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Roundtable on Climate Destabilization and the Study of Religion

Climate Change: Insights from Hinduism

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A LARGER CRISIS THAN ANY THAT typically makes the evening news—a terrorist attack, a relentless war that claims civilian lives as "collateral damage," the lengthening shadow of death cast by a fatal virus—engulfs us all, even those who are sheltered from the cruel afflictions to which a good portion of humankind is still subject, especially in the global South. Over the last few years, as the opening article in this roundtable by Todd LeVasseur so clearly sets out, a consensus has slowly been emerging among members of the scientific community that climate change is presently taking place at a rate which is unprecedented in comparison with the natural climate change cycles that have characterized our earth in the course of the last half a million years; moreover, as successive Assessment Reports of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2007) have affirmed, global warming is, to an overwhelming degree, the consequence of human activity. Scientists and increasingly other commentators—various practitioners of the social sciences, journalists, and policy makers—are now inclined to the view that this

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anthropogenic climate change is of such a magnitude that we might reasonably speak of a new geological epoch, defined by the action of humans, that the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen has termed the Anthropocene (Zalasiewicz et al. 2011).

If we are afflicted by a planetary crisis that threatens all living species, it is all the more striking that it is at best only a decade since the dire warnings about the calamitous consequences of anthropogenic climate change began to be taken seriously, even if there are still holdouts who obdurately refuse to accept the claims of climatologists and scientific researchers. Though the long history of reflections on the impact of human activity upon planet earth might reasonably be dated to the nineteenth century, when writers such as Edward Carpenter, Leo Tolstoy, and Henry David Thoreau began to look askance at the dramatic changes wrought not merely in physical landscapes but in the moral psyche of humans in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, it is only in the 1960s and early 1970s that the first concerted voices of opposition to the unchecked exploitation of natural resources could be heard around the world. Even then, neither "climate change" nor "global warming" were part of the scientific vocabulary, though the geochemist Wallace S. Broecker (1975) warned in a piece, entitled "Climate Change: Are We on the Brink of a Pronounced Global Warming?," that the complacency about the warming effect of carbon dioxide produced by the burning of chemical fuels was not warranted. The NASA scientist James E. Hansen is sometimes credited with having made the term "global warming"—which is less encompassing than "climate change," referring as it does only to the increase in the earth's average surface temperature as a consequence of rising levels of greenhouse gases—acceptable to a wider public with his testimony before Congress. There, he asserted that scientists could "ascribe with a high degree of confidence a cause and effect relationship between the greenhouse effect and the observed warming" (U.S. Senate 1988: 44).

However belated the recognition of climate change in the public sphere, it is even more remarkable that work in much of the academy—and I confine my remarks here to the humanities and the social sciences—has proceeded with barely an acknowledgment of the Anthropocene as an epoch—the era of geological time during which human activity exercises dominant influence over the environment, climate, and ecology of the earth—that might make most scholarly work superfluous. I leave aside for the moment the question, though it is not unimportant, whether practice generally precedes theory, and whether the academy characteristically follows rather than leads public opinion even if scholars persist in believing otherwise. Over the last three to four decades, a good deal of scholarly work, and not only in the United States and Britain, has been informed

by theoretical strands that have been given names such as deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, post-Marxism, feminism, LGBT studies, and postcolonialism. This theoretical ferment is generally supposed to have sensitized scholars to new questions, radically differing perspectives, dissenting views, and even alternative epistemological frameworks. Yet, it is indubitably true that virtually none of the practitioners of such schools of thought have had anything to say about what climate change might mean for their disciplines or frames of thought, or indeed for any kind of scholarly work. One could concede, of course, that environmental historians, cultural anthropologists, or "indigenous studies" scholars, to name only three intellectual constituencies whose work likely brings them into contact with communities that have been palpably impacted by global warming, are perhaps not oblivious to the myriad ways in which climate change may be pushing them to pose different research questions or adopt more nuanced interpretive frameworks, but it would be exceedingly difficult to argue that climate change has moved a jot to the center stage of humanistic inquiry or social science research. Intellectual labor, it can justifiably be argued, has not been even remotely productive in questioning the placid assumption that what happens to the planet is not likely to affect the survival of the human species.

Students of religion must be particularly sensitive to what climate change portends for the future of humankind and all of creation. I argue this proposition before moving, in the rest of this article, to offer some exploratory and tentative thoughts on some insights that might possibly be derived from the study of Hinduism. In a world beset by extraordinary calamities—as this is being written, Iraq, Syria, and Libya are being torn apart, Ebola continues to take a heavy toll of life in several West African nations where substantial number of people have been placed under quarantine, large tracts of land in Afghanistan and Pakistan remain under the sway of militant groups, and so on—it is difficult for most people to turn their attention to something called climate change. But it is not only those who are devastated by war, sexual violence, grave civil unrest, disease, a deadly virus, or a natural calamity such as an earthquake who see themselves as without the luxury to ruminate over the afflictions engendered by climate change. Suffering is in the here and now; the privations that are effects of climate change, such as they are understood, happen—or are likely to happen—elsewhere, at a remote distance, and to others. No doubt some people are aware that melting glaciers and rising temperatures have already wrought havoc, but nevertheless those who issue warnings about the calamitous consequences of climate change are unable to derive much emotional or spiritual purchase from arguments that

invoke the future of our children, grandchildren, and generations to come when they speak solely or predominantly in the language of science.

More so than other practitioners of other disciplines and areas of inquiry, scholars of religion ought to consider the question of climate change their special provenance. In many respects, religious studies scholars are especially equipped to address the social, cultural, and ethical implications of climate change. First, the notion of an afterlife, howsoever it may be interpreted, occupies a critical space in every religion: the religious sensibility is one that insists not only on the imperative of ethical conduct in the present, but also on the persistence of good outcomes of such conduct in the long run. Religion helps us to think of different registers of temporality and it holds up the future as a mode and space of being that is of at least as much critical importance as the present; similarly, the ecological awareness that proponents of climate change seek to elicit in every person rests in part on the idea that proper custodianship of the earth will yield rich dividends for those who are to follow us.

Second, there is another idiom of temporality in which the student of religion, or more particularly of Hinduism, can hope to render understandable an argument about the reality of climate change. Harold Coward reminds us that "it took all of human history up to the early 1800s for the earth's population to reach one billion. It took 130 years to add the second billion, 30 years to add the third, 15 years to add the fourth, and 12 years to add the fifth" (1997: 260). A like argument may be advanced apropos of climate change: the first several decades of the industrial revolution led to greater accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere than the preceding tens of thousands of years, and it is quite likely that the last two decades—which have seen not only increased levels of consumption in most of the major economies, but exponential growth in China and a substantial increase in the middle class in India, Brazil, and elsewhere—have contributed as much to global warming as the preceding century. However, what is equally germane is that a phrase such as "all of human history up to the early 1800s" evokes gargantuan periods of time—a notion that is remote to ordinary human experience but rather more readily available to the practitioners of Hinduism, who have long been habituated to the idea of the Yugas, or the four ages—Satya Yuga, spanning 1,728,000 years; Treta Yuga, lasting 1,296,000 years; Dwapara Yuga, spanning 864,000 years; and Kali Yuga, which is half the duration of the Dwapara Yuga and a quarter of the Satya Yuga—through which human history is said to have passed. The point here is that even if the scientific evidence for climate change is compelling, there is a different sensibility at work in the suggestion that the very idea of climate change also commands us to think of strikingly varying temporalities—both of the

eons of time that have passed and the eons of time well into the future. Hinduism's mytho-geological conception of time immensely facilitates such leaps of imagination.

Third, whatever the inclination of adherents of each religion to prize their own faith as the correct and wholly distinct path to emancipation, the religious-minded generally recognize that every religion affirms the oneness of humankind. Arguments that draw attention to the precariousness of human existence, an existence rendered all the more fragile by widespread, devastating, and often unpredictable changes in nature that can be explicitly traced to human activity, are likewise predicated on the idea that climate change provides yet another affirmation of the oneness of existence. The common maladies that afflict the poor, the marginalized, and the disempowered, mainly in the global South and certain pockets of the affluent North, are after all not *our* maladies, even if activists, social workers, and idealists choose to alleviate their suffering and occasionally even partake in it as the most meaningful gesture of solidarity. Yet what does the recognition of climate change entail if not precisely the notion that there are certain forms of suffering that are indivisible, that the problems of one might well be the problems of all? If religion may be defined as an attempt to teach us how we can share in the suffering of others, can it not be said that awareness of climate change leads to the same outcome?

There are, it should be readily admitted, nearly insuperable difficulties in positing such a framework of ethical thought. Those people in China, India, Africa, and elsewhere who are the first among several generations of their people to reap the benefits of what is called "development" are not likely to be assuaged by the plea that they should forgo, for the sake of a better future for all humanity, the material artifacts and improvements that most people in affluent countries have long taken for granted. Nor is it probable that they will be moved much by the variation of this argument, namely that the real opposition is not between the global South and the global North: climate change is induced not by rich countries as such, but rather by the consumption levels of the rich, whether in the global South or the global North. Still, if one is to oppose the luxury emissions of the rich to the subsistence emissions of the poor, the argument that the poor should be allowed every opportunity to climb into the ranks of the rich, or at least those who enjoy a comfortable and yet not profligate standard of living, seems unimpeachable. By what right can the poor and the upwardly mobile, often struggling against the greatest odds, be asked to settle for a lesser lifestyle than that enjoyed by the more well-to-do? With what moral force can one even ask for such a sacrifice among the poor, especially in view of the highhandedness and insufferable arrogance of elites such as Lawrence Summers, who in his capacity as Chief

Economist at the World Bank thought it perfectly apposite to suggest that sub-Saharan Africa could be better integrated into the world economy if it could be persuaded to part with its natural resources in return for regular shipments from the developed world of desirables such as leaded gasoline, nuclear wastes, asbestos, and other toxins. "I have always thought that underpopulated countries in Africa are vastly underpolluted," wrote Summers, adding that "their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low in pollutants compared to Los Angeles or Mexico" (Summers 1991; Lal 2002: 115–116).

Proponents of the climate change argument—some will call it a hypothesis—recognize that the notion of growth has been the greatest intoxicant of modern society. The very idea of development presumes that nations sit astride different steps on the ladder to growth: some nations are at the lowest rungs (the underdeveloped), some are on the middle rungs and struggling (developing), others are about to take their place under the sun (emerging powers), and yet others have long enjoyed the blessings of affluence (the developed). Certain nations even seem over-developed: thus, one argument that is not infrequently encountered is that the pace of technological change has far outstripped the human capacity to think ethically and honor the categorical imperative. The mantra of growth, however, spares no one: its one non-negotiable principle is the idea that there is always room for growth—not merely that the poor must develop and run the race, or, in the anodyne language of the well-intentioned, reach their full human potential—but also that the rich can become yet richer. Mohandas Gandhi was among those who recognized that in this form, the idea of growth is supremely antithetical to the quality of human life; more alarmingly, if it were carried to its extreme logic, such an idea portended the ransacking of the earth's resources and selective genocide. "God forbid that India," Gandhi told an interlocutor in 1928, "should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 millions took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts" (Gandhi 1928).

Thus, and here we may say that Gandhi was drawing upon idioms of religiosity, he took it upon himself to show that equality is to be sought not principally by uplifting the have-nots, but rather by impressing upon the well-to-do to lower their standard of living and unlearn their privileges. Yet Gandhi was shrewd enough to understand that we cannot dispense with the notion of "growth," though his views did not spare him from being condemned as an antediluvian luddite; and it is from his lifetime study of religious texts and observances that he counseled that such growth be channeled inwards to a more holistic notion of human

development. The entire discipline of economics is highly inimical to any serious consideration of the notion of climate change: at most, economists, the high priests of market modernity, have been able to craft technicist solutions, peddling such market-based approaches, all of which continue to hold up economic growth as the apotheosis of human achievement, as emissions trading and carbon credits. We are living in the reign of *Homo Economicus*: as the economist Stephen Marglin (2008), who knows his profession inside out, has eloquently and even angrily argued, economics obsesses with productive efficiency. In contrast, religion, which at least confers dignity upon notions of voluntary poverty, nonpossession of material goods, abstemiousness, and self-abnegation, can be far more hospitable to the climate change hypothesis.

What wisdom, then, might Hinduism have to contribute to our understanding of climate change? Does its pharmacopeia offer resources that other religious traditions, and especially the Abrahamic faiths, cannot draw upon, or does it only put into sharper relief the considerations that are common to all the religions? Does Hinduism offer wiser conceptions of the stewardship of nature? The Hindu Declaration on Climate Change, "Presented for Consideration to the Convocation of Hindu Spiritual Leaders" at the 2009 Melbourne Parliament of the World's Religions, affirms that "the Hindu tradition understands that man is not separate from nature, that we are linked by spiritual, psychological and physical bonds with the elements around us." Hindus, the Declaration states, "hold a deep reverence for life and an awareness that the great forces of nature—the earth, the water, the fire, the air and space—as well as the various orders of life, including plants and trees, forests and animals, are bound to each other within life's cosmic web." However, "centuries of rapacious exploitation of the planet have caught up with us, and a radical change in our relationship with nature is no longer an option. It is matter of survival." The Declaration calls upon Hindus to "take the lead in Earth-friendly living, personal frugality, lower power consumption, alternative energy, sustainable food production and vegetarianism, as well as in evolving technologies that positively address our shared plight" (Hindu Declaration 2009). It invokes, predictably we might say, the cherished Hindu notion of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, "the whole world is one family."

Skeptics will surely be justified in asking whether Hinduism is exceptional in its recognition of the oneness of all creation. (Some Hindus who affirm that the notion of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* gives their religion its special characteristics are also willing to admit that the same reverence for all life animates other religions that have grown out of the Indian soil, especially Jainism and Buddhism. But these same Hindus often also hold to the view that Jainism and Buddhism should not be viewed as distinct

religions, but rather as kindred faiths; even the Indian constitution, it is worth noting, exhibits a degree of ambivalence on this point.) However conceited the view that Hinduism is uniquely hospitable to the idea of the reverence for all life, Hindus are likely to persist with it; they may also derive comfort from the work of scholars such as Lynn White, Jr., who wrote in no uncertain terms that the Christian tradition has a strong tendency toward anthropocentrism and that in such circumstances, the ecological stewardship of the planet and nature's resources is a daunting task (1967). Many Hindus point to the fact that in no other country of the world does vegetarianism have such a sustained history as it does in India: though the country is far from being predominantly vegetarian, India has long been viewed, and for good reasons, as the mecca for vegetarians. India has, according to figures collected by the United Nations agency, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the lowest per capita meat consumption of any country in the world, less than, to take one measure, 2% of meat consumption in the United States (FAO 2012). But perhaps the more germane consideration is that meat consumption in India has grown significantly in recent years, the demand being fuelled by the growing middle class, rising disposable incomes, and meat's symbolic significance as a marker both of conspicuous consumption and of virility (*New York Daily News* 2013). If climate change seems remote from all such considerations, it is well to remember that meat production is one of the largest sources of greenhouse gases: a 2006 FAO report stated that meat production at that year's level contributed between 14% and 22% of the world's 36 billion CO_2-equivalent greenhouse gases the world over (Fiala 2009). The stress placed on the world's resources by meat production is signaled by the UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development, which has provided a vital perspective on the implications of diet for ecological sustainability and climate change: 13 liters of water are required to grow one tomato and 25 liters to grow one potato, but a staggering 16,000 liters of water are needed to yield one kilogram of beef (IFAD n.d.; Tansey and D'Silva 1999). The story that statistics tell is yet partial: one of the most authoritative of the Hindu *dharmasastras* or law books, *The Manusmriti*, furnishes a more oblique commentary on the elevated conception of the vegetarian in Hindu culture in its declamation that "he who permits (the slaughter of an animal), he who cuts it up, he who kills it, he who buys or sells (meat), he who cooks it, he who serves it up, and he who eats it, (must all be considered as) the slayers (of the animals)" (V.51, quoted in Buhler 1886: 176).

The more common recourse among Hindus to point to their faith's deep underpinnings in an ecological sensibility is to suggest that Hindu texts, practices, and cultural mores are all indicative of the fact, to quote

the German Indologist and grammarian of the Sanskrit language Monier Monier-Williams, that "there is not an object in heaven and earth that a Hindu is not prepared to worship—sun, moon and stars; rocks, stocks, and stones; trees, shrubs and grass; seas, pools and rivers; his own implements of trade; the animals he finds most useful; the noxious reptiles he fears; . . . each and all come in for a share of divine honour or a tribute of more or less adoration" (Rukmani 2000: 116). The assumption, of course, is that we will safeguard and protect that which we worship and honor—in this case, all of creation and even the implements which allow us to earn our daily bread. The aforementioned Hindu Declaration on Climate Change commences with a verse from the "Hymn to the Earth" ("*Bhumi Suktam*"): "Earth, in which the seas, the rivers and many waters lie, from which arise foods and fields of grain, abode to all that breathes and moves, may She confer on us Her finest yield" (*Atharva Veda* XII.1.3). However, in this form, the verse is not merely unexceptional, but may even be construed as an invitation to mine the earth for its resources: how else is she to confer "Her finest yield," the unabashed advocate of open and unrestrained mining will most certainly ask, except by taking the view that nature is inert and waits for the bidding of humans?

There is a reasonably wide consensus among practitioners and scholars of Hinduism that the faith's moorings in a profoundly ecological worldview are not to be doubted. Banwari (1992), the editor of the Hindi daily newspaper *Jansata*, wrote a lovely little book on the place of the forest in the Indian imagination, and gave it as his opinion that every Indian village was characterized by a cluster of five great trees (*panchavati*) that symbolized the five elements: earth, fire, water, air, and ether. Banwari is scarcely the first commentator to have observed that forests loom large in the epic literature of India, but he offers some useful distinctions and anticipates the criticisms of those who are inclined to dismiss narratives of "Indian ecological wisdom" as forms of romanticism, suggesting that the Hindu tradition was simultaneously *pragmatic*, respectful of the natural inheritance, and fully alive to the majesty of nature. Some portion of the forest—characterized as *shrivan*, "forest of wealth"—was recognized as serving the needs of villagers and forest dwellers, though this was not to be construed as a license for unchecked exploitation. The *tapovan*, the "forest of the sages," furnished a retreat for penance, meditation, and reflection; *mahavan*, the great or universal forest, was something akin to a forest reserve, in which all species of life and not merely humans could expect to find shelter. As one advocate of "Vedic ecology" has eloquently and suggestively written, "according to [Indian] tradition, it was not trees that should be in the village, but the village that should be among the trees" (Prime 2002: 25). If trees generally tower over humans, perhaps they do so for a reason: the

human species, we should endeavor to remember, has been around for a much shorter span of time than trees.

The Bishnoi of Rajasthan are only one of many communities which have over the centuries shown exemplary stewardship of natural resources and practiced holistic science: their villages are oases in the desert where trees abound and deer roam around with abandon (Fisher 1997; Lal 2005). Much has been written on "sacred groves" in India from antiquity and, more generally, on the widespread reverence for trees celebrated in Hindu texts and practices: according to two scholars who have long worked on this matter, colonial "forest management"—and what else should one expect of "management," the keyword in the deadening of all that is true, beautiful, and good—destroyed the network of groves that colonial officials themselves admitted covered the subcontinent (Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli 2000: 291; Kent 2010). Reams and reams have similarly been written on the personification of rivers as goddesses in India,[1] the prolific tendency toward recycling present in everyday life, and the extremely expansive notion of the sacred—critically, a conception of the sacred productive of judicious ecological tenets—in Hinduism which encompasses the cow, the *tulsi* (basil) plant and *neem* (Indian lilac) tree, and the tens of thousands of places where the gods dropped ambrosia, or where Rama and Sita stopped to bathe during their long sojourn in the forest, or where the god Vishnu performed his *lila* (cosmic play).

Against what some would term this idealistic sketch of Hinduism's intertwining with ecology, one can just easily as stack up equally varied and numerous instances of the unchecked abuse of natural resources in India, and unfortunately almost nowhere as much as in Hinduism's holy sites. The mountains are conceived as the abodes of the gods, but at ten thousand feet or even higher heaps of trash, at notable pilgrimage centers such as Gangotri, Yamunotri, Badrinath, and Kedarnath, have scarred the vistas presented by the majestic Himalayas. If the personification of rivers as goddesses was at all intended to secure their purity and longevity, then such an ingenious form of environmental conservatism has proven to be, at least under conditions of industrial modernity, a dramatic failure. Not only India's rivers, but nearly all of its water bodies—ponds, lakes, seashore, temple tanks—are severely contaminated. So sacred is the

[1]The discussions in Feldhaus (1995) and Haberman (2006) are illuminating on this point. For an approach that is less scholarly but finely attuned to popular sensitivities, see Singh (2005). It is common, of course, to refer to the Ganga as "Ma" or mother. The sadhu in a recent documentary film on *Ganga Ma*: *A Pilgrimage to the Source* is heard saying, "Ganga is a Goddess to us as well as a Mother to us." He speaks, we might say, for millions and not only for himself. The film, directed by Pepe Ozan and Melitta Tchaicovsky, is available on www.artnetwork.com.

Ganga that many Hindus keep a vial of Ganga *jal* (water) at home, to be administered to the sick and the dying. The elaborate religious mythology that has been woven around the Ganga is beyond comparison anywhere in the world; and yet the Ganga, which serves some five hundred million people, is so polluted that at some places, it could be mistaken for a small stream of blackened water. A recent article points out that two thousand and nine hundred million liters of sewage are pumped into it daily, but the sewage treatment plants have an existing capacity of only one thousand and one hundred million liters (*Hindustan Times* 2012). The authoritative 2013 report from the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment paints a grim picture of the thirty-year effort to clean up the river, pointing out that in "all the stretches [of the river], the pollution is getting worse"; even in its upper reaches, the Ganga is showing increased fecal coliform levels (Narain 2014: 7). Nearly the same story can be told about the Yamuna, "celebrated in India as an aquatic form of divinity for thousands of years" (Haberman 2006: 1). David Haberman, in his insightful study of this river, avers that although "rivers have been worshipped as sacred entities for millennia worldwide, river worship is a more prominent feature of Indian culture than of any other culture in the world today" (2006: 1). It is on the banks of the river, in Mathura and Vrindaban, that the god Krishna frolicked on the green, amused himself with the village women, and created an enchanting world; and yet it is here that it resembles, says Haberman, "a river of death," contaminated by pesticides, carcinogenic chemicals, industrial pollutants, human waste, and heavy metals—so fulfilling perhaps the prophecy possibly implied by its name, which may be derived from Yama, the Lord of Death (2006: 75). This is the same river, in Hindu mythology, where Krishna vanquished the demon Kaliya. Little did Krishna's cowherd friends know that Kaliya, the serpent demon, had poisoned the river; when they drank from it, they fell to the ground unconscious. The epic struggle between Krishna and Kaliya lasted for two years before Krishna prevailed and so rid the river of its source of contamination. Haberman is surely not the only one who has wondered whether the Yamuna, having been poisoned again, might not need deliverance from something other than a government agency to bring it back to life.

The ecological inheritance of Hinduism is, thus, laden with ambivalence. Climate change may perhaps bode greater ill for Hindus than for adherents of other faiths for none other than the reason that so many of Hinduism's principal pilgrimage sites are associated with rivers, mountains, or other manifestations of nature. One of the more arduous annual pilgrimages during the long Indian summer is to the Amarnath cave in Kashmir at an altitude of 12,756 feet, where an ice stalagmite forms inside the cave and has for centuries been worshipped as a Shiva *lingam*.

In recent years, however, the lingam has been melting and has required artificial cooling. Pilgrims who undertook the long trek to the cave in 2006 found to their shock that a man-made ice stupa was being passed off as the Shiva lingam; in the words of one pilgrim, as captured by a reporter for the *Times of India*, "We are deeply hurt to see the man-made lingam instead of the natural one regarded by the faithful as divine. I understand that due to climatic changes Baba Bhole Shankar [the god Shiva] didn't give darshan [blessings, literally 'gaze'] this year. But not telling the truth and constructing a lingam in its stead is a big mistake" (Rana and Pandit 2006). However, it will not suffice to suggest that modernity has imposed burdens that Indians, many of whom until recently knew nothing but the ambiance of the village, are ill-equipped to address. True, the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has contributed to glacier melt, and industrial pollutants and chemicals have ruined rivers and lakes throughout the country; nevertheless, little thought has been given to the place of religious rites—the immersion of the images of Durga and Ganesh, during Durga Puja and the Ganapati Festival, respectively, into rivers, ponds, and lakes—in the contamination of the country's diverse water bodies. Religious reverence for a river scarcely provides any assurance that it will even help mitigate the effects of climate change: as one study of ecological change near the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier amply suggests, pilgrims who were confronted with facts about the diminishing size of the glacier and the pollution even at the sacred point of the Ganga's origin nevertheless insisted that these external manifestations of contamination only point to the fact that the real source of pollution is within humans themselves (Drew 2012).

The enormity of what is implied by climate change is not likely to be understood unless we accept bold interpretive moves and radical ethical frameworks that take us well beyond the facts that the science of climate change has laid bare. In closing these reflections on the insights that Hinduism perhaps furnishes to help us think about climate change, I turn briefly to an unusual exchange—precipitated by an earthquake that devastated parts of the northern Indian state of Bihar in 1934—which took place between Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi. It has been common to think of Tagore, the greatest name in Indian literature in the twentieth century, and a figure who in his native Bengal receives veneration *sans pareil* as more of a humanist rather than as a spokesperson for Hinduism. Though Tagore remained a relentless critic of obscurantist traditions, he would have been just as much at unease with the middle-class Hinduism of the modern variety, associated very often with Hindu nationalism and other forms of religious self-aggrandizement. At the same time, it seems to be wholly injudicious to dismiss Tagore's profound investment in both the philosophical

strands of Hinduism, as represented by the Upanishads, and more folk expressions of a faith that he routinely encountered in the Bengal countryside. Gandhi's Hinduism was even more *sui generis*: it is possible to think of him both as the greatest exponent and representative of Hinduism in the twentieth century and as someone whose idea of Hinduism upheld only the idea that nothing in a religion is acceptable that is also not consistent both with the demands of reason and one's own conscience. One could thus be a Hindu and not believe in God at all; one could be a Hindu and accept an atheist as a fellow traveler in the pursuit of Truth (Lal 2013).

Though Gandhi and Tagore were intimate friends and held each other in the highest regard, their differences were seldom as sharply voiced as in 1934 when an 8.1 magnitude earthquake destroyed entire towns and villages in northern Bihar and Nepal and occasioned from Gandhi the following remark at a public gathering on January 24th in Tuticorin, a port city in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu: "I want you to be superstitious enough to believe with me that the earthquake is a divine chastisement for the great sin we have committed and are committing against those whom we describe as untouchables, *Panchamas* [the fifth caste], and whom I describe as Harijans [children of God]" (Gandhi 1934). While Tagore was entirely in agreement with Gandhi that untouchability could not be considered as anything but an unmitigated evil, he was alarmed that Gandhi, whose following was without equal in India, had encouraged among his countrymen "the element of unreason." He thought Gandhi's words particularly "unfortunate, because this kind of unscientific view of things is too readily accepted by a large section of our countrymen. I keenly feel the iniquity of it when I am compelled to utter a truism in asserting that physical catastrophes have their inevitable and exclusive origin in certain combinations of physical facts." In a characteristically spirited rejoinder, published in his journal *Harijan*, Gandhi admitted that he was ignorant "of the working of the laws of Nature." But just as he could not help believing in God even though he could offer no conclusive proof of God's existence to the skeptics, "in like manner" he could "not prove the connection of the sin of untouchability with the Bihar visitation" even though he felt this connection "instinctively." Gandhi affirmed that "visitations like droughts, floods, earthquakes and the like, though they seem to have only physical origins, are, for me, somehow connected with man's morals" (Bhattacharya 1997: 158–161).

Tagore is invariably viewed, at least by the educated and the scientifically inclined, as having prevailed in this debate; indeed, to Gandhi's critics, his statement on the earthquake stands forth as unrivalled testimony to his frequent lapses into irrationality and his adherence to the very blind faith for which he admonished others. We need not here be

detained by the intricacies of the debate, nor do I take it as my brief to mount a defense of one position or another; but, of course, it remains to suggest how the debate, or more precisely the views articulated by Gandhi, might be germane to an understanding of Hinduism's insights into climate change. Tagore recognized at least that Gandhi had an uncanny ability to speak in the language of the Indian countryside: one suspects that the farmers in Rajasthan who had long experienced drought but were content to explain their predicament with the aphorism, "no *dharma*, therefore no rain," would have had no difficulty in comprehending Gandhi's position (Sanford 2012: 63). But there are other germane considerations: I have elsewhere written at considerable length about Gandhi's lasting impact on Indian environmental movements and his profoundly ecological sensibility (Lal 2000). He may not have known the extent of the Hindu tradition's philosophical probing of man's relationship to nature, but he was ecological in his lifestyle, abstemious in his habits, caring toward animals and the environment around him, and, though this is not understood by those whose own view of ecology is extremely circumscribed, hospitable to those who had been nurtured in other traditions. His own vegetarianism, for example, did not permit him to insist that guests at his ashram who were accustomed to meat should have to follow a vegetarian diet (Lal 2000: 205).

Having said this, we are still moved to ask how Gandhi might have thought of climate change, or whether he had any premonition of it at all. His notion of "trusteeship," for example, has been critiqued even ridiculed by those of his opponents who were certain that Gandhi, with his abhorrence for violence, had no appetite for class warfare, and that he therefore was prepared to settle for a society where the wealthy, rather than being forcibly stripped of their wealth, would presumably hold it in trust for the less fortunate. On this view, Gandhi throughout remained sympathetic to bourgeois society. But, to adopt a contrary position, it is also possible to argue that Gandhi's conception of "trusteeship" was ecological in the widest sense of the term: each one of us is called upon to hold the earth's resources in trust for future generations, and this in turn means that we are obliged to respect the laws of nature, observe limits, lower our consumption levels, and so on. "Nature has enough for everyone's need," Gandhi is famously reported as having said, "but not for every one's greed."[2]

[2]This quote is encountered everywhere, but I have not been able to identify an exact source. Occasionally "nature," and less frequently "man," is substituted for "the world."

Gandhi's lifetime study of Hinduism had convinced him that the religion's most pronounced shortcoming was its inability to come up with any theory of collective responsibility. Every person is enjoined to follow his or her *dharma*, which is not merely duty but the law of one's own nature. A snake has its dharma, which may be nothing other than to hiss; a dog's dharma is to bark; and similarly, each of the castes has its dharma. Hinduism, which is a highly individualistic faith, also forcibly impresses upon each individual the idea that he or she bears the consequences of his or her action, but the impact of these consequences on others is of comparatively little consequence as the impact on oneself. Such an outlook, Gandhi felt, was not remotely conducive toward fostering notions of collective responsibility, and it is precisely his attempt at the articulation of what in Hindu society would have been an altogether novel account of dharma that led him to espouse the view that the collective "sins" of Hindu society, in treating a large segment of its own people as utter outcastes, had some relationship to the outcome that became known as the Bihar Earthquake. Climate change is not, of course, another name for "divine retribution"; but nor should this occlude the fundamental recognition, which informs both frameworks of thought, that, to revisit Gandhi's language, "visitations like droughts, floods, earthquakes and the like, though they seem to have only physical origins, are . . . somehow connected with man's morals." If we are bold enough to engage in creative hermeneutic exercises, it may yet be possible to see that Hinduism's ecological and spiritual inheritance, at least as Gandhi understood it, is not devoid of some resources for grappling with the critical problem of climate change.

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