

A River of Delights, a River of Troubles

We are slow to realize water, the beauty and magic of it. It is interestingly strange to us forever.

Henry David Thoreau

I hold the hand of my five-year-old son, Nathan, as I walk down a twisted alley that winds through a maze of ancient red stone temples and leads to the bank of the Yamuna River in the northern Indian town of Vrindaban. The sun is low on the western horizon, casting a pinkish golden hue on the rippling surface of the water. Bright green rose-ringed parrots squawk noisily as they flutter about the buildings behind us, a koel bird sings its fluty cuckoo call from the tall grasses on the other shore, and a gray heron wades in the shallow water nearby, hunting for fish. We settle down on a sandstone platform near three Shiva lingams to appreciate the sights and sounds of the evening. We are both drawn to the peace of this place and remain quiet. A turtle pokes its head out of the water and stares at us for a few moments before disappearing into the depths. The river is calm in April, and its mirrorlike surface reflects the ever-changing play of light. We both comment on how beautiful the river looks this evening. Nathan calls it “magical.” Reflecting on all the devotional literature I have been reading, I find it easy in this moment to understand why for centuries this river has been worshipped as a goddess. Beauty abounds; this is indeed a world blessed with a river of delights.

After some time, however, my gaze shifts from distant to near. I look down directly into the water and see that it is dark in color—too dark for natural water, even for a river known to be dark. A large drain carrying untreated sewage empties into the river a hundred yards upstream

from where we sit. Suddenly everything I have been reading about the environmental condition of this river comes crashing into my consciousness. The flow of the river is diminishing rapidly, because of the increasing demand for water for domestic use by a growing population and for irrigation by modern farming techniques. Pesticides seep into the river from the surrounding farmland, and frightening amounts of untreated sewage and toxic industrial effluents pour into it continually from Delhi, a city of more than fifteen million people located one hundred miles upstream.

I struggle to hold onto the magical beauty I experienced with Nathan a few minutes earlier. It is wonderful to see this river through the eyes of a child, especially a child open to its stories; but he too is aware of this other perspective. He points to some trash floating past us in a plastic bag. “Yamuna-ji has a sickness,” he says. “People are mean to her.” When he first arrived in Vrindaban, he wanted to swim in the river, delighted by its sight and my own accounts of swimming in the river twenty years ago. But my awareness of the pollution loads the river now carries prohibited me from allowing him this simple pleasure. Joyful delight gives way to sadness and anger. I follow these feelings and my knowledge of the river’s pollution into a sober consideration of a flood of troubles.

Rivers are now under threat worldwide; freshwater is becoming scarcer and more polluted. Although we humans recognize that life on Earth would be nonexistent without freshwater, we disregard this fact by abusing our rivers and other sources of freshwater. *The World Watch Reader* reports, “The Nile, the Ganges, the Amu Dar’ya and Syr Dar’ya, the Huang He (or Yellow River), and the Colorado are each now so dammed, diverted, or overtapped that[,] for parts of the year, little or none of their freshwater reaches the sea. Their collective diminution portends not only worsening water shortages and potential conflicts over scarce supplies, but mounting ecological damage.”¹ Moreover, the remaining freshwater that the rivers of the world carry is often so severely polluted by domestic sewage and industrial poisons that rivers now threaten the very life they once nurtured. “Eighty percent of all disease in developing countries is spread by unsafe water.... In Russia, the very rivers that people depend on for life—the Volga, the Dvina, the Ob—are now hazardous to public health.”²

And it is not just the water; we are now in the process of changing the Earth’s atmosphere. Human activity in the latter half of the twentieth century increased the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere

by nearly 30 percent. The result is a global warming that threatens to challenge all life-forms with severe weather and radical climate change.³ The protective ozone layer is rapidly being depleted because of our fossil-fuel burning and our use of chlorofluorocarbons and other ozone-depleting substances. We are contaminating our air, soil, water, and bodies with toxic chemicals. Safe food is disappearing, the cancer rate is skyrocketing, forests are being clear-cut, the amphibian population is crashing, and biodiversity is plummeting. Many scientists contend that we are now in the throes of one of the fastest mass extinctions in the planet's history.⁴ Granted, death and destruction are a natural feature of the biological process; nonetheless, the rate of extinction and radical environmental change today are clearly driven by human activity. Scientists now concur that biodiversity is necessary for the overall health of all species, and the increasingly rapid loss of biodiversity now taking place is one of the greatest threats to life on Earth. All those who are courageous enough to pierce through socially sanctioned denial and acknowledge the vast sea of troubles we face today know that the very future of a healthy humanity is in question.⁵ There is no more important challenge today than to find a way out of this life-threatening nightmare and into a nurturing world of sanity in which all life can flourish.⁶

Today we live in a complicated world: a world of delight—perhaps more delight than we ever imagined—and a world of trouble, perhaps more trouble than we ever bargained for. What follows relates to my own struggles to understand and negotiate this contemporary dichotomy in human experience, using the sacred Yamuna River of northern India as a focusing lens. From the outset, I want to make clear that I do not mean to be overly critical of India: the problems of river pollution are found everywhere in the world today. Nonetheless, although the Yamuna is a river of delights—many in India see it as a liquid form of love—today it is also a river with a great many troubles. An examination of the Yamuna River, then, affords a look at both rivers and river pollution from the distinctive perspective of the Hindu religious cultures of northern India.

Why do we humans produce a river of troubles when offered a river of delights? Any answer to this question necessarily is complex, but certainly one contributing factor is that we largely lack an awareness of and appreciation for the interdependence and preciousness of all life-forms. Contrary to the information biologists now provide, human beings often assume their superiority over and independence from other life-forms.⁷ Indu Tikekar, a religious scholar and Gandhian environmentalist living

in the Himalayas, told a group of bicyclists riding for the purpose of raising awareness about the plight of the Yamuna, “All the expressions of nature are all expressions of one reality. Therefore, humans are members of one family. Why are we then creating havoc within our family? Because we have lost the sense that we are part of one family. Our problem is that we think that we are the center of life. The solution is to realize that we are all part of one single reality.”⁸ Reflecting on the troubles of the Ganges River, Lina Gupta writes, “From an ecofeminist perspective, pollution is the result not only of inappropriate technologies and mismanagement of resources, but also a failure to be connected with, to, and for one another and the rest of the planet. External pollution begins with internal pollution, the pollution of thinking we are utterly separate from the rest of existence.”⁹ These insights invite consideration of the role of religion in the current environmental crisis.

What does religion have to do with the health of a river? The contemporary science of ecology is producing many new ways of thinking. A new field of inquiry now in the process of emerging in religious studies, and which is generally known as Religion and Ecology, recognizes that religious worldviews play a major role in shaping human attitudes toward the natural environment. This field analyzes religious texts, both written and ethnographic, to explore how an expressed worldview determines particular beliefs, practices, and interactions regarding the nonhuman world. Different religious traditions establish and promote very different human perspectives on the natural environment. Some religious worldviews regard the health of a river, for example, as religiously unimportant, whereas others consider the well-being of a river to be essential. Religion and Ecology examines such differences and investigates their implications and consequences in the arena of human behavior, for the human effect on a river today is considerable. Those who consider a river sacred treat it differently than do those who regard a river in strictly utilitarian terms. This book explores how the religious culture associated with the Yamuna increasingly serves as a valuable resource in efforts to protect and restore the river.

The emerging field of Religion and Ecology has its origin in the work of the medievalist Lynn White and other scholars concerned with the environmental crisis in the late 1960s. White published a seminal article in 1967 titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” and a subsequent article in 1973 titled “Continuing the Conversation.”¹⁰ In the first of these articles, White remarks, “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things

around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by the beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.”¹¹ Here White articulates a foundational idea: that religious beliefs influence human treatment of the natural world.¹² White’s primary focus is European (and thus American) Christianity. According to him, Western Christianity’s dominant theology, which has tended to profess a God who transcends all nature, as well as its strong anthropocentrism, which insists that the physical creation has no value except to serve human purposes, has contributed significantly to the destructive environmental practices we observe today. White, however, does not view religion only as a problem: it may also be part of a solution. “More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.... Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not.”¹³ Acknowledging the historically diverse character of Christianity, White promotes a side of this tradition that he identifies as its “recessive genes,” exemplified by Saint Francis of Assisi.¹⁴ Importantly, White represents the current ecological crisis as a “religious problem,” since for him “every culture, whether it is overtly religious or not, is shaped primarily by its religion.”¹⁵ Accordingly, White looks to “religion, including crypto-religion, as a source for historical explanations.”¹⁶ With these assertions, he established an approach to environmental considerations in which religion is taken seriously. The conversation White and others began in the late 1960s has certainly continued; although the new field of Religion and Ecology is still in its infancy, it has established a firm foothold in the American academy.¹⁷

Parallel with the development of the academic study of religion and ecology has been a change in the religious traditions themselves. Although White became the most well known, he was only one of many in the 1960s who criticized the dominant trends of Western Christianity for contributing to the ecological crisis. The assertion that Christianity was largely responsible for attitudes that led to environmental destruction caused some within Western societies to abandon Christianity in search of more eco-friendly ideas in Asian and Native American religious traditions. But many who accepted the critique of Christianity chose to remain within the circles of Christian theology. This latter group of reformers engaged in efforts to rethink the current Christian tradition and articulate a new understanding of it in light of the ecological crisis. This development has been labeled by some as the “greening of religion.”¹⁸ While acknowledging that Christianity has been a causal problem in the

ecological crisis, those involved in this project agree with White that it may also serve as a creative solution. This leads them to engage in both deconstructive and constructive work.

A general consensus emerged in the late 1960s that identified several negative aspects of Western Christianity contributing to the environmental crisis. First is that Christianity has been highly anthropocentric (the belief that humans are separate from and superior to all other life-forms), a tenet that has led to a disregard for the value of other life-forms.¹⁹ Second, Christianity stripped nature of any sacrality, making way for the exploitation of nature in a mood of indifference.²⁰ Third, Christianity identified technological progress with religious virtue, thereby legitimizing technological developments that have proved to be harmful to the environment. Fourth, Christianity rejected the notion of metempsychosis, a belief that allowed recognition of a nonhuman being as a relative. For Christianity, the good soul was destined only for heaven, not the body of an animal or plant, thus removing another restraint to harming nonhuman life-forms. Fifth, Christianity often tended to view wilderness as a cursed land. Paradise was conceived of as either a garden (Eden) or a city (New Jerusalem). This fostered a move toward the domestication of all wild land and its inhabitants. Sixth, otherworldliness is pervasive in Christianity; because we are temporary sojourners in this world, our ultimate destination is assumed to be elsewhere. Such a belief is often linked to a radically transcendent view of God or the sacred, and it fosters an attitude whereby this world is greatly devalued in favor of a home far removed from this one.²¹ In addition, the charge was made that Christianity eradicated many different cultures that had more this-worldly, or eco-friendly, attitudes. Although the initial critique of religion from an environmental perspective was first applied to Christianity, it was extended over time to include aspects of any religious tradition that might be viewed with suspicion by someone concerned about the environmental crisis. For those receptive to this new avenue of religious criticism, an opportunity presented itself for fresh and creative theological reflection.

Because Christianity was the initial target of criticism by White and others, much creative theology has emerged in Christian circles in response. A common goal of this endeavor is to identify sources within Christianity that can be used to foster a more ecologically positive view of the world. Despite conservative resistance, eco-theology is thriving in American Christianity today.²² This collective work calls for a move beyond anthropocentrism and for a reenchantment of the world that

honors the intrinsic value of the nonhuman and celebrates all life by asserting that the whole of nature is sacred. The theologian Rosemary Ruether, for example, uses lessons from modern science to help accomplish this. "One of the most basic 'lessons' of ecology and spirituality is the interrelation of all things. Both earth science and astrophysics give us extraordinary and powerfully compelling messages about our kinship, not only with all living things on earth, but even with distant stars and galaxies. A profound spirituality would arise if we would attempt to experience this kinship and make it present in our consciousness.... Recognition of this profound kinship must bridge the arrogant barrier that humans have erected to wall themselves off, not only from other sentient animals, but also from simpler animals, plants, and the abiotic matrix of life in rocks, soils, air, and water. Like the great nature mystic, Francis of Assisi, we may learn to greet as our brothers and sisters the wolf and lamb, trees and grasses, fire and water."²³ In the works of many contemporary Christian theologians, we observe a religious perspective that takes seriously the sacrality of the entire world, and an ethical call for a loving care that extends beyond humans.

Trends observed in Western religions are also discernible in philosophy, most specifically in the area of ethics.²⁴ Throughout much of the history of Western philosophy, ethicists have tended to focus on the behavior of people toward other people. Traditional moral philosophy showed little regard for the nonhuman world. Driven by serious concerns about the environmental crisis, however, environmental philosophy and ethics came into being in the early 1970s.²⁵ In general, this development in ethics involved widening the circle of moral concern to include all life. More radical environmental philosophers proposed extending the moral horizon to include rocks, soil, rivers, forests, and even entire ecosystems. Representative of this movement are those who identify themselves as "deep ecologists."

The recognized founder of the philosophical movement of deep ecology is Arne Naess, an eminent Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer. Naess coined the term *deep ecology* in a seminal article published in 1973 in which he distinguished the deep ecological movement from the "shallow" ecology movement. The latter, according to Naess, is concerned primarily with resource depletion and pollution control via technological innovations that still favor continuous economic growth and avoid seriously questioning the fundamental values that brought us to the current crisis. The deep ecological movement, on the other hand, through a process of deep questioning seeks to transform problematic

sociopolitical systems and achieve an environmentally sustainable, socially equitable, and spiritually rich way of life.²⁶

Naess was influenced heavily by Gandhi, who defined the spiritual and ethical life as a process of “self-realization,” a Vedantic concept whereby one moves progressively from an identification with the limited ego sense of self to identify ultimately with the unlimited wholistic Self, known in the Hindu tradition as the *atman*.²⁷ Self-realization, for Gandhi, is rooted in a unified, or nondual (*advaita*), understanding of reality: “I believe in *advaita*. I believe in the essential unity of man and for that matter of all that lives.”²⁸ For Naess, self-realization is a process in which one identifies with a larger and larger sense of self until finally one identifies with all living beings; he calls this larger self the “ecological self.” “We under-estimate ourselves,” he claims. “Human nature is such that with sufficient all-sided maturity we cannot avoid ‘identifying’ our self with all living beings, beautiful or ugly, big or small, sentient or not.”²⁹ For Naess, all love and compassion depends on some kind of identification. This leads Naess to articulate not only the spiritual dimension of self-realization, whereby one overcomes painful disconnection by identifying with the All, but also the ethical dimension of environmental activism. For Naess, care of the environment does not require some dutiful sacrifice, but rather comes naturally from joyful identification. The deep ecologist Bill Devall elaborates: “As we discover our ecological self we will joyfully defend and interact with that with which we identify.”³⁰

Deep ecologists aim to replace what they perceive to be the arrogance of anthropocentrism with the all-embracing eco-centric virtues of humility, wider vision, reverence, and loving care. This has serious implications for rivers. The first of Naess’s eight deep ecological principles reads: “The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.”³¹ To check current anthropocentric tendencies and stress the all-inclusive nature of this eco-centric statement, he adds, “the term ‘life’ is used here in a more comprehensive nontechnical way to refer also to what biologists classify as ‘nonliving’: rivers, landscapes, ecosystems. For supporters of deep ecology, slogans such as ‘*Let the river live*’ illustrate this broader usage so common in most cultures.”³² Deep ecology, however, does not stop with thought; the eighth and final principle demands action. “Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to

implement the necessary changes.”³³ Deep ecology, which is now a global movement, is not a disembodied philosophy, but rather strives for implementation through direct environmental action.³⁴ Later in this book I discuss environmental movements in India that align themselves with such deep ecological principles.

What all three of these movements—the emerging academic field of Religion and Ecology, the greening of religions, and environmental philosophy—have in common is that they are driven by a deep concern for what is happening to the life-support systems on Earth, and they all acknowledge that worldviews significantly shape attitudes and behavior toward the environment.³⁵ Although such thinking has been developed primarily within Christian circles, it has by no means been limited to this religion. Every religion on the planet is now challenged to rethink itself in light of the environmental crisis. What about Hinduism? How does it look from an ecological perspective? In the spirit of Lynn White, we might ask: Is Hinduism eco-friendly?

One would be justified in rejecting this question altogether, for it is a misleading question that both reduces a complex tradition to a singularity and expects an answer never intended by any tradition. Like all world religious traditions, Hinduism is a multifaceted cultural phenomenon made up of many varied and sometimes contradictory voices. There is plenty of evidence for what we today might identify as ecologically destructive views and practices within Hinduism,³⁶ and there is abundant evidence for what we might identify as ecologically friendly views and practices within Hinduism. In an effort to “dethrone” what they call the “oriental ecologist,” Ole Bruun and Arne Kalland argue that “Asian philosophies and cosmologies seem to have had little effect in preventing over-exploitation of soils, over-grazing, erosion, deforestation, pollution of waters and other environmental disasters—by which a number of Asian societies are acutely threatened.”³⁷ The Hindu ecofeminist Lina Gupta acknowledges ecologically destructive elements in Hinduism, which she labels “patriarchal,” but she also writes, “Still, I believe that Hinduism, though containing its own patriarchal aspects, offers as well some resources for assisting us to move beyond patriarchy. Hinduism can help us awaken to the deep connections that already exist, if we have eyes to see.”³⁸ In a similar vein, after noting that many aspects of Hinduism are detrimental to the environment, Rita Dasgupta Sherma insists, “In the case of Hinduism, resources exist for the development of a vision that could promote ecological action.” She especially emphasizes the goddess-worshipping traditions of Hinduism

for their ability to “offer a rich and nuanced resource for the construction of an eco-conscious spirituality.”³⁹

We must also keep in mind that the present scope of the environmental crisis is a radically new human experience that demands new responses; thus no religious tradition in its present form is prepared to address the current problems. As Poul Pedersen reminds us, “No Buddhist, Hindu, or Islamic scriptures contain concepts like ‘environmental crisis,’ ‘ecosystems,’ or ‘sustainable development,’ or concepts corresponding to them. To insist that they do is to deny the immense cultural distance that separates traditional religious conceptions of the environment from modern ecological knowledge.”⁴⁰ Religious traditions are always changing as they move into new historical circumstances, and one of the greatest challenges they face today is the environmental crisis, which is already reshaping traditions worldwide. Nevertheless, with these cautionary points in mind we can proceed to examine certain dimensions of the Hindu tradition that might serve as resources for those who employ a Hindu cultural perspective in their struggle with the environmental crisis.

Before beginning this task, it might be worthwhile to acknowledge that, in much of the literature which examines religions from an ecological perspective, the answer to the question “Is Hinduism eco-friendly?” has frequently been: “No.”⁴¹ Whereas Buddhism, Taoism, and Native American religions are almost always depicted as being eco-friendly, Hinduism is not. On the contrary, in many Western representations Hinduism is typically assumed to be an ascetic, world-renouncing tradition that views the natural world of multiple forms as a valueless illusion. If this were indeed the case, one might wonder why Hindus would even want to save a river. This is, however, not at all true of many types of Hinduism.⁴² It is therefore necessary to clear up widespread confusion on this issue before examining the religious culture associated with the Yamuna River.

Although any scholar of Hinduism must certainly acknowledge the existence of strong and important world-renouncing dimensions in this tradition, by no means can Hinduism be reduced to a single position. Hinduism is a pluralistic tradition with many world-affirming schools of thought and action. In fact, numerically speaking, world-denying asceticism is a minority position overshadowed by a plentitude of world-affirming temple cults. Unfortunately, this latter fact has been missed by many of those considering religious traditions from an ecological perspective. In *The Lost Gospel of the Earth*, for example,

Tom Hayden writes that any reverent attitude toward nature in Hinduism has “to be retrieved from a long Hindu tradition of viewing the earth as illusion to be transcended.”⁴³ The operative assumption here is that schools within Hinduism which view the world as an illusory trap to be escaped, such as the religious system of Advaita Vedanta articulated by the well-known ascetic philosopher Shankaracharya (also known simply as Shankara), represent the sole Hindu position on the value of the world. This assumption, a product of Oriental scholarship driven by particular philosophical commitments and the political agenda of British colonialism, informs many understandings of Hinduism. The truth is that there are many schools of thought within Hinduism. There are even many schools of Vedanta, a variety of religious systems based on early scriptures that establish the unity of all reality. Shankara’s specific school of Advaita Vedanta, which rationalizes renunciation of an illusory world, represents only one of the many schools of Vedanta. The Vaishnava schools of Vedanta all tend to assert that the world is real, and thus promote a more this-worldly form of Vedanta.

In his insightful study of deep ecology, Warwick Fox considers the nature of Hinduism while examining Gandhi’s influence on Arne Naess. Following other scholars, Fox argues that Gandhi had rendered radical changes in Hindu thought, thus making it more appealing to the ecologically minded Naess. Specifically, Hinduism had to be transformed into a this-worldly religious tradition. Fox writes, “While Indian thought emphasizes repelling and overcoming the forces of life, Gandhi accepts the reality of this world and, proceeding on this basis, insists on remaining in this world and seeking salvation through serving the world.”⁴⁴ Gandhi’s perspective is represented here as a radical deviation from “real” Hinduism. Fox contends that “Gandhi’s Hinduism is heavily influenced by Buddhism.”⁴⁵ He even identifies Buddhism, a tradition assumed by many to be eco-friendly, as the positive transformative force, claiming that “the path of seeking self-realization through serving the world—the upshot of Gandhi’s version of Indian thought—is most readily associated with the Bodhisattva ideal, which is the ideal of Mahayana Buddhism, rather than with the more Hindu-inspired ideal, which is strongly associated with Hinayana Buddhism, of seeking one’s own salvation first and foremost, and even withdrawing from the world to do so.”⁴⁶ Regarding Gandhi’s specific brand of Hinduism, Fox presumes that “Gandhi was committed to Advaita Vedanta,” the “dominant traditional Indian metaphysics” established by Shankara that “impugns the reality status of the empirical world.”⁴⁷

Fox makes a big mistake here. In his personal writings, Gandhi clarifies that his own thinking about Vedantic issues was influenced by his Vaishnava background, which holds the world to be real and is therefore deeply invested in life. Nonetheless, because Fox makes the mistake of reducing Vedantic systems of thought to Shankara's alone, he assumes that it was necessary for Gandhi to affect radical changes in Hinduism. Fox remarks that Gandhi "went against the grain of that tradition in the extent to which he endorsed the reality of the phenomenal or empirical world."⁴⁸

In sum, Fox assumed that Naess and anyone else who has a positive ecological view of the world would be attracted only to the eco-friendly version of Hinduism worked out by Gandhi, and not to the traditional otherworldly form of Hinduism that constitutes the real tradition. In condensed form, Fox articulates something commonplace and highly problematic in many representations of Hinduism, particularly in textbook representations that fail to examine critically the scholarship of previous generations on which much of this is based. To be sure, Hinduism does include important ascetic and world-denying schools such as Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, but it also includes much more that frequently gets left out of secondary representations of Hinduism: specifically the lived traditions of theistic or temple Hinduism that typically view the world as a manifestation of the highest divinity. How did the reductionistic views of Hinduism so prevalent in ecological considerations of Hinduism come into being? In many ways this is a story of how a relatively minor part of the tradition came to represent the entire tradition in scholarly literature during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Scholarship during the colonial period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was influenced by eighteenth-century European historians who had a nostalgic commitment to recapturing a glorious past. In the normative studies of religion at the time, this meant that authenticity was equated with antiquity, and the "original" aspects of a religion were assumed to be the truest. Early Orientalist scholars working within India, such as William Jones and Henry Colebrooke, constructed a golden age of Hinduism located deep in the past and fashioned a portrayal of the Vedic age that is still widely accepted in the West today.⁴⁹ Colebrooke published an extremely influential article titled "On the Vedas, or Sacred Writings of the Hindus," in which he advanced his far-reaching notion that the Vedas—by which he means primarily the Upanishads—are the authentic, genuine Hindu scripture and that the

goal of liberation from the world, or *moksha*, is the “real doctrine of the whole Indian scripture.”⁵⁰ He was also one of the first to identify Shankara as the great and authentic commentator on the Vedas. In this same article, Colebrooke condemns the life-affirming theistic cults of Hinduism—as well as their scriptural sources, the Puranas—as inauthentic and deserving of being “rejected, as liable to much suspicion.”⁵¹ Here was the first major contribution to the construction of “neo-Vedantic Hinduism,” which was soon to assume the status of canonical fact and seize the position of the authentic singular in most Western representations of Hinduism. The privileging of Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta and its specific goal of *moksha* continued on throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is still very much with us today.

Paul Deussen and Max Muller, two writers deeply influenced by German idealism that defined philosophy as a study of the disjunction between appearance and reality, and perhaps the two most important Western interpreters of Indian thought in their day, both articulated this position with great enthusiasm.⁵² Under their pens, Shankara’s system came to represent the whole of Indian thought for Europeans in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In his introduction to the Vedanta, Deussen assumes that Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta represents the entirety of Vedanta and writes, “On the tree of Indian wisdom there is no fairer flower than the Upanishads, and no finer fruit than the Vedanta philosophy. This system grew out of the teachings of the Upanishads, and was brought to its consummate form by the great Shankara (born 788 A.D., exactly one thousand years before his spiritual kinsman Schopenhauer). Even to this day, Shankara’s system represents the common belief of *nearly all thoughtful Hindus*.”⁵³ Along with the privileging of Shankara, *moksha*—understood to be liberation from the world experienced by the senses—came to be identified among a range of possibilities as the single goal of Hinduism. Andrew Tuck argues that during the nineteenth century it became “an established belief that *all Indian thought* was devoted to the attainment of *moksha*, or liberation from the ‘earthly bondage’ of perceived reality.”⁵⁴ Thus under the influence of the Orientalist scholarship of this period, the rich and multifaceted vastness of Hindu religious culture was largely reduced to a singularity that either was in harmony with Christian ideals or was rendered so otherworldly that it became politically impotent. Specifically, what gets denied is the world-ordering temple cults that offered a variety of goals besides *moksha*, such as life blessings or a devotional rapture frequently defined in contrast to *moksha*.⁵⁵

Through the politics of colonial scholarship, this portrait of Hinduism became the basis of early representations of Hinduism privileged in the Western academy. As Ronald Inden argues, “Whatever their interpretations of the Vedic ritual and Upanishadic philosophy, both the secularists and Christian idealists[,] on the one hand, and the philosophical idealists[,] on the other, have on the whole agreed that the monism embodied in Advaita Vedanta constituted the essence of Indian thought.”⁵⁶ The resulting reductionistic view has caused many to overlook much that is important in Hindu religious culture, particularly its most popular features: temple beliefs and practices.

Before proceeding, I want to make clear the political agenda behind this reduction of Hinduism initiated in the nineteenth century. At the peak of the independence movement in 1935, Mulk Raj Anand published a novel titled *Untouchable*. In the novel Anand has a wise poet say:

It is India’s genius to accept all things. We have, throughout our long history, been realists believing in the stuff of this world, in the here and the now, in the flesh and the blood. Man is born and reborn, according to the *Upanishads*, in this world, and even when he becomes an immortal saint there is no release for him, because he forms the stuff of the cosmos and is born again. We don’t believe in the other world, as these Europeans would have you believe we do. There has been only one man in India who believed this world to be illusory—Shankaracharya. But he was a consumptive and that made him neurotic. Early European scholars could not get hold of the original texts of the *Upanishads*. So they kept on interpreting Indian thought from the commentaries of Shankaracharya. The word *maya* does not mean illusion.... The Victorians misinterpreted us. It was as if, in order to give a philosophical background to their exploitation of India, they ingeniously concocted a nice little fairy story: “You don’t believe in this world; to you all this is *maya*. Let us look after your country for you and you can dedicate yourself to achieving *Nirvana*.”⁵⁷

Regardless of the accuracy of this representation of Shankara, Anand has identified an important point regarding the political agenda of the privileging of Shankara’s thought and the religious goal of *moksha*. The scholarly movement that reduces Hindu culture simultaneously justifies colonial rule. Inden argues a similar point. The implication of this reduction was that the “Indian mind requires an externally imported world-ordering rationality. This was important for the imperial project of the British as it appeared, piecemeal, in the course of the nineteenth century. Why? Because the theist creeds and sects, *activist and realist*,

were the world-ordering religions of precisely those in the Indian populace, among the Hindus, that the British themselves were in the process of displacing as the rulers of India.”⁵⁸

In my own study of a well-publicized trial known as the Maharaj Libel Case that took place in Bombay in 1862, I have demonstrated how Orientalist representations of Hinduism were used to undermine established religious authority in Indian societies associated with the worship of Krishna.⁵⁹ During this libel case, much of Hinduism itself was put on trial. The Oriental scholar and Christian missionary John Wilson was brought into the court as the “expert” to determine the authentic nature of Hinduism. He and the judges decreed together that the world-affirming temple cults of Krishna devotionism were illegitimate forms of Hinduism; the true tradition was ancient, ascetic, individualistic, transcendent, world-denying, and had the singular goal of *moksha*. To the degree that the ruling had effect, the existing culture of temple Hinduism, which involved the worship of embodied forms of divinity and was very much focused on this world, lost all legitimacy and its social leaders forfeited all authority. The undermining of temple Hinduism, then, had not only a religious agenda but also a political one: the leaders associated with temple Hinduism represented a political challenge to the British Raj.

At this point the dominant claim of colonial scholarship on Hinduism should be clear: the Vedas or Upanishads are the genuine Hindu scriptures, Shankara’s ascetic interpretation of them is singularly correct, and *moksha* is the true and only goal of pure Hinduism; the rites and practices of temple Hinduism that engage the body, mind, and senses in the worship of multiple forms of embodied divinity represent a popular corruption of and even dangerous deviation from the authentic tradition. Clearly, the world-affirming theologies associated with temple worship have no place in this representation of Hinduism. Although the scholarship of the past two decades has done much to deconstruct this picture of Hinduism and focus more attention on the types of Hinduism actually practiced by Hindus in India today, many dimensions of the earlier representations of Hinduism are still with us. I have found this to be particularly true in considerations of Hinduism found within ecological literature. The authors of this literature would benefit greatly from a study of recent scholarship on Hinduism.

Ironically, what is often missing in the oversimplified representation of Hinduism constructed by Orientalist scholars during the colonial period is its most common aspect: the theistic Hinduism present in the

temple cultures of India that focus on embodied forms of divinity, and which frequently promote a very positive view of the world. At this point an examination of the worldview expressed in the Bhagavad-gita would be advantageous for a number of reasons. First, this tremendously popular text gives representative access to theistic Hinduism. Second, the Gita was important for Gandhi, a key figure in many environmental movements in India and abroad, who regarded it “as the book *par excellence* for the knowledge of Truth,” and who used it for daily meditations.⁶⁰ Through Gandhi the Gita had a deep influence on many involved in developing ecological philosophies in both India and the West. Arne Naess took the term *self-realization* from Gandhi, who in turn took it from the Gita.⁶¹ One scholar remarks that self-realization “for Naess is not something new. For him, the view is expressed quite clearly in the *Bhagavad-gita*.”⁶² Indeed, Naess quotes the Gita himself to support his own view of self-realization.⁶³ Gandhi wrote in his commentary on the Gita that “self-realization is the subject of the Gita.”⁶⁴ Moreover, Himalayan forest-defenders and other well-known environmental activists in India have organized readings of the Gita as part of their strategy for environmental protection, and some have used it to articulate a specifically Hindu ecological philosophy.⁶⁵ One can even find uses of the Gita in environmental publications such as *Down to Earth*, a periodical published by the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi: “Conserve ecology or perish—this, in short, is one of the messages of the *Gita*, one of the most important scriptures of the Vedic way of life now known as Hinduism.” And: “It is time for another Hindu revival that restores the individual’s link with the society and the environment, time for a fresh set of examples, a fresh set of heroes. This will have to take into account the scientific revolution that has changed the face of human civilization, for good or for bad. It is time for Hindus to re-read the *Bhagavad Gita*.”⁶⁶ Finally, the Gita introduces a theological framework for understanding the religious thought that informs much worship of the Yamuna River. The Gita is clearly at the heart of many ecological considerations in India.

The overdetermined presence of Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta, however, still influences many scholars who explore the Gita with regard for ecological concerns. Two recent publications aptly demonstrate this point.⁶⁷ In an article titled “*Bhagavadgita*, Ecosophy T, and Deep Ecology,” Knut Jacobsen examines the influence of Hinduism on the thought of Arne Naess and the development of deep ecology. He begins by correctly noting that many of the ideas central to environmental thinking

in Europe and North America—such as “non-injury (*ahimsa*), the oneness of all living beings (*advaita*), and self- (*atman*) realization (*moksa*)”⁶⁸—come from the Hindu religious traditions, although this fact is rarely acknowledged.⁶⁹ In a narrowing representational move, however, Jacobsen identifies these influential Hindu concepts with the “monastic traditions” of “ascetic Hinduism,” which aim “to teach the realization of freedom from the world.” Moreover, he labels the Bhagavad-gita, which is the product of the historically specific Bhagavata, or Vaishnava, tradition that gives expression to a very particular theology, a nonsectarian text.⁷⁰ This allows him to focus his greatest attention on Shankara’s Advaita Vedantic interpretation of the Gita. Jacobsen notes that for Shankara the world of multiple appearances is ultimately not real. Since the world is ultimately devalued in Advaita Vedanta, and the stated goal is to escape from the illusory world, Jacobsen concludes that “Advaita Vedanta and deep ecology have quite different intentions.”⁷¹ He points out that the Gita according to Shankara teaches the cessation of the world, whereas deep ecology teaches the celebration of the world, and thus he questions any connection between the two. “There is therefore a great divergence between *advaita* in Shankara and *advaita* in Ecosophy T [Naess’s own philosophy].”⁷² Jacobsen seems to overlook the fact, however, that Naess did not draw his ideas about *advaita* from Shankara.

Continuing in this reductionistic fashion, Jacobsen asserts, “The monastic tradition of commentary [on the *Gita*] has continued up to this day and will go on into the future. Its focus is liberation *from* the world” (in contrast to liberation *in* the world).⁷³ If the primary meaning of the Gita necessarily implies a devaluation of the world, then indeed it must be changed if it is to address ecological concerns in any positive way. But is this true? Is this the only—or even primary—meaning derived from the Gita for the variety of Hindu traditions? Assuming that it is, Jacobsen argues that the change in positive political or ecological interpretations of the Gita was due to outside influences, suggesting that a socially conscious Christianity was foremost among these. He concludes: “A comparison of the Hindu monastic with the political-environmental interpretation of [the Bhagavad-gita] has shown that the political-environmental interpretation in many ways is the opposite of the monastic.”⁷⁴ Although Jacobsen acknowledges that “for none of the representatives of the monastic tradition was the *Bhagavad-gita* their primary religious text,” he seems unaware that Hindu traditions with closer ties to the Bhagavad-gita offer interpretations of this text that are directly opposed to the monastic interpretations.⁷⁵ Many of

these come from the Bhagavata or Vaishnava tradition that produced and maintained the Bhagavad-gita as a special sectarian text and that still has living representatives today. (It is this tradition that best enables an understanding of the religious world associated with the Yamuna.) It is not necessary, therefore, to argue for a radical transformation of interpretive possibilities for the Gita from the outside; interpretative traditions exist within Hindu religious philosophy that a figure like Gandhi might draw on, and which were more attractive to Naess and others committed to the perspective of deep ecology. Gandhi made it very clear in his autobiography, after all, that he was raised in the Vaishnava culture of northern India.⁷⁶

Jacobsen contends that deep ecology “has *samsara*, the world of the natural processes of birth, flourishing of life, decay and death as its ultimate concern.”⁷⁷ This leads him to highlight a huge difference between views expressed in the Gita and contemporary environmentalism. “Self-realization (*moksa*) for the Hindu monastic tradition meant freedom from *samsara*, while self-realization (*moksa*) for the environmental interpretation meant merging oneself with *samsara* and the preservation of *samsara*.”⁷⁸ Again, he assumes that the monastic interpretations of the Gita are the most authoritative and the most influential on Naess’s teacher Gandhi. There is much to consider here. First we might question Jacobsen’s use of the Sanskrit word *samsara* to refer to the manifest world of changing appearances. I contend that in the Gita *samsara* more correctly refers to the experience of alienation and suffering that results from ignorance about the true nature of the world. A more appropriate term for the world of multiple changing forms is *jagat*, most simply translated as the “world.”⁷⁹ Escape from *samsara* is clearly part of the goal, according to the Bhagavad-gita, but not necessarily escape from the world (*jagat*). In fact, many have argued that the goal of the Gita is freedom *in* the world, not freedom *from* the world. Shankara and other ascetic thinkers may indeed see the world, or *jagat*, as an unreal illusion to be escaped, but the Vaishnava theologians who represent the Bhagavata tradition that produced the Gita differ from Shankara precisely on this point: in conscious opposition to Shankara, they insist that the world as *jagat* is real (*sat*). Drawing on the Gita and Upanishadic texts, the seventeenth-century Vaishnava philosopher Lallu Bhatta, for example, states in his *Prameya Ratnarnava*: “The world is not ‘mayic’ (illusory) nor is it different from the Lord. It is real.”⁸⁰ The Gita itself identifies Krishna as the source of the *jagat* (7.6) and even goes so far as to state that the view that the *jagat* is unreal is demonic (16.8). The goal

of *karma-yoga* as expressed in the Gita involves realizing freedom *in* the world, not freedom *from* the world.⁸¹ Thus, it is the alienation of *samsara* that is negated in the liberation of *moksha*, not the world itself. As Richard Davis writes, “Moksa always involves leaving behind the sufferings and fetters that constitute our normal worldly existence, but it may lead one, according to which school one follows, to a merging with the godhead, to permanent service at the feet of the Lord, to autonomous and parallel divinity, or to some other final and ultimate state. The character of liberation was one of the major points of contention among the theological schools that developed during this period.”⁸²

The point I am trying to establish here is that the Gita does not simply relegate the world as *jagat* to an illusory realm; many Vaishnava Vedantic schools that follow it hold that the world is profoundly real. I am also highlighting the fact that there are multiple interpretive possibilities for the Gita, not simply that of Shankara. If we understand how deeply Gandhi was influenced by the Vaishnava schools of Vedanta, then we can avoid the philosophical acrobatics that Western scholars such as Fox and Jacobsen go through in representing Naess’s attraction to Gandhi’s teachings on *advaita* and self-realization.

Recognizing that Shankara’s interpretation of the Gita is not the only one opens up the possibility for a deeper understanding of the particular Bhagavata theology expressed in the Gita and further developed by later Vaishnava thinkers. Important to this understanding is appreciation of conceptual terms used in the Gita to characterize the nature of the world.⁸³ Although the Gita recognizes a higher dimension of reality, it teaches that the world of multiple and manifest forms that we perceive with our senses is still very real. Indeed, the Gita identifies the world with an aspect of Krishna himself.⁸⁴ Thus, according to a Vaishnava interpretation of this text, the world is fully divine.

Once we acknowledge that Gandhi was raised in a world of Vaishnava culture, we can begin to make sense of statements such as this one from his commentary on the Gita, without turning to religious sources outside of Hinduism as Fox and others have done: “All embodied life is in reality an incarnation of God.”⁸⁵ Gandhi identifies the goal of self-realization as *moksha*, which he defines as “seeing God face to face.”⁸⁶ He views this realization as being dependent upon one’s ability to identify compassionately with all of life: “To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face[,] one must be able to love the meanest creation as oneself.”⁸⁷ For Gandhi, loving compassion is rooted in the Vedantic vision of nonduality: “The rockbottom foundation of the

technique for achieving the power of non-violence is belief in the essential oneness of all life.”⁸⁸ Such an understanding leads Gandhi to endorse an all-inclusive and this-worldly form of religion: “My religion embraces all life. I want to realize brotherhood or identity not merely with the beings called human, but I want to realize identity with all life, even with such things as crawl upon earth. I want, if I don’t give you a shock, to realize identity with even the crawling things upon earth, because we claim descent from the same God, and that being so, all life in whatever form it appears must be essentially one.”⁸⁹ This position is clearly distinct from Shankara’s negation of the manifest world and suggests a different source for Gandhi’s understanding of the Gita: the Vaishnava schools of Vedanta encountered in his youth.

In an article published after Jacobsen’s, Lance Nelson presents a reading of the Gita in close agreement with Jacobsen. After reviewing what he calls “ecological positives” in the Gita—mostly an “ethics of restraint” coming from ascetic ideals—he remarks, “The apparently ecofriendly images and practices cannot be isolated from the contexts in which they are embedded, especially from the underlying worldviews which give rise to them and condition their significance.”⁹⁰ Nelson identifies the problematic worldview that he believes informs the Gita’s vision: a dualistic perspective that sharply devalues the manifest world. Because of this, he, too, assumes the goal of the Gita to be liberation (*moksha*), defined as “escape *from* the world of nature.”⁹¹ With an interest in understanding how Hindus have “traditionally” read the Gita, Nelson follows the well-worn path that begins with an examination of Shankara’s reading of the text. Nelson concludes that, according to the Gita, the real self has “nothing to do with nature,” which it holds to be an “illusion.”⁹² Therefore, “the physical, including the empirical existence of other beings, does not matter.”⁹³ He concludes his article by agreeing with Jacobsen, insisting that the Gita’s “ideals are in many ways antithetical to ecological ethics as we know it.... If we are tempted to look to Asia for religious visions that give nature greater significance, however, the *Bhagavadgita* may not be the best place to start.”⁹⁴

Jacobsen and Nelson would have us believe, then, that the Gita expresses an ascetic worldview that greatly devalues the world by viewing it ultimately as a worthless illusion. Accordingly, it has little value for those with environmental concerns. There are two problems with this conclusion: First, it does not take into consideration the ethnographic fact that many in India today who would identify themselves as environmentalists claim to be following the teachings of the Gita.

Second, although there are clearly long-standing and influential ascetic traditions within Hinduism, by no means do they represent the majority of the tradition. Although they acknowledge other dimensions of Hinduism, Jacobsen and Nelson continue a long scholarly tradition in the West that tends to reduce the rich variety of Hinduism to Shankara's Advaita Vedanta. By assuming that the Gita is historically a nonsectarian text, they overlook the specific and sophisticated Bhagavata theology expressed in this text,⁹⁵ which informs a perspective that has challenged the very ascetic worldview that devalues the world of nature. Since this Bhagavata theology is precisely the one that informs the worldview of most worshippers of the Yamuna River, understanding it is extremely important.

Historically, the Bhagavad-gita is the product of the Bhagavata cult.⁹⁶ Introducing the philosophy of Pancaratra, an important branch of the Bhagavata tradition, Surendranath Dasgupta writes, "The Pancaratra doctrines are indeed very old and are associated with the *purusa-sukta* of the Rig-veda, which is, as it were, the foundation stone of all future Vaisnava philosophy."⁹⁷ Dasgupta further remarks, "The *bhedabheda* ['difference in nondifference'] interpretation of the *Brahma-sutras* is in all probability earlier than the monistic interpretation introduced by Shankara. The *Bhagavad-gita*, which is regarded as the essence of the Upanishads, the older *Puranas*, and the *Pancaratra*, are more or less on the lines of *bhedabheda*. In fact the origin of this theory may be traced to the *Purusa-sukta*."⁹⁸ Many scholars agree that the *Purusha Sukta* of the Rig Veda, which gives expression to the simultaneity of radical unity and diversity (*bhedabheda*), has played a significant role in the development of Bhagavata theology.⁹⁹ There is, therefore, no better place to begin an introductory understanding of Bhagavata theology than with the *Purusha Sukta* of the Rig Veda.

A thousand heads, a thousand eyes, and a thousand feet has Purusha. He pervaded the Earth on all sides and stretched beyond it by ten fingers. Purusha is this entire universe, all that has been and all that is to be. In the grand cosmic sacrifice that produced the world, Purusha became differentiated: three-quarters of Purusha rose upward to become the unchanging transcendent, while one-quarter remained behind, and from this portion came the sum total of all that we experience with our senses, animate and inanimate. The Purusha hymn of Rig Veda 10.90 is a cosmogonic myth that gives expression to the simultaneous transcendent and immanent quality of divinity. Jan Gonda, a historian of Indian religions, maintains that the "Purusasukta . . . is the

first expression of the idea that creation is the self-limitation of the transcendent Person manifesting himself in the realm of our experience.”¹⁰⁰ Although a majority of divinity is beyond the world of manifest forms, a significant portion of divinity is clearly identified with the world of manifest forms.

This central idea was elaborated further in Upanishadic texts, particularly in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which became part of the *Satapatha Brahmana*, a text of considerable importance for Bhagavata theology.¹⁰¹ The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* asserts that there are two aspects of ultimate reality, or Brahman: one is identified with all forms (*murta*), and the other is identified with the realm of the formless (*amurta*).¹⁰² Brahman as all forms is everything that is manifest and transitory, whereas Brahman as the formless is unmanifest and unchanging. A good way to approach this nondual philosophical proposition is to reflect on the double meaning of the phrase: “Nothing ever remains the same.” The world of concrete things is in constant flux and always changing; things never remain the same. On the other hand, the nothingness that is the source of all things is eternal and unchanging; it ever remains the same. It is important to remember in Vedantic thought, however, that these are not two separate realities, but different modes of the same unified reality.

Vedantic theological traditions frequently recognize a third dimension in the complex unity that is Brahman, for Brahman’s nature is expressed as tripartite in much Vedantic literature. We read in the *Shvetasvatara Upanishad*, for example: “This whole world, which is the changing [*kshara*] and the unchanging [*akshara*], the manifest [*vyakta*] and the unmanifest [*avyakta*] combined, is supported by the Universal Lord [*vishvam isha*].”¹⁰³ This text identifies the three dimensions of the ultimate reality of Brahman as the manifest, the unmanifest, and the supreme lord upon whom it all depends. Although this text paints its theological picture in a specifically Shaivite hue, naming Rudra (a name of Shiva) as the “one God” (*deva eka*) identified with Purusha of the Rig Veda, it gives expression to a common feature of much Vedantic theological thinking current in the centuries just prior to the beginning of the first millennium of the common era.¹⁰⁴

The language and concepts expressed in the earlier Upanishads are continued in that other important Vedantic text, the Bhagavad-gita. Three Sanskrit terms that characterize the nature of reality are introduced and defined in the opening verses of the eighth chapter of the Gita; these not only are indispensable for expressing the ultimate nature of

Krishna in this text but also become important later on for articulating much Yamuna theology.¹⁰⁵ The ever-changing and manifest dimension of reality (*kshara*) is identified with the Sanskrit term *adhibhuta*; the unchanging and unmanifest dimension (*akshara*) is labeled *adhyatma*; and the dimension that is said to be the source of, as well as higher than, the previous two dimensions is identified with Purusha and called *adhidaiva*.¹⁰⁶ The changing and the unchanging are also identified in this chapter with the manifest (*vyakta*) and unmanifest (*avyakta*), respectively. These dimensions of reality are regarded hierarchically. The fifteenth chapter of the Gita explains that there are two dimensions of Purusha in this world: the changing (*kshara*) and the unchanging (*akshara*). The changing is here identified with all beings, and the unchanging with the supreme spirit. This text asserts, however, that there is another dimension of reality higher than both of these. This dimension is identified as the Lord (Ishvara) who pervades and sustains the entire universe, and who is none other than Purusha of the Vedas. This latter and highest dimension of ultimate reality is also called Purushottama, the “Highest Person.”¹⁰⁷ These three dimensions of reality are regarded in a hierarchical fashion, but, importantly, all three are aspects and expressions of divinity, namely Krishna. That is, while it is assumed to be only a portion of a much vaster and unmanifest reality, the manifest world of multiple forms that we perceive with our senses is fully divine. Vasudha Narayanan highlights the fact that “central to the *Bhagavadgita* is the vision of the universe as the body of Krishna.”¹⁰⁸ This is not only an aspect of the Gita that is often missed by many Western scholars but also one that helps us understand the Vedantic teaching that informs Gandhi’s claim that “all embodied life is in reality an incarnation of God.”¹⁰⁹

An interpretation of the Gita that focuses on these three Sanskrit terms and their resulting theological perspective would embrace a positive view of the world.¹¹⁰ This is the position taken by most of the Bhagavata, or Vaishnava, schools of Vedanta that inform many of the theistic and temple traditions of Hindu India, and that certainly inform much of the theology associated with the Yamuna River. The goal of the Gita from this perspective, then, would be to escape the torments of alienated suffering (*samsara*), not the world (*jagat*) itself, which if viewed with proper knowledge is understood to be a manifestation of divinity. Again, the Gita very clearly affirms that the world is real, although many Westerners considering the Gita from a contemporary ecological perspective have missed this positive assertion. Living with a

deluded or distorted understanding of the world leads to suffering, whereas living with a true understanding of the world leads to enjoyment. The world is a product of *maya* according to Vedantic thought. Since Krishna claims it as his own, the important Sanskrit term *maya* is perhaps best translated as “divine creative power,” rather than as “illusion” or “delusive appearance,” as Nelson translates it.¹¹¹ Jacobsen notes that, for Shankara, “the plural world is understood as *maya*, an appearance, created by the lower *brahman* (*saguna brahman*, *ishvara*), which is not ultimately real.”¹¹² This may be so for Shankara, but we have just seen that the Gita states that the highest reality is identified as Ishvara, the Lord who sustains the very real world. Scholars who have critically examined Shankara’s commentary on the Gita and compared it to the commentaries of later Vaishnava theologians, such as Ramanuja, have concluded that Shankara had to stretch his interpretation of the text, since his position is farther from the expressed meaning of the Gita than that of the Vaishnava theologians.¹¹³ This being so, it is perhaps better to approach the Gita with the interpretive aid of these commentaries, rather than relying heavily on that of Shankara, which has been the major tendency of Western scholars. If this were done, a new possible perspective would emerge with regard to the Gita and contemporary ecological concerns. In exploring possible resources within Hinduism for establishing deep interconnections and ecological health, Lina Gupta writes:

The divine energy called the “Brahman” is immanent as well as transcendent. The world, with its infinite variety, is the manifestation of the divine principle. The world, with all its multiplicity and diversity, begins and ends in a cycle within the divine womb and therefore does not have any separate existence outside of the “Brahman.” Being the manifestation of the same principle, all parts of the universe, human or nonhuman, mobile or immobile, organic or inorganic, are animated by the same life force. Being permeated by the same energy and essence, creation reflects kinship among all its facets.... Nature as seen in the Gita is clearly an example of divine expression in its varieties. Nature, being in the womb of God, is a living organism and as such is not to be treated as an “Other.” If the One universal “Brahman” is revealing itself in the multiplicity of this planet, be it a river or a rock, all parts of this Nature have an intrinsic value; as such, all of Nature should be treated with dignity, kindness, and righteousness.¹¹⁴

The Bhagavata view of the nature of the world expressed in the Gita is further articulated in the *Bhagavata Purana*, the other major text of the Bhagavata schools. In the first chapter of the second book of the

Bhagavata Purana, the solid form of the Lord (*sthula rupa*), or the manifest portion of Purusha, is identified with the entire visible world.¹¹⁵ This form of the Lord is described in concrete detail. We are told, for example, that the mountains are the bones of his body, the oceans are his abdominal cavity, the trees are the hairs on his body, and the rivers are his veins and arteries.¹¹⁶ Whereas contemporary Christian eco-theologians, such as Sallie McFague, creatively stretch Christian theology to claim that the world is “metaphorically” the body of God, here such a notion is stated without theological reservation.¹¹⁷ Although the *Bhagavata* traditions maintain that there is much to divinity beyond the manifest world, they nonetheless acknowledge that the world we inhabit is fully divine and must be understood as a manifestation of divinity, in this case Krishna. This identification of the natural world with divinity is pervasive in much Hindu theology and religious practice.¹¹⁸

Thus, knowledge of the *Bhagavata* perspective—which is shared by many of the Hindu theistic traditions—leads one to expect that much religious practice in India would be involved directly in the worship of natural phenomena as embodied forms of divinity.¹¹⁹ This is indeed the case, as even the mildest form of ethnographic research demonstrates. One need only travel about India to observe reverence toward natural forms: the worship of mountains, forests, animals, trees, ponds, rocks, plants, and rivers as natural forms of divinity is common in Hindu religious practice. Considering the Ganges, Diana Eck writes, “For the natural is the religious. Although the river has attracted abundant myth and *mahatmya*, it is the river itself, nothing ‘supernatural’ ascribed to it, that has been so significant for Hindus. The river does not stand for, or point toward, anything greater, beyond itself; it is part of a living sacred geography that Hindus hold in common.”¹²⁰ Betty Heimann maintains that this dimension of Hindu religious culture is informed by a “sacramental natural ontology” and asserts, “In India the veneration of Nature has never been discarded as outdated and primitive. On the contrary, primitivity is here appreciated in its productive ambiguity and inexhaustible potentialities. Nature cult is the fundament of the earliest forms of Indian religions and remains the basis of even the highest and most exalted speculations of Indian philosophy.”¹²¹ Whether or not this characteristic makes Hinduism eco-friendly is another matter, but it is a central and highly visible characteristic that reveals deep investment in the world of nature. Importantly, the worship of natural forms in India most certainly includes rivers.

Water is the very basis of all life. Around 75 percent of Earth's surface is covered by water, although only 3 percent of this is freshwater, with 2 percent frozen in ice. In recognizing that all life has come from water, modern science highlights water's significance; but because it is precious and life-sustaining, water has also evoked a religious response throughout humanity's history. "It seems natural that our ancestors should have regarded water as a living creature with the power to bestow the life force, health and energy," write Janet and Colin Bord.¹²² The historian of religions Mircea Eliade claims that water has long been worshipped as the Universal Mother, since "water symbolizes the primal substance from which all forms come and to which they will return."¹²³ The worship of rivers as natural forms of divinity, usually goddesses, has been a significant feature of religious traditions in many parts of the world. In France, for example, there remains archaeological evidence of a temple for river worship at the source of the Seine River, which was sacred to the goddess Sequana.¹²⁴ The Nigerian river Oshun is worshipped as a life-blessing goddess by the same name not only in Africa but also in the African diaspora religions such as Candomble in Brazil and Santeria in Cuba. "Oshun is the symbol of river waters, without which life on the earth would be impossible. In the same manner, she controls all that makes life worth living, such as love and marriage, children, money, and pleasure."¹²⁵ The Nile was associated with the goddess Isis in ancient Egypt and the river Boyne was worshipped as a goddess by the Celts.¹²⁶ More specifically, rivers throughout the world have tended to be viewed as maternal presences. "The role of rivers as the sustainers of life and fertility is reflected in the myths and beliefs of a multitude of cultures. In many parts of the world rivers are referred to as 'mothers': Narmadai, 'Mother Narmada'; the Volga is Mat Rodnaya, 'Mother of the Land.' The Thai word for river, mae nan, translates literally as 'water mother.'¹²⁷ What, we might ask, happens to the worlds of religious meaning associated with river worship as the rivers of the world become increasingly polluted?

Although river worship is found in many parts of the world, no religious culture has sustained river worship to the extent we find in Hindu India (figure 1). "India honors its rivers more than any other nation, seeing them as the manifest form of divine female powers sent to earth to assist humanity," writes Bill Aitken.¹²⁸ Although aesthetic appreciation is easily found in literature about rivers in the West, rivers are often regarded as something to negotiate, conquer, explore, fish, take recreation on, or exploit. Journeys to rivers in India are more typically



Figure 1. Scene along the banks of the Yamuna in Vrindaban. The man in the foreground sings a song of praise to Yamuna as others bathe in the river or gaze upon it. Photo by David Haberman.

undertaken to honor, worship, or contact the river for spiritual benefits. A poem well known in the region of Braj reads:

Having bowed to the water of Yamuna,
 Drink the water of Yamuna.
 Meditating continually on the water of Yamuna,
 Bathe in the water of Yamuna.¹²⁹

River worship has a long history in India. Archaeological evidence links ancient pilgrimage activity with river worship,¹³⁰ and early religious

texts express a reverent attitude toward rivers. Many Rig Veda hymns celebrate water for its life-blessing qualities. Hymn 10.9, for example, reads:

Waters, you are the ones who bring us the life force.
Help us to find nourishment so that we may look upon
great joy.

Let us share in the most delicious sap that you have,
as if you were loving mothers.

Let us go straight to the house of the one for
whom you waters give us life and give us birth.

For our well-being let the goddesses be an aid to us,
the waters be for us to drink.
Let them cause well-being and health to flow over us.

Mistresses of all the things that are chosen, rulers over
all peoples, the waters are the ones I beg for a cure.¹³¹

Bodies of water in general, and rivers in particular, are conceived of in Vedic hymns as feminine divine entities who are the source and support of abundant life; they are frequently referred to as “mothers of the world.”¹³² Although all rivers in India are praised for these qualities, seven are often identified in Rig Vedic hymns as being worthy of special attention because of their great powers.¹³³

The celebration of rivers expressed in the Vedic period continues in the more sectarian literature of the Puranas, medieval scriptures full of references to river worship. In a summary statement the *Padma Purana* exclaims, “All rivers are holy.”¹³⁴ Consideration of rivers in the Puranas, however, often involves a hierarchical ranking determined by the various sectarian traditions of different regions. Reflecting a northern perspective, the *Skanda Purana*, for example, states, “There are hundreds of rivers. All of them remove sins. All of them are bestowers of merit. Of all the rivers, those that fall into the sea are the most excellent. Of all those rivers[,] Ganga, Yamuna, Narmada and Sarasvati are the most excellent rivers. Among the rivers, O eminent sages, these four are highly meritorious.”¹³⁵ Over time, the list of seven sacred rivers has varied, but the Yamuna has almost always appeared among the seven.¹³⁶

We have seen that, in the *Bhagavata Purana*, a text of central importance for the Bhagavata tradition, the whole world is considered to be the body of God. As a playful youth, Krishna also appears in this text as an enjoyer of his own body, delighting in the beauty of nature.¹³⁷ Three embodied forms of divinity are marked for special attention in the sacred realm of Braj, a land identified with the body of Krishna and depicted as a vibrant world of nature.¹³⁸ Specifically, the *Bhagavata Purana* tells us that Krishna was particularly delighted by the forest (Vrindaban), the mountain (Govardhan), and most important for our concerns, the river (Yamuna).¹³⁹ For many of the surviving Bhagavata traditions, especially those observed in Braj, the Yamuna is considered to be the most sacred of all rivers.¹⁴⁰ According to these schools, the Yamuna has qualities possessed by no other river. It is regarded as a river of delights, viewed by many as the very source of all that is joyful in life. Yet today it is also a river with a great many troubles. To understand more about it, we must venture high in the Himalayan Mountains where its story begins.