Response: The Circle Without a Center: Rethinking Religious Authority in India

Richard S. Cohen

This response offers a context within which to expand one's reading of the previous four articles. Those four articles are representative works in the study of religion as an instrument of social hegemony. Taken from the lexicon of Marxist sociology, the term *hegemony* highlights the importance of *consent* in the constitution of hierarchical societies. Hegemony marks the differential between the coercive power of an institutional elite and the active acceptance of that elite's authority, wisdom, values, and goals by those who are outside it. This term has received its most nuanced explication in the writings of Ernesto Laclau, who offers a neat four-part schema for the structure and inner working of a hegemonic articulation. I use Laclau's schema to illuminate the matter of hegemony in conjunction with the subject matters of Orr, Kaimal, Sanford, and Dempsey's individual articles.

Each of the four preceding articles takes a swatch from the fabric of South Asian religious life and inspects the orthodoxies from which it is woven. Or, to use a more appropriate metaphor given that these articles are less textual than cartographic, each maps the topography of hegemonic interests (western and Indian) onto the terrain of South Asian lives. These articles teach us about *yoginis*, *yakṣas*, *yakṣīs*, goddesses, and saints: superhuman beings usually relegated to the margins in scholarship on South Asia. Each asks: what do we make of that marginalization if the circle has no center?

Richard S. Cohen is an assistant professor in the Department of Literature at the University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA, 92093-0410.

This present response, by contrast, is intended to situate the four articles within a broader intellectual landscape. I do so along my own geometric course, this way and that. My response begins with a discussion of neurotheology, a curious field of scholarship that reduces "religious" phenomena to physical terms only then to cancel out that reduction and reclaim the biological body as a "spiritual" entity. Neurotheology is a striking new example of the representation of religion as a universal phenomenon whose truth is correlate to its universality. The academic study of religion is devoted, of course, to the identification and exploration of such constructions. Although neurotheology provides one example, a wealth of other instances come out of Indology. Indeed, *yoginis*, *yakṣas*, *yakṣīs*, goddesses, and saints are particularly interesting because they are doubly inscribed: hegemonic orthodoxies (Brāhmaṇic, Christian, and Jain) relegate them to the margin of social life. Scholars find them at that edge and then describe them in that place as marginal to India's religions. In using *hegemony*, I will be closely following the lead of Ernesto Laclau, who has proposed that it "defines the very terrain in which a political relation is actually constituted" (Laclau 2000: 44). This tips my hand: relationships between humans and gods, as well as relationships among humans as mediated by gods, are constitutively political; scholarly representations of those relationships are political as well. Thus my response moves from a discussion of neurotheology, to a discussion of broad trends in the study of religion, to an explication of how the study of Indian divinities fits into those trends, to a semiformal exploration of the term *hegemony* as it applies to the four articles.

INTRODUCTION: YOUR BRAIN ON GOD

On 19 August 2001, the day I started writing this response, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (WGWGA) was number 220 in Amazon.com's sales rankings. If a book could merit success based upon its title alone, this might be the one. Robing religion in the raiment of science, this title enfolds the past and future, heaven and earth, faith and doubt within the workings of a human brain. It thus begins a forthright fable to ease the modern heart: being religious is no different than using language or reaching orgasm—human beings are hardwired for it. Indeed, this book presents our neurons as cosmic conduits: "the deepest origins of religion are based in mystical experience, and . . . religions persist because the wiring of the human brain continues to provide believers with a range of unitary experiences that are often interpreted as assurances that God exists" (Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause: 129). To be sure, this statement's presuppositions, *pro* Schleiermacher,

and its conclusions, *contra* Nietzsche, are ripe for criticism. I will leave that until later. First let us consider its explanations for the neurological mechanisms of "mystical experience."

To paraphrase the book's own lay explanation: At the rear of the brain (the posterior parietal lobe) is the *orientation association area* (OAA), which is responsible for fixing how individuals position themselves in physical space. This OAA is the reason that we do not fall up the stairs or try to walk on walls as a matter of daily habit. In order to be oriented in space a person must first sense where she ends and the world begins; the spatial self must have an internal integrity as a self. "In simple terms, it must draw a sharp distinction between the individual and everything else, to sort out the you from the infinite not-you that makes up the rest of the universe" (5). Thus the OAA has two parts, one in each hemisphere of the brain: the left keeps track of the margins of the body, whereas the right spatializes the three-dimensional matrix within which that body moves.

Under certain extreme cognitive conditions, however, the OAA's function breaks down. The distinction between the you and not-you is suspended, leading to a so-called *unio mystica*. Of course, subjective descriptions of mystical union enthrall with fantasies of spirit. Neurology offers an objective description as well. Certain types of stimulation (such as ecstatic dancing and enstatic mentation) quiet the chattering of the everyday mind, but inspire other autonomic responses whose gnostic intensity can threaten psychic equilibrium. In order to prevent that over-load, the hippocampus restricts the flow of neural information between parts of the brain. This blockage of neural input is called *deafferentation*. Strangely, the deeper one's state of concentrated quiescence the higher one's level of physical brain activity. To get to the heart of the matter now, when the brain becomes simultaneously hyperconcentrated and hypercharged, the OAA becomes fully deafferented; the hippocampus cuts off its source of information, cold turkey. WGWGA explains what happens next: the right orientation area, "lack[ing] the information it needs to create the spatial context in which the self can be oriented . . . generate[s] a subjective sense of absolute spacelessness. . . . Meanwhile, the left orientation area . . . would not be able to find the boundaries of the body. The mind's perception of self now becomes limitless; in fact, there is no longer any sense of self at all" (119).

To extrapolate from WGWGA's description: human beings who claim to have an infinite experience of the infinite, or an infinite experience of nothing, or a non-experience of the infinite, or a non-experience of nothing, all have the same neurological condition. They are so disori-ented that their brains no longer limit spatial orientation; they are so incognizant of personal limits that their brains no longer limit personality.

Such people experience themselves as nothing and everything, nowhere and everywhere. The science is fascinating; what does it have to do with religion?

For the scholar of religion, *Why God Won't Go Away*'s greatest significance is not the threat of its title but is secreted, rather, in the copula of its subtitle: *Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. This book's claim is not limited to the quantitative assertion that a reasonable correlation can be made between subjective experiences of divine union and objective, measurable changes in brain activity. It does not bring brain science to bear upon the biology of *subjective union* but rather the biology of *belief*. In short, the authors have written their book within these simple parameters: 1) belief is the essence of religion; 2) religious belief takes god as its proper object; 3) *unio mystica* provides a valid experiential basis for belief in god; and 4) this experience is not a random product of psychosis but the result of explicable and predictable biological processes. They expect that, taken together, these four points prove the kinship of all religions. And further they expect that once this kinship is acknowledged to be a somatic truth, institutional religions will "steer the heart and the mind in the right direction" and "provide the world with its last, best hope for a happier future" by unifying into an undifferentiated "interspirituality" (165, 167, 166). It is the naivete of this agenda, especially its presupposition—subjective experiences of a fully deafferented brain are objectively religious—that is grist for the *JAAR* reader's mill.

To take one example. WGWGA cites the thirteenth-century Angela of Foligno as sensing "the closeness of God" when she describes her *unio mystica*: "I possessed God so fully that I was no longer in my previous customary state but was led to find a peace in which I was united with God and was content with everything" (7). The authors characterize experiences of this sort as "intensely religious moments," the stuff of which religion properly is made. But a historian of Christianity who has not thus prejudged the scope of valid religiosity might cite other deeply personal interactions with god in Angela's life, during which she also finds peace. Are all such states religious? And would it be the cognitive union that marks them as religious? Or the presence of god? Or the affective emotion? For Angela also lays claim to god's closeness when her mother, husband, and children die in swift succession: "I asked God to extricate me from them, and received a great consolation from their deaths, even though I mourned them a little bit" (Société des Bollandistes: 4 January, p. 189).[1] If Angela "finds peace" and is "content with everything,"

---

[1] My thanks to Nancy Caciola for calling this passage to my attention and translating it from Latin. Caciola (2003) is exemplary of an atheological approach to writing the history of religion.

almost, after her family members' deaths, then was not her prayer to release her from the burden of her family also an intensely religious moment? Within the logic of medieval Catholicism it was—indeed, Angela's hagiographer presents this statement as an example of her piety—as was the time Angela fantasized at length about humiliating herself by parading naked through public squares, draped with rotting meats and fishes, to make a display of her hypocrisy and false sanctity (191). There are several Angelas here. Taken together, or taken apart, how do they justify WGWGA's statement: "the transforming power of these unitary states, is what makes mysticism our most practical and effective hope for improving human behavior" (168)?

For WGWGA's authors, religiosity is a "reflection not only of neurological unity, but of a deeper absolute reality" (168). In this view Angela united with god is more truly religious—and thus, a better human being—than the Angela naked in the public square, or Angela asking god to extricate her from the burdens of kinship. Such an *a priori* conceptualization of religion is not useful for the historian who would analyze Angela in her own moment, or to the comparativist interested in the subtle nuances of unitive subjectivity across times and cultures. This does not faze the authors of WGWGA. They are biologists working outside their specialization. But we professional scholars of religion can readily see how their discourse is informed by defunct stereotypes, as when they distinguish a personalized god, who "can be a mere idol carved in our own image," from a transcendent god, found in "the state of absolute unity" (162–163). For us, it is clear that they take liberal Protestant theology as the normative ground from which to affix a transcendent meaning to cerebral processes intrinsic to the biology of Homo sapiens. They do not seem to be aware that this hegemonic articulation is historically embedded. It is this lack of awareness that is so instructive when one thinks about the *yoginis*, *yakṣas*, *yakṣīs*, goddesses, and saints of India.

NOT EVERYBODY'S DOIN' THAT DURKHEIMEAN RAG

There are certain phrases that a scholar returns to, time and again, throughout his career. For me these words from Peter Brown form one such phrase: "The supernatural becomes the depository of the objectified values of the group" (318). Of course, in terms of theology there is nothing particularly new here. Early in the history of western thought Xenophanes also observed that "if horses or oxen or lions had hands or could draw . . . horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses, and the oxen as similar to oxen" (Lesher: 25). Aristotle, Augustine, and Feuerbach, among others, concurred. As did the authors of WGWGA,

who characterize "all personifications of God [as] symbolic attempts to grasp the ungraspable" (161). Indeed, I would imagine that many individuals can remember a moment, early in their own lives, when the intuition arose of its own accord: gods are made in the human image.

But Xenophanes was no atheist. For Xenophanes, as for the authors of WGWGA, this is less a statement about horses, oxen, or humans, than one about the unrepresentability of true divinity. And this is why the academic study of religion received its most solid foundation when Émile Durkheim turned the focus of this divine anthropomorphism away from the gods and toward the social groups who "draw" those gods. It is this sociological twist that I find so well stated in Brown's formulation. As historians and critics, we look to gods, not as imperfect signs of a Reality that transcends symbolization but as temporally and spatially circumscribed objectifications of human desires. Yet, in this capacity, each god is not a simple reflection of its radically particular social or cultural moment. Gods are suspended, in tension, between the universal and the multiple particulars out of which that universal is constructed: the act of attending to the "god" in gods guarantees this. Or as Ernesto Laclau writes, "the very notion of particularity presupposes that of totality" (2000: 58). Thus Durkheim's sociological turn does not completely solve the problem of gods. For we still might ask how totalities are constituted as such, especially in relation to corresponding particulars. A more pointed form of the same question would read: what kinds of problems arise when a universal, like the interspirituality advocated by WGWGA, is presented as encompassing all *other* particularities within its circle of meaning?

Here enters the concept of *hegemony*. In this response's introduction I cited Laclau, who characterizes hegemony as "more than a useful category" (44). For Laclau this term identifies a pattern of human relationships marked by an uneven distribution of power in the representation of values, truths, and ideals. Hegemonic relations are those in which universals whose content is the terrain for ideological antagonisms (e.g., arguments over specific definitions of "god" or "religion") have their significance fixed, with acceptance of that resolution then providing a criterion for structuring a social order. So, if, for Durkheim, participation in rituals "really strengthen[s] the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member, since the god is only a figurative expression of the society" (226), for Laclau this statement only goes half way, because societies are not constituted as stable totalities. Gods cannot be simply "the clan itself, personified" (Durkheim: 206). More dynamically, gods provide a means by which one segment of a community arrogates to itself a dominant position: "the hegemony of a *particular* social sector depends

for its success on presenting its own aims as those realizing the *universal* aims of the community" (Laclau 2000: 50). A hegemonic regime is found where acceptance of a particular reality is the condition for participation within a social order and, therefore, where the social order itself is organized around particular representations that are cloaked as universal indices of Reality itself.

Although god and gods are hegemonic instruments par excellence, within the study of religion metaphors of location provide the most common means for representing this subordination of particulars to a universal. Hegemony works within the space discursively structured by the delineation of a periphery by reference to a center. This spatialization of divinity receives its classic expression in Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, which distinguishes "geometrical space" from "sacred space" (22, 20). The former "can be cut and delimited in any direction . . . [with] no qualitative differentiation," whereas the latter "is not homogenous," because "some parts . . . are qualitatively different from others." The former is objective; the latter subjective. The former gives "no orientation . . . by virtue of its inherent structure"; the latter, by contrast, "allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation." For Eliade, *homo religiosus* is defined, in the first place, by his fixation upon this center. Although recent metaworks in the field have sought to redirect our attention from "sacred space" to more nuanced, multimodal terminologies, such as "territory" (Gill) or "world" (Paden), the orientation remains the same: the hierarchy of center and periphery provides a basic pattern for the hierarchy between universal and particular. The universal is valued as that which is *central* to an object of analysis; it is at the *heart* or *core*; it is the *deepest* or the most *profound* dimension. In phallocentric language, the universal is *seminal*, as when Hare spoke of "the idea of God" as "beyond all question or comparison, the one great seminal principle." In psychological terms, one finds the universal through piercing the limns and limits of the *self*. In national terms, the *native* is the person who belongs right where he is. Among sources the *insider* is the one who knows the real truth.

Indeed, we can broaden this metaphor. For if universality inhabits that center in which particulars converge, then it also can be assimilated to the periphery conceived as unbounded presence. This is best captured in the image of a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere: the ideal configuration of space—universal, central—as constructed in, and constructive of, a positively valued discourse on religion. This circle is a topographic utopia, exploding center and periphery, locality and translocality, centripetal force and centrifugal force. This circle transfigures Eliade's "geometrical space" into his "sacred space." It

accords nicely with WGWGA's thesis that personal experiences of "the ultimate transcendent state, Absolute Unitary Being, in which no sense of self is possible, and no specific images of God or even of reality can exist" arise from the inactivity/hyperactivity of the brain's *spatial orientation* association area (122). Perfectly disoriented, these mystics see the source of orientation everywhere they look.

It is too easy to aestheticize this stable but fluid geometry when the task is to disclose what is at stake in its postulates and proof. Thus, now, to recall Durkheim's flip of divine anthropomorphism: constellations of the universal flash with sociological and political lights. Or to invert a wonderful dictum articulated by Sam Gill: discourse on territory shapes a sociology of knowledge (311). Let us shift attention from the territory (the circle; the center; the god) to the sociology. This response's title, "The Circle without a Center," registers a desire to think about religion apart from the theological control of the center/periphery pattern at the same time that it signals that endeavor's geometric impossibility. For the particular remains off the edge until it is brought into dialectic with a central universal. To return to an earlier statement from Laclau, the particular remains unknown as such until spatialized within a totality. It may not be possible to think of a circle without a center, but what is the cost of not even trying?

Let me clarify what is at stake in this latter question by turning one final time to WGWGA. The following passage can be read as expressing, constructing, a hegemonic terrain that can be mapped onto the circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. I have italicized the spatial metaphors. "All religions *arise from* and are maintained by transcendent experiences, therefore, they all *lead* us, by different *paths*, *toward* the same *goal* of wholeness and unity, *in* which the specific claims of individual faiths *converge into* an absolute, undifferentiated whole" (166). The centripetal force is almost palpable. This passage uses denatured metaphors to represent the convergence of diverse particulars into a shared universal as an almost inevitable, natural telos. Indeed, this is a key passage: it encapsulates the totality of this book, from the basic presuppositions its authors brought to their writing up to the highest ambitions they have for its reception. But neither the presuppositions nor the ambitions, nor the centripetal force that links them, are apolitical. As a student of Durkheim do not read this as a statement about an absolute, undifferentiated whole. To the contrary read it as a statement about absolute, undifferentiated people. Durkheim observes, "the god of the clan . . . [is] nothing but the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable" (206). By eschewing all forms, all personifications, all particularities vis-à-vis the

representation of god, these authors uncover their bent toward fashioning a formless and impersonal society, devoid of disruptive human particulars. This passage from WGWGA is a manifesto for a spiritual totalitarianism that would naturalize its own definition of humanity as a universal definition, as well as its own model for human society as a universal model. However, to the extent that WGWGA's ideal of divinity appears bland and benign, even beneficent, we must shift attention from Durkheim to Laclau, from religious universals as sociological phenomena to religious universals as instruments of social hegemony.

MAY THE HEGEMONIC CIRCLE BE BROKEN

As an example of neurotheology WGWGA represents a potentially important new source of theological reflection. The book's intervention into the space of religious origins, especially its attempt to ground theology in the brain's biological evolution, demands a strong response. This work neatly crystallizes a third millennium *Zeitgeist*, by positioning the brain as a middle term, which enables a transition from "religion" (tainted by institutional histories and limited by symbolic imagination) to "spirituality" (the pure peak of human existence). However, when considered in terms of hegemony, WGWGA makes a straw man of itself. That is to say, although WGWGA can be critiqued, its critique is too simplistic, for the social agenda implicit in its universalized particular—i.e., fully deafferented experience is *prima facie* religious or mystical—is profligately facile. Easily hierarchizing the deafferented brain's experience and culturally conditioned representations of that experience, this book makes an easy case for utopia; rapt in its own imperial rhetoric, its argument is gravely disconnected from the details of how hegemonic orthodoxies structure people's lives. Straw men are great for knocking down, but only as practice for a real battle.

The articles by Leslie C. Orr, Padma Kaimal, A. Whitney Sanford, Corrine Dempsey do not confront straw men. The hard terrain of their reconnaissance is the lived practice of South Asian people. Each of these articles is concerned, at some level, with the matter of hegemony, for they explore how orthodoxies establish themselves through the stipulation and marginalization of unorthodoxies. In this way they offer a fresh perspective on religion in South Asia, through eyes that look this way and that: from the sanctity of holy writ to temple pathways and platforms daubed in pig blood. It should be clear, these articles do not propose that *yakṣas*, *yakṣīs*, and brightly smiling *yoginis* offer unorthodox eyes through which to view South Asian religions. The y-beings studied here are not, properly speaking, unorthodox at all. For, if anything, a close engagement

with y-beings calls into question categories like *orthodox* and *unorthodox*, except as first-order descriptors of insider norms. A scholar who treats *yakṣīs* and *yoginis* as unorthodox has allowed an indigenous elite's ideological universals to control what she, as a scholar, sees in India and how he, as a scholar, represents his perceptions. Insofar as we take our orientation from the circle's center, we become tacit apologists for, or unwitting accomplices in, religionists' construction of discursive space and, by extension, their hegemonic designs upon social space. The earlier critique of WGWGA describes the stakes of not even trying to imagine a circle without a center. Knowing the stakes, these four articles make that attempt.

The purpose of this current response is to articulate a context within which to expand a reading of the four preceding articles. Although all four also make specific contributions to Indology, especially to the study of *yakṣīs*, *yoginis*, and other "lesser" divinities, I have chosen to focus upon their virtues as representative works in the study of religion as an instrument of social hegemony. This term, taken from the lexicon of Marxist sociology, highlights the importance of *consent* in the constitution of hierarchical societies. Hegemony marks the differential between the coercive power of an institutional elite (whether "sacred" or "secular" makes no difference) and the active acceptance of that elite's authority, wisdom, values, and goals by those who are outside it. As I indicated above, this term has received its most nuanced explication in the writings of Ernesto Laclau, who offers a neat four-part schema for the structure and inner working of a hegemonic articulation. In the pages that remain, I will use Laclau's schema to illuminate the matter of hegemony while I simultaneously explicate the subject matters of Sanford, Dempsey, Kaimal, Orr's individual articles. (Please note that I do not discuss these articles in the order of their appearance.)

Hegemony, in first place, is a discourse marker that indicates an uneven distribution of power in the social actualization of values, truths, and ideals. Or, as Laclau puts it (the emphasis is his): "*we see a first dimension of the hegemonic relation: unevenness of power is constitutive of it*" (2000: 54). A. Whitney Sanford's article, "Shifting the Center: *Yakṣas* on the Margin of Contemporary Practice," interrogates just such a power differential through its analysis of the relationship between a translocal high-god, Krishna, and local *yakṣas* in the Braj region of Uttar Pradesh. Sanford presents Braj religion as constituted through a set of binary oppositions between two classes of gods. Krishna—the hub of what Sanford calls "the hegemonic Krishna tradition"—embodies the utopian, pastoral values of an urban elite; his religion idealizes affective devotion, free of messy mundane entanglements or consequences; his "rural persona . . . masks an

urban sophistication." *Yakṣas*, by contrast, are numerous, localized, discontinuous in their importance, and representative of the material hopes and apotropaic yearnings of low caste agriculturalists. Indeed, *yakṣas* number as only one among many subordinate divinity-types in Braj; others include *nāgas* and a variety of goddesses. Sanford offers the bicycle wheel as a metaphor: Krishna is centered at the hub, whereas the others scribe to the felly's edge. But even if there is a positional imbalance between these divinities (that imbalance being metonymically keyed to a hierarchy of values), these gods are functionally complementary: a bicycle whose wheels lack a hub, or a felly, or a properly trued balance between the two, will not operate. Sanford writes of this as "an inclusive and symbiotic hierarchy." Indeed, the bidirectional vector of Braj religion's dynamic tension is indicated by one of Sanford's informants as follows: "Daūjī lets Krishna be Krishna." That is to say, Krishna is freed to play the universalized role of central god, associated with passion and pastoral bliss, because other, lesser beings take up the slack, attending to the peripheral but gritty particulars of workaday sickness and poverty. Thus, although Sanford's article demonstrates the importance of attending to normative or normalizing constructions of discursive space as a first step in disclosing hegemonic social relations, it also teaches the necessity of looking beyond those norms, to see what is left over in their valorization.

Sanford's ethnographic observations also point us toward the second dimension in Laclau's schema. Describing cult devotions to a *yakṣa* in the village of Mahābhan, Sanford notes the odd fact that blood offerings to the *yakṣa* cannot be made at the *yakṣa*'s own shrine, upon the platform designated for just such offerings. Local Brahmins have taken control of the shrine and forbidden blood offerings in its precincts, though blood is the food *yakṣas* love most. So, if hegemony is constituted by an unevenness of power, we need look no further. But Laclau also presents hegemony as playing upon uneven power in a very specific way (emphasis as in the original): "We can, in this way, point to a second dimension of the hegemonic relation: *there is hegemony only if the dichotomy universality/particularity is superseded; universality exists only incarnated in—and subverting—some particularity but, conversely, no particularity can become political without becoming the locus of universalizing effects*" (2000: 56). There is hegemony only when those who hold greater power actively represent their particular articulations of power as salient for, and applicable to, an entire, mixed community. More accurately, this is a description of ideology; the production of ideology is a necessary moment in the construction of a hegemonic regime. We find ideology where there is a slippage between particulars and universals; where particular forms are universalized, and where those universals are presented as possessing a fundamental

ontic or epistemic reality. As described by Slavoj Žižek, "an ideology is really 'holding us' only when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality—that is, when the ideology succeeds in determining the mode of our every day experience of reality itself" (49).

Corrine Dempsey's "Nailing Heads and Splitting Hairs: Conflict, Conversion and the Bloodthirsty *Yakṣī* in South India" does a superb job of describing the dialectic between particulars and universals in the struggle to found a hegemonic regime. To do so, Dempsey shifts our attention geographically, from north India to the south-west coastal state of Kerala, and sociologically, from Brahmin/low caste conflicts, to "multi-layered adversarial relationships" which "confuse tidy oppositions" between Christians and Hindus.

Hindu and Christian communities both have stories that detail the exploits of indigenous magicians who tame beautiful but malevolent *yakṣīs* and harness their wild energy. At one level, these stories can be read as propaganda, common to a battle between rival religious groups for converts, legitimacy, donations, and prestige. At this level, when Achan, a Christian, asserts his control over a *yakṣī*, he vanquishes not only that demon-lady but Kerala's Namboodiri Brahmins as well (since they were unable to tame her). However, according to Dempsey, Kerala's *yakṣī* tales do more than teach the power of insider saints to harness dark forces or orthodox sacra (e.g., the *Bhagavadgītā*) to suppress them. These stories also point to Hinduism and Christianity as related, a "feuding fraternity" whose brothers share certain foundational perspectives. "Christians competed with their Hindu neighbors not by challenging but by adopting the rules of the dominant society. While it may appear that Achan beats the Namboodiri Brahmins at their own game, it's his game as well."

In short, Dempsey's article points to an interesting circulation of power around the poles of universal and particular. *Yakṣīs* are beings of power, localized embodiments of primal energy. To harness a *yakṣī* is to harness nature itself. As such, *yakṣīs* provide the elemental bases for ideological conflict, since Christians and Hindus alike take *yakṣīs*' real existence for granted. From one perspective, therefore, Hinduism and Christianity in Kerala are less different than one might expect. A holy man's ability to control *yakṣīs* holds greater on-the-ground relevance than his sectarian identity or affiliation with a translocal institution. This can be restated in Laclau's terms: *yakṣīs* exist at the point at which "the dichotomy universality/particularity is superseded" vis-à-vis institutional orthodoxies. But Laclau's schema for hegemony bids us look at this matter from a second perspective, by reinscribing those institutional orthodoxies. For there are no universals *as such*. An implicit ideological presupposition of these Keralan tales is that if one side or the other—Christian or Hindu—is able

to control *yakṣīs*, then fundamental reality itself must be either Christian or Hindu. Thus Dempsey's narratives can be read back into Laclau's description of the second dimension of the hegemonic relation. The understanding that *yakṣīs* are only socially useful when controlled by *either* a Christian *or* Hindu magician (structurally, it does not matter which type it is, so long as he is a representative member of a specific, exclusivist tradition) reminds us that "universality exists only incarnated in some particularity." Laclau's statement, "but, conversely, no particularity can become political without becoming the locus of universalizing effects," translates into the understanding that Christian and Hindu claims to control *yakṣīs* are coded declarations of the exclusive but universal value of each particular tradition's truths, goals, and institutions: reality is Christian or reality is Hindu.

Sanford's and Dempsey's articles point toward hegemony as founded in a logic akin to the one christened by Jacques Derrida as *supplementarity*. In common usage a supplement is something that completes or perfects that to which it is added. But Derrida bids us to invert the perspective: that which can be supplemented is constitutively incomplete or imperfect in itself. In Derrida's words, a supplement is an "*addition* [that] comes to *make up for* a deficiency, [that] comes to compensate for a primordial nonself-presence" (1973: 87). Per Sanford's research, Krishna cannot be Krishna without a network of *yakṣas*, *nāgas*, and goddesses in Braj to do the divine dirty work; the center is set—reality, established— by that which is not central, the supplement. Conceived thus, supplements are "dangerous" (Derrida 1976: 141), for the logic of supplementarity determines the center, the implicit place of dominance and universality, through the subordination of particulars, which are explicitly relegated to a position of inferiority and contingency. Here is the danger: the instability of this cleavage between the structure of universality and representations of the universal constitutes reality as a site of, and source for, antagonisms between social groups. We see this with Dempsey's *yakṣīs*: as potential embodiments for reality they must first be tamed through force so they can then serve as palladia in the conflict between religious communities.

Reality, it would seem, is a constitutionally violent concept, since the signs used to represent it vary in form and take on meaning only through an implicitly political process of exclusion. Here, we come to the third part of Laclau's schema, which reiterates this basic post-structuralist insight: hegemonic power cannot be asserted without the existence of empty (or floating) signifiers. Though numbered three, this claim provides a logical precondition for the second. "This shows us the third dimension of the hegemonic relation: *it requires the production of tendentially*

empty signifiers which, while maintaining the incommensurability between universal and particulars, enables the latter to take up the representation of the former" (2000: 57). In Dempsey's exposition Kerala's *yakṣīs* are a site for antagonism between Christians and Hindus because those *yakṣīs* cannot have been either Christian or Hindu to begin with. Nor do the *yakṣīs* end up either Christian or Hindu. In scholarly literature they have a fixed association with one religion, or the other, only to the degree that scholars themselves adjudicate the matter by accepting a single ideology as normative.

If *yakṣīs* are well suited to playing the role of empty signifiers, archaeological remains of temples may even be better suited. As scholars, we know that monumental temples materialize ideological norms. But often we cannot be certain *which* norms. Lacking epigraphic or other documentary evidence, we allow hypothesis and speculation to conduct our gaze as we attend to archaeological remains and reconstruct their meanings. Here Padma Kaimal demonstrates just how far a tradition of scholarship can miss the mark. Her article, "Learning to See the Goddess Once Again: Male and Female in Balance at the Kailāsanāth Temple in Kāñcīpuram," offers a radically new reading of the architecture of early Hindu temples and a clear example through which to understand how scholarly traffic in empty signifiers supports the hegemonic power of native elites.

Kaimal writes as much to correct an eyes-wide-shut tradition of art historical observation as she writes to initiate a new conceptualization of the early eighth-century Kailāsanāth temple at Kāñcīpuram, the former capital of the Pallava dynasty. Kaimal begins her article by presenting a disciplinary consensus, whereby art historians have long framed *yoginis* and other goddesses as "remnants of ancient, localized faiths marginalized through unsuccessful competition with pan-Indic, male deities." This assumed marginality translates into an assumption that *yoginis* and goddesses did not require monumental structures for worship. Scholars did not know *how* to identify goddess temples, did not look for them, and thus, not surprisingly, did not find any: "Temples to goddesses lie outside the art historical canon." Kaimal's close reading of the Kailāsanāth temple calls for a revision of that canon. In fact, Kaimal proposes that "well before the ninth century, Hindu temple architecture celebrated goddesses as much as it celebrated male gods." Monumental goddess temples have been present all along. Scholars have not seen them simply because they never turned around to look.

Architecturally, Kāñcīpuram's Kailāsanāth complex is not atypical for temples of its day. Most prominently, this complex includes a central, towered shrine (*vimāna*) and a surrounding rectangular precinct wall (*prākāra*). Reliefs of Śiva's exploits cover the *vimāna's* outer walls,

whereas its sanctum holds a lingam, the iconic representation of Śiva's phallic might. Kaimal observes: "presumably because of the *vimāna's* dedication, scholars have identified the entire Kailāsanāth complex as a dedication to Śiva, and to Śiva alone." She admits that when she first started studying this temple she too viewed Kailāsanāth in this way; she considered the *prākāra* wall to be a mere "service building," an italicizing device that accentuated the central shrine's centrality. But Kaimal demonstrates that the *prākāra* is itself a temple in its own right, dedicated to goddesses and *yoginis*. She speaks of this goddess temple as having an "emphatic periphery," shifting focus from Śiva's linga to a series of 64 shrines dedicated to *yoginis* and other goddesses that line the *prākāra's* walls. Kaimal proposes that goddesses, whose shrines mark the outer boundary, may *for that very reason* be central to the temple's meaning. Like later *yogini* temples, Kailāsanāth's *prākāra* stresses "horizontality, breadth, openness, the periphery" in contradistinction to the *vimāna's* stress on "verticality, height, closure, the center."

Thus Kaimal bids us to view Kailāsanāth as "two contemporary and conjoined temples of equal significance, one to Śiva and one to goddesses." In this way we can re-educate our eyes and reorient the ways in which we represent Hindu temples, freeing goddesses and *yoginis* from the patriarchal gaze. A temple dedicated to Śiva might be viewed as lying within the precinct of a goddess shrine. Goddess chapels envaginate the central phallus. They displace significance. They force us to move away from the metaphorical valorization of centrality, in order to see ordered multiplicity as another possible pattern for indexing value.

Such a re-visioning of Kailāsanāth is impossible, of course, without the recognition that the temple plan itself provides an "empty" signifier that becomes "filled" and fixed through tendentious acts of attention. If scholars of Indian art history have overlooked the goddess temples right before their eyes, it is only because they have accepted the particular, literally phallocentric, representations of contemporary Śaivism's priestly elite—guardians and lustrators of Śiva's divine liṅga—as possessing universal significance. Thus Kaimal demonstrates, once again, the historical, scholarly, and political cost of the genesis of a universal through the exclusion of competing particulars.

In a sense, Leslie C. Orr's "Identity and Divinity: Boundary-Crossing Goddesses in Medieval South India" picks up where Kaimal's article leaves off. Orr, like Kaimal, focuses upon the southeastern region of Tamilnadu, albeit her attention spans the eighth to thirteenth century. And like Kaimal, Orr's investigation into divine identities leads her to empty out signifiers that are generally granted full significance in scholarly discourse. But Orr now takes us the last step. For although, in

Laclau's phrase, "the presence of empty signifiers . . . is the very condition of hegemony" (1996: 43), it is only when those signifiers, filled, determine social relations and community formations that we speak of hegemony proper. In Laclau's italicized prose: "Here we have a fourth dimension of 'hegemony': *the terrain in which it expands is that of the generalization of the relations of representation as condition of the constitution of a social order*" (2000: 57). Here we can disengage Orr's project from that of Kaimal, for Orr is directly concerned with how divine identities constitute social orders. Indeed, she is surprised by what she does *not* find. Durkheim tells us that gods represent groups. What would it mean, therefore, if, as Orr discovers, the relations of representation vis-à-vis medieval South Indian goddesses do not create unique societies, or communities neatly divided by ideology?

Orr's article begins with wonderment at the fact that although sectarian literature from medieval Tamilnadu reveals the existence of communal rivalries between religions, those communities nevertheless shared a single ritual culture: "it is rather puzzling to find so little that is distinctive in their practices." Attempting to solve this puzzle, Orr suggests that so-called sectarian religious activities and identities might be sectarian "only in retrospect." It is not just that common indices of religious identity—Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Jaina, Bauddha—were not yet fully delineated at that time. Far more radically, Orr observes that this mode of categorization was almost entirely ignored. Thus the body of Orr's article tries "to see this world of the past through the eyes of *yakṣīs*," in an effort to discover whether these goddesses would "recognize the categories that we employ as scholars to analyze the nature and scope of divinity in their world." And it concludes with the firm assertion that questions about sectarian identity are not pertinent to that time and place. The study of south Indian goddesses must generate better questions than "is she Hindu or is she Jain?"

To move from puzzlement to certainty (or at least reduced puzzlement), Orr takes her readers on an intellectual journey in four parts: leading from narratives about goddesses, through their iconographies, to epigraphic records describing them, finishing finally at their positions in temple architectures. I can hardly do justice to Orr's rich series of examples, which lead to the conclusion that, given the micro-politics surrounding these goddesses, their identities can be determined only through a case-by-case consideration of "a particular local history of religions and iconographic conventions." Orr's consideration of goddesses' locations in temple architecture provides a case in point. Scholars assume that "a goddess in a Jain temple is Jain . . . A consort in a Śiva temple is Pārvatī . . . and so on." But how, Orr queries, do we classify the temples themselves? Indeed, Kaimal's analysis of Kāñcīpuram demonstrates the

difficulty of identifying a temple's "central" deity, or rather the mistake involved in assuming that south Indian temples necessarily have a single, significant deity, just because they have a single, central *vimāna*. Orr takes this insight further, citing a panoply of factors that thwart attempts to assign a single, original sectarian milieu to South Indian temples, even those that, today, *are* clearly defined in sectarian terms.

What, in the end, are we to make of Orr's analysis. By claiming, "however well-known and useful this classificatory scheme may be, for those of us who study the history of Indian religions . . . this way of mapping the diversity of religious beliefs and practices in fact may have guided very few of those people of the past whose identities and activities we seek to describe," Orr places the hegemon's crown directly on the scholar's head. It is we historians of Indian religions who generalize the relations of representation in order to constitute a social order suitable for our purposes.

But how seriously will we take this point? Indology, like every other discipline, requires a field of stable categories through which to articulate its knowledge. Is there a place in the modern university for a discipline that has no special taxa to call its own? What happens to the study of Indian religions when even "Hinduism," "Jainism," and "Buddhism" are discarded, emptied of explanatory significance? Whitney, Corinne, Padma, Leslie, will we then have to remove our names from our universities' catalogs? For if we cannot readily categorize the objects we study, how can we hope to justify our own positions in a language crisp enough for administrators, let alone ask our deans for new FTEs?

Hegemony is a way of talking about the recursive link between identity and existence insofar as the two are constituted in social institutions that distribute power unevenly. All four articles reveal the extent to which scholars have normalized the categories by means of which a social elite represents itself as *elite*, allowing those representations to determine their scholarly reconstructions of the past. All four articles show social orders organized around particular representations that are cloaked as universal indices of reality itself. Although Orr asks whether *yakṣīs* would see themselves as we do, her investigation forces a correlate question: How would India's *yakṣīs* see us? I am not sure if we would like ourselves as seen through their eyes: witting tools of a violent social order. Ring Around the Rosie played with *yakṣīs* is a dangerous game.

REFERENCES

Brown, Peter *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*. Berkeley:
1992   University of California Press.

Caciola, Nancy
2003
Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Derrida, Jacques
1973
Speech and Phenomena. Trans. by David B. Allison. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

1976
Of Grammatology. Trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Durkheim, Émile
[1912] 1968
The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. Trans. by Joseph Swain. London: Geoge Allen & Unwin.

Eliade, Mircea
[1957] 1987
The Sacred and the Profane. Trans. by Willard Trask. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co.

Gill, Sam
1998
"Territory." In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 298–313. Ed. by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Laclau, Ernesto
1996
Emanicpation(s). London and New York: Verso.

2000
"Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics." In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Ed. by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek. London and New York: Verso.

Lesher, J. H.
1992
Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Newberg, Andrew, et al.
2001
Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief. New York: Ballantine Books.

Paden, William E.
2000
"World." In *Guide to the Study of Religion*, 334–347. Ed. By Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon. London and New York: Cassell.

Société des Bollandistes, eds.
1863–1887
"Vita Angleae de Fulgino." In *Acta sanctorum quotquot toto orbe coluntur*. 3d ed. Paris: Société des Bollandistes.

Žižek, Slavoj
1989
The Sublime Object of Ideology. London: Verso.