

Word as Weapon: the Polemically Charged Use of Terminology in Euro-American Discourse on Hinduism¹

Dr. Frank Gaetano Morales²

An Introduction: The Power of the Word

The inherent power of the word is a phenomenon that has been both omnipresent and essential throughout the long histories of literature, philosophy, religion and politics. The power of words has always been recognized for both its potentially constructive, as well as its devastatingly destructive, force. In the Vedic era, the potency of *śabda* (or the divine word) was lauded for its soteriological, liberating properties, as well as for its role as a means of epistemic insight into the nature of the Absolute. The Word both liberated and revealed — and both of these functions were accomplished via *mantra*, sound frequencies precisely sequenced in such patterns as to most optimally utilize the inherent *śakti* — or potency — of sound vibration. The divine word in the form of *mantra* could heal illness, relieve suffering and deliver freedom. Many millennia later, we find similar parallels in the Biblical literature, in which the Word is seen as being ontologically non-differentiated from the *natura esse*, or essential nature, of God. “In the beginning was the Word”, the Gospel of John assures us, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

The converse side of the positive power of words is seen in the destructive employment of words used, not to convey truth or to heal, but to obscure and deconstruct reality. Whether we speak of the sinister slogans of Joseph Goebbels or the propaganda ministries of defunct Stalinist states, words have been used with pointed polemic accuracy throughout the long history of human discourse. Words have always been employed by one group of individuals to control and delegitimize the political, social and philosophical freedoms of other groups. Academia has, unfortunately, not been free from the use of such ideologically charged — even if infinitely more subtle — polemic terminology. Such biased and politically motivated scholarship has led in the last few decades to the necessary creation of such fields as African-American Studies, Women’s Studies and Holocaust Studies as new academic institutions designed to balance previously perpetrated intellectual injustices.

¹ © Frank Morales, 2002. This article can be forwarded only in unaltered form and with due citation of author and source. Dharma Central: www.dharmacentral.com

² Dr. Frank Gaetano Morales, Ph.D. earned both a doctorate and a Masters degree in Languages and Cultures of Asia from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His fields of expertise include Philosophy of Religion, Hindu Studies, Sanskrit, History of Religion, Comparative Theology, Contemporary South Asian Politics, and the interface between Hinduism and modernity. In 1986, he was formally ordained in India as an orthodox Vedic brahmana and is now known as Sri Dharma Pravartaka Acharya. He heads the International Sanatana Dharma Society.

In the following, I will explore only a few of the more insidious terms used specifically throughout the history of South Asian Studies that have been traditionally used to denote various phenomena and features of the Hindu religion. Such words have been used to obscure the factual meaning of many philosophical, theological, social and ritual phenomena found within the Hindu context. I will proceed by outlining 1) the commonly accepted academic terms for these phenomena, 2) the proper indigenous view of the actual nature of these phenomena, and 3) I will offer several alternative terminological devices that will hopefully be more accurate indicators of the full nature and extent of these phenomena.

The Right to Self-Referential Terminology

The first two terms that we will examine are the terms usually used to indicate the overarching spiritual/cultural matrix of traditional, indigenous South Asian religion itself. These are the very terms “Hindu/Hinduism” themselves. The term “Hinduism” is not a term that is inherent to the religion itself. Rather, the term was first coined by individuals who were culturally and perspectively extrinsic to the culture in order to designate the ancient Vedic spiritual culture as a primarily geographic and ethnic phenomenon. The terms “Hindu/Hinduism” are not self-referential terms that the practitioners of the Vedic world-view chose for themselves. These words are not attested to in any of the ancient Vedic or Classical Sanskrit literatures, or even in the many local dialects until the medieval era. It was not until the nineteenth century under the rule of the British Raj that these dual terms even acquired legal significance on a national scale in India.

The actual term that the Vedic tradition uses to refer to itself is “Sanatana Dharma”. While many non-Hindu academicians have no doubt encountered this term before, not every South Asian Specialist is necessarily as familiar with the full philosophical implications of its meaning. Thus it is necessary to explicate the term’s full meaning. The Sanskrit word “Sanatana” denotes that which always is, that which has neither beginning nor end, that which is eternal. The term “Dharma”, on the other hand, is a term that can be properly rendered into the English language only with the greatest of difficulty. This is the case because there is no one corresponding English term that fully renders both the denotative and the connotative meanings of the term with maximal sufficiency. The denotative meaning of “Dharma” is an essential attribute of x object — an attribute whose absence renders the object devoid of either rational meaning or existential significance. To illustrate the full meaning of this term: “it is the *dharma* of water to be wet”. Without the essential attribute of wetness, water loses all meaning. Likewise, it is the *dharma* of fire to be hot, etc. It is, however, when we come to the connotative meaning of the term “Dharma” that we then leave the concerns of Vaisesika categoriology behind and then enter the realm of the overtly philosophical.

For, according to the tradition itself, the very empirical cosmos in which we find ourselves currently situated also has its own inherent *dharma*, its essential attributive nature. In this more cosmological sense, the term *dharma* is designed to communicate the view that there is an underlying structure of natural law that is inherent in the very constitution of Being itself. Thus, if we needed to render the entire term “Sanatana Dharma” into English, we can cautiously translate it as “The Eternal Natural Way”. The term “Sanatana Dharma” more accurately communicates the axiomatic metaphysical nature of this concept than do the terms “Hindu/Hinduism”. Thus, when the terms “Hindu/Hinduism” are repeatedly appealed to by both Euro-American and Indian academicians, we fall very short from fully communicating the

metaphysical, ethical and ontological components of the world-view of Sanatana Dharma. The former — i.e. Hinduism — is a religious tradition, which finds itself currently tied to ethnic, national and social concerns. The latter — Sanatana Dharma — is a science of Being in a purely philosophical — and therefore highly rational — sense.

The Misapplication of Western Theological Terms to Distinctly South Asian Religious Phenomena

Having examined the problematic issues of a very broad misapplied academic term, I will now briefly examine several more specific terms that have been misemployed in the 200 year history of South Asian Studies. The first of these more specific polemically charged words is the term “idol”. This word has been repeatedly misused by purported scholars of Hinduism — and again, by both Euro-American, as well as Indian scholars — and it has been continuously and unthinkingly used by even religious Hindus to this very day. At least once a month I get notices from Hindu temples inviting me to “idol” installations, pujas to the “idol”, etc.

Unbeknownst to the vast majority of Hindu practitioners, the term “idol” is not a neutral term meant only to signify the objective reality of a statue or some other focal point used as a means of meditation upon the Divine, but it is a term that is historically devoid of any positive connotations. First arising from a purely Christian/Islamic religious and cultural context, the theologically derived terms “Idol/Idolatry” were quite clearly designed to signify the misguided worship of the graven images of fictitious gods. In the Old Testament, idol worshippers are condemned to death. In the Koran, the worshipers of idols are relegated to the category of the demonic. The theological baggage attendant upon the word “idol” was understandably imported into the nascent field of Indology by the eighteenth and nineteenth century European founders of modern Vedic studies. Thus, over time, what originated as a purely religious term specifically meant to designate a false practice and erroneous theological view, progressed to being accepted as an academic term meant to describe the practices and views of a “foreign” religion. In turn, tragically, the greater Hindu community has itself now thoroughly embraced this term as a legitimate word meant to convey one of the most sacred and integral mechanisms of Hindu worship. Unfortunately, when a Christian theologian, a Muslim cleric or a colonialist-tempered scholar is using the term “idol”, they are interpreting a specific religious phenomenon in a radically different manner than is the typical Hindu worshipper.

For those scholars who have allowed themselves to develop a more sophisticated and objective understanding of the phenomenon — that is, one that arises from an indigenous and thus an insider perspective — it becomes rather apparent that the practice that is occurring via the process of *archa-puja* is something radically distinct from the stereotyped image of idol worship that is painted by rabidly iconoclastic ideologies. Followers of Sanatana Dharma are not blindly worshipping false idols, but are using divine images whose forms have been revealed via the non-mediated intuitive perception of the Absolute experienced by the *rsis*. Moreover, such images are used primarily as focal points designed as aids to meditative awareness. *Archa-puja* is not a superstition, is not a debasement of religion, is not fetishism, but is a tried and tested soteriological device. This being the case, I urge both scholars of Hindu Studies, as well as everyday practitioners of Sanatana Dharma, to refrain from using the derogatory term “idol” and to instead use one of the more culturally sensitive, and academically accurate terms that is used by the tradition itself. Such terms include: *murti*, *archa*, etc. Take your pick.

Misdefining Dharma as a Lie: Objective Scholarship or Bigoted Polemic?

The next term that we will examine is the word “myth”. The related terms “myth”, “mythology”, “mythological”, etc., have had an interesting history and a very pointed polemic use in Euro-American discourse on Sanatana Dharma. That the terms are rife with very negative connotations is doubted by very few. The way the terms are used today both within academia, as well as by the general public, is to denote something which is untrue, false, a lie, “primitive” (i.e., not Euro-American). Several months ago, during a visit to the dentist’s office, I saw a pamphlet on the table called “The Myths About Sexually Transmitted Diseases”. The ultimate question that needs to be determined is: is it really of any scholarly necessity that such powerfully negative terms also be associated with the sacred stories, teachings and history of Sanatana Dharma?

Polemically speaking, one culture’s “myth” is another culture’s sacred history ... and visa versa. The academic field of the study of “mythological” literature was founded by eighteenth-century European Classicists who took their misconceptions about their own Greco-Roman pre-Christian religious and cultural heritage and attempted to then apply these misconceptions to all contemporary non-Christian cultures — including that of India. These founders of “mythology” studies — including such individuals as Sir George Grey, Rudolph Otto and Karl Kerényi — were convinced, as is unarguably evident in their writings, that the entire realm of religious story could be clearly demarcated into two radically distinct camps:

1) “Myth”, that is the “primitive” stories about gods, goddesses, spirits, demons, magic and mysticism, etc. found throughout all of the indigenous and non-Biblical cultures of the world. Such stories are all considered to be certainly no more than ignorant “pre-scientific” attempts by “primitive peoples” (THEIR words, not mine) to come to terms with and explain such frightening mysteries as natural weather phenonema. The study of such mythologically ridden cultures was then relegated to the nascent fields of anthropology, folk-lore and aesthetic studies.

2) The second category that religious stories were placed in was termed “History”, that is Biblical literature and all supposedly factual accounts of events proceeding such literature to be found throughout the history of Europe and the post-Columbian Americas. In order to study these supposed historical facts, Euro-American scholars employed a different battery of academic disciplines entirely, including philosophical, ethical, literary, psychological, etc. The only overlapping exception being the field of philology, which was employed to research both the glorious history of Europe, as well as the primitive utterings of the Rg Veda.

There is the wonderful saying that we have all encountered that assures us that “history” is written by the victors. Consequently, the stories of the Garden of Eden, Noah’s Ark, Abraham, Moses, the Judges, David, etc. are unquestioningly accepted by most European historians — and interestingly by many Indian historians! — as being incontrovertible and established fact. This, even though the evidence for these supposed historical facts are in many cases no stronger, or even less so, than the evidence supporting the historicity of the ancient stories of Sanatana Dharma. What these Western scholars and their Westernized Indian counterparts called the “mythical” Sarasvati River, for example, was discovered to be a concrete geological fact in our century by no less empirical evidence than satellite photography; Krishna’s “mythological” city of Dvaraka was, likewise, impertinently discovered off the coast of Gujarat about two decades ago (anyone out there have a crane?). Despite these geological facts, the Puranas, Itihasas and

traditional histories of India, unlike the Biblical “myths”, are relegated by modern Euro-American scholars to the misty realm of “myth”. Or more bluntly: primitive fables.

If we would venture to speculate that what has brought this stark double standard about has been nothing less than European racism and intellectual colonialism, coupled with a strong element of Hindu inferiority complex, we would not be far from the mark! The terms “myth”, “mythology”, “mythological”, etc., have been used as a powerful weapon for decades as a way of delegitimizing the world-view of Sanatana Dharma, as well as the Hindu and Indian way of life.

Whether such unscholarly use of these otherwise legitimate terms will be allowed to continue as a weapon against the sacred stories of Vedic culture, or whether the use of such terms will be relegated to the same dust-bin of other such derogatory terms is up to both the greater community of ethical scholars, as well as practitioners of Sanatana Dharma. Such terms should be absolutely anathema to every sincere and self-respecting scholar when speaking about the sacred stories of Sanatana Dharma.

As a more positive alternative to these terms, I propose that South Asianists who study the religions of South Asia approach their purported object of research in a similar manner as do scholars who study many other formally oppressed non-Christian cultures (such as those who study Native American tribes). In these fields the religious stories of the subjects under study are often referred to by the more culturally sensitive term “Sacred Stories”. We can later, as informed scholars, debate over the actual meaning of these stories — whether they are literal history (which in many cases they very clearly are), or meant to be taken allegorically or metaphorically. Let us all, in any case be in agreement that these Sacred Stories must never be degraded again by terming them “myth”.

The Depolemicizing of South Asian Studies

The perennial use of politically surcharged words to stifle the aspirations of a people, to deflect the actual meaning of an action or concept, and to otherwise keep a people subservient to the dominant cultural mainstream is nothing new. Additionally, it is not new that the very people who have been the victims of such propagandistic terminology will inevitably come to adopt such terms in self-referential ways. We have the case of the Ethiopian Jews who for hundreds of years were termed “Falashas” — an incredibly derogatory term in the Ethiopian language — by those who persecuted them. After hundreds of years of such persecution, the Jews of Ethiopia even began to refer to themselves as the “Falasha” community. Such instances of the victims adopting the polemic terminology of their oppressors has been witnessed repeatedly over the long course of human history — among the Jews, Native Americans, European Pagans, and now among the so-called Hindus.

Consequently, the use of inaccurate, and often consciously and maliciously distorted, terminology has been a double-edged source of oppressive discourse. The use of such terms has been made use of by an intellectually lethargic tradition of South Asian scholars who view the religion of Sanatana Dharma, not as the noble and vibrant living tradition that it is, but as their own personal academic plaything. On the other hand, followers of Sanatana Dharma have, in turn, blindly accepted these non-indigenous and inaccurate terms and adopted them as their own. Thus, while the bulk of the blame must be placed squarely on the shoulders of the oppressors, the victims too need to free themselves of a colonialist-induced mentality of inferiority and

acceptance of their oppression. It is my fervent hope, and I know it is the hope of the majority of ethical scholars of South Asian religions, that we will soon witness the beginning of a new way of viewing the nature, history and future of Sanatana Dharma.

Every revolution, however, begins with thoroughly grasping the power of the word.

