystical tradition, focused solely on enlightenment and the hereafter. (Perhaps the countercultural extremes of the 1960s left us with a very skewed view of the tradition.) Indeed anyone travelling through India would scarcely accept Hinduism to valorize a dreamy, spiritual and mystical state. Rather, Hinduism is as much a tradition of the here-and-now, of the best-way-to-live-all-things-considered, as of achieving liberating insight into the true nature of existence. Moksha in this sense is born of the insight of living well, rightly and successfully: it is a *result* of worldly Hindu life. This is not to say that moksha is in any way easy. The tradition insists that liberation is difficult, just as living an enjoyable, right and successful life is exceedingly difficult.

Another thing to remember is that the purusharthas, the four right ends of life, are to be understood holistically. While moksha is the ultimate goal, and dharma supersedes artha which supersedes kama, this is no exclusive hierarchy where one relinquishes effort on one aspect of living when pursuing another. All aspects of Hindu life are to be practiced together. In this way the worldly ends, dharma, artha and kama, are three legs of a stool, each requiring the others. Moreover, the consistent striving after these three ends have no sense of being second best compared to more 'spiritual' pursuits. It is entirely right, just and proper to fully commit oneself to worldly success, prosperity, sensual delights and enjoyment, so long as one does not harm others or neglect one's responsibilities to oneself and one's community.

It is sometimes said that Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life. While true, this statement applies equally to all major religious traditions, as each enjoins one to live in particular ways. If religions can be understood as social technologies for the practice of living a flourishing, humane existence, then a perhaps unique characteristic of Hinduism is the sheer plethora of particular implements included in its tool chest. Nothing is ever really thrown away in Hinduism so the worldly, organizational systems of dharma, artha and kama have been fashioned to organize these tools, ultimately to help us make something beautiful out of our disorganized, inconsistent and very worldly lives.

Dr. Tinu Ruparell
Lil Faider Scholar-in-Residence

Seeing Through Other Eyes

by Dr. Tinu Ruparell

This is my last *Shofar* article of my tenure as the Lil Fader Interfaith Scholar in residence and firstly let me say how much I have enjoyed my time in this program, and how much I have learned and appreciated about Judaism. I have repeatedly stated in public that this program is a model of interreligious engagement worthy of wide emulation. Extended conversations across multiple and varied contexts over time are essential for training the imagination so that we can begin to understand our world inflected by differently religious perspectives – which is a fancy way of saying that we need time and repetition to learn to see through other eyes.

Interreligious dialogue is really a technique of redescription. We learn, through conversations and *being with* folks from other religious traditions, to describe our worlds in different ways. In doing so we rearrange the furniture of our lives to enable different ways of living, thus learning to re-imagine the world: to see differently. This new seeing is, I think, almost equivalent to gaining a new sense (infra-red vision or being able to sense magnetic fields, for instance) and it is not too much, in my mind, to think of it as a kind of developing superpower. Seeing through other eyes is to develop the superpower of empathy and understanding.

Over the past nine months I hope that the conversations and events we have experienced together have allowed you to redescribe your worlds in terms of Hindu religious tradition: that you have been able to see and live Judaism in more Hindu ways (*Hindu-ish,* if you will) as much as I have been able to redescribe my own understanding of Hinduism more Jewishly. In what follows I want to describe how my understanding of Hinduism and of Judaism have begun to redescribe each other. I do so very tentatively and in the spirit of experimentation – so, as they say, your mileage may vary.

While both Judaism and Hinduism place a high value on the holiness and transcendence of the Divine, the Jewish model of personal covenant with God is instructive in creating a communal sense of journey with the Divine. Hinduism is so diverse that it tends towards individualism; the Jewish way of living through communal belonging born of a shared narrative (and many shared practices) is thus a valuable lesson and redescription. It is impossible to unite Hinduism into a singular body of belief and practice and attempts to do so have always resulted in confusion and strife. However, a balancing pull toward a sense of solidarity with other Hindus would be a valuable corrective for the tradition as a whole. A sense of shared origins, shared difficulties and shared futures

is a valuable way of understanding one's own tradition. Hindus struggle, at times, to educate themselves into the depths, richness and diversity of their own beliefs and practices and, without positing some essential form of Hinduism, a greater sense of solidarity with other Hindus may be valuable.

One area on which Hindus and Jews must, it appears, agree to disagree are their fundamental beliefs on the nature of time. Given the cyclical nature of time in Hinduism, the immediacy and finality of historical events is felt slightly less urgently by many Hindus. History is, to be sure, very important, and it is false to claim that Hindus believe the phenomenal (samsaric) realm to be illusory or less than real. However, when all historical events are contextualized in the continuing cycle of birth and rebirth, the significance of any one particular event can lose some of its impact. Here again I think that both Jews and Hindus can learn from each other. Time can be seen both as circular as well as importantly directed in a linear fashion. We must all balance the motivation gained from directing our lives toward an end or *telos,* and the realization that those ends are not always the last word on all events – that tomorrow is another day and other ends await. The wall of remembrance in the synagogue serves as an excellent example of this balance. Seeing the lights on that wall has been very striking and meaningful to me this year. That significant life events are all marked in such a public way is a beautiful reminder of the uniqueness and significance of individual, particular lives and events. Moreover the permanence of that wall is a powerful reminder of the next anniversary: that life goes on and that history ever drives us forward in newness and hope.

Finally, I have been struck by the shared importance of humor and irony in both traditions. This is revealed not merely in the vast repository of Jewish jokes – which is very important, and Hindus would do well to celebrate and make better known their own tradition of Hindu jokes – but at the deeper level of the fundamental, ludic nature of creation. I think we lose a great deal when we take theology *too* seriously. Really, we are so far out of our depths in trying to understand the Divine that our feeble attempts can only be seen as so much whistling in the dark. While our natures seem to compel us (*Bhagavad Gita 18:59)* to keep trying to make sense of the world and our place in it, the ironic foolishness of the endeavor ought to bring a smile to our lips and a lightness to our minds.

So let that be my final message: that the interreligious engagement begun five years ago at Beth Tzedec be continued, both formally and informally, in the spirit of lightness and revelry. Surely much significant learning and growth will take place, oftentimes in spite of us – we are like owls blinking at noon – but let us remember, and always seek, the delight of discovery when we learn to see through other eyes.

Dr. Tinu Ruparell
Lil Faider Scholar-in-Residence