

The Extreme Orient: The Construction of ‘Tantrism’ as a Category in the Orientalist Imagination

HUGH B. URBAN

Although it has now come to be accepted as a basic part of the vocabulary of historians of religions, the category of ‘Tantrism’, as a singular abstract, and clearly defined entity is largely a product of nineteenth-century Orientalist and colonial discourse. Very quickly, moreover, this category was identified as the most extreme form of that tendency toward passion, licentiousness and moral depravity which was thought to characterize the ‘Indian Mind’. Indeed, we might say that Tantrism came to embody the ‘extreme Orient’, the most Other, that which was most diametrically opposed to the rational and progressive mind of the West. This paper traces the genealogy of the category of ‘Tantrism’ within the British colonial imagination, as it was constructed, not only in Orientalist scholarship, but also in administrative writings and in popular Victorian novels. As we will see, the discourse about Tantrism and its sexual licentiousness was part of the much broader discourse about sexuality, which, as Michael Foucault and others have shown, pervaded late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British culture. Finally, this paper will then show the ways in which the Tantras came to be defended rationalized, and ‘sanitized’ by certain more sympathetic scholars of the twentieth century—above all in the work of John Woodroffe. It is largely through the dialectical tension between these two extremes—between the Victorian horror at Tantric licentiousness, and Woodroffe’s defense and de-odorization of Tantric philosophy—that this category came to be inherited by contemporary historians of religions. © 1999 Academic Press

The category of ‘Tantrism’ has now become a standard part of the vocabulary of historians of religions, a category employed freely by Indian and Western scholars alike. Yet this term, like most of the terms we use in the study of Indian religions (Hinduism, for instance) is largely a creation of modern Western thought, a joint construction of certain Indian texts, European Orientalist scholarship and the Western popular imagination. And it remains to this day, as Herbert Guenther put it, ‘one of the haziest misconceptions the Western mind has evolved’.¹

As it is used today, ‘Tantrism’ refers to an enormously diverse body of texts, traditions and practices which spread throughout the Hindu, Jain and Buddhist communities of South Asia since at least the fifth or sixth century. However, as André Padoux points out, the abstract category of ‘Tantrism’ was itself only formed in the nineteenth century, coined from the Sanskrit word *tantra*. Probably derived from the root *tan*, to ‘weave or stretch’, *tantra* refers most commonly to a kind of text—though one which may or may not contain materials that we would today label as ‘Tantric’. It so happens, however, that it was in such texts that European scholars first discovered certain beliefs and practices which we now identify as Tantric—specifically, practices which were considered not only bizarre but also repulsive, sexually licentious and morally offensive.²

By the late nineteenth century, however, the category of Tantrism had become a key part in the broader Orientalist project of imagining India as a whole. Even as Western scholars began to construct the abstract entity called ‘Hinduism’, so too they began to imagine ‘Tantrism’ as one of its primary, though least admirable, components. It thus became a key part of what Bernard Cohn has called the conquest of knowledge—that is, the detailed study and classification of Indian society and religion, which formed a critical part of the colonizing project. As Ronald Inden has argued, the India of

Orientalist scholarship was progressively constructed as the quintessential ‘Other’ of the West. Conceived as an essentially passionate, irrational, effeminate world, a land of ‘disorderly imagination’, India was set in opposition to the progressive, rational, masculine and scientific world of modern Europe.³ And ‘Tantrism’, it would seem, was quickly singled out as the darkest, most irrational core of this Indian mind—as the extreme Orient, the most Other. For if Orientalist scholars had identified the Golden Age of India with the Vedas or Upanisads, they also identified its darkest, more perverse age with the tantras—‘superstition of the worst and most silly kind’, as Sir Monier Williams put it).⁴

And yet, although universally condemned as primitive immoral and degenerate, Tantrism also occupied a place of mixed fascination and repulsion in the British imagination, as the topic of enormous popular and scholarly discourse. Following the lead of Michel Foucault, I would suggest that this fascination with the licentious practices of Tantrism was part of the broader discourse about sexuality in nineteenth-century England. By no means simply the repressed world of puritanical prudes we commonly imagine it to be, Victorian culture, Foucault suggests, was pervaded by a deeper fascination with and an unprecedented proliferation of discourse on sexuality: ‘What is peculiar to modern societies . . . is not that they consigned sex to a shadowy existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, exploiting it as *the secret*.’⁵ Nowhere is this paradox more apparent than in the discourse on Tantrism—an object of simultaneous horror and obsession in the Western imagination.⁶

In the first half of this century, however, the category of Tantrism underwent a sudden new rehabilitation and revalorization. No longer simply dismissed as a degenerate form of popular Hinduism, the Tantras now came to be appreciated for their deeper philosophical content, as a tradition in equal complexity to the Upanisads, Vedānta and other classical systems. The single most important figure in the rehabilitation of the Tantras was Sir John Woodroffe, alias ‘Arthur Avalon’—a man who stands out as among the most baffling figures in the history of British India. In his exoteric public life, Woodroffe served as a judge on the court of Calcutta, well respected as an authority on Indian law. Yet in his esoteric inner life as Arthur Avalon, he was also one of the most influential—and even today the most widely read—scholars of the Tantras that the world has ever known. Although he was himself reluctant to use the term ‘Tantrism’, preferring instead ‘Śāktism’ or ‘Tantraśāstra’, it was Woodroffe more than anyone else who helped to popularize this as a category in the Western mind.⁷ In the process, however, he also appears to have gone to remarkable lengths to downplay or rationalize the more offensive elements of this tradition. In order to be acceptable to Western scholarship, it would seem, Tantrism first had to be significantly sanitized, domesticated and ‘deodorized’.

In what follows, I will briefly trace the genealogy of this category within the Orientalist imagination in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. My aim here is not simply to produce yet another Foucaultian deconstruction of a familiar scholarly category—an exercise which has become all too easy in recent years; rather, I hope to trace the rather convoluted history of a complex and often grossly abused term, and thereby help us to re-imagine this in a more productive way in contemporary discourse. One need only peruse the shelves of any New Age book store (where we may now find our own *Tantric Paths to Ecstasy*), or scan the web sites of the internet (where we now may attend the ‘Church of Tantra’ on line), to see that this is very much still a living category in the Western imagination, and one in serious need of careful examination and definition.

For the sake of brevity, I will in this essay concern myself primarily with Western constructions of Hindu Tantrism; I will not be able to address here the equally important questions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indian constructions of Tantrism,⁸ nor will I discuss the various constructions of Buddhist Tantrism.⁹ I will, however, look not only at nineteenth-century scholarship but also at the writings of colonial administrators, as well as more popular cultural forms such as Victorian novels. I will then examine the ways in which a few more sympathetic authors—above all, the father of Tantric studies, John Woodroffe—sought to defend and rescue the Tantras, though often by censoring, rationalizing or deodorizing them in the process. It was in large part through the dialectical tension of these two extremes—the Orientalist denigration of tantric immorality, and Woodroffe's sanitization and defense of Tantric philosophy—that this category has been inherited by contemporary historians of religions.¹⁰

The Term 'Tantra' and the 'Tantras' in Indian History

The term *tantra*, as Donald Lopez rather elegantly puts it, has long been and still remains one of the most elusive terms in the study of South Asian religions—a kind of 'floating signifier . . . gathering to itself a range of contradictory qualities, a zero symbolic value, a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary content over and above that which the signified contains'.¹¹ Thus, before examining the writings of the Orientalists themselves, let us begin with at least a very rough historical outline of the diverse body of texts and traditions that would eventually come to be identified as 'Tantrism'.

The Sanskrit word *tantra* has appeared since Vedic times with an enormous diversity of meanings, denoting, for example, *siddhānta* (conclusion), *śrūtisākhā* (a branch of śruti, i.e., the Vedas), *itīkartavyatā* (set of duties), *prabandha* (composition), and *śāstraviśeṣa* (a particular *śāstra*).¹² In its earliest appearances in the *Rg Veda* (X.71.9) and *Atharva Veda* (X.7.42), *tantra* denotes a kind of weaving machine or loom; later, in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, and *Taṇḍya Brāhmaṇa*, the range of the term is extended to refer to the chief portion or essence of a thing; and still later, as we see, for example, in the works of Śaṅkara, the term is used to denote simply a system of thought (e.g., *Kapilasya Tantra*, meaning the Sāṃkhya system).¹³ However, according to Sir Monier Williams, the term has also been used throughout Sanskrit literature to signify not only 'any rule, theory or scientific work' (*Mahābhārata*) but also 'an army, row, number or series' (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, x.54.15) and even 'a drug or chief remedy'.¹⁴

Various authors have suggested a range of etymologies for the term, some defining it as 'shortening' or reduction, others tracing it to the noun *tanu* (body), and still others deriving it from *tantrī* (to explain) or *tatrī* (to understand).¹⁵ However, most recent scholars agree that the term probably derives from the root *tan*, to spread or weave, and hence, by extension, to explain or espouse. Thus, it is perhaps most commonly used (much like *sūtra*, which derives from the verb 'to sew') to designate a particular kind of treatise.¹⁶ As Padoux points out, however, most of the texts which we consider to be Tantric do not define themselves as 'Tantric'. At most, they might refer to other tantras (saying *tantrātare*, in another tantra), or they might include at the beginning a section called the *tantrāvātāra*, which describes the 'descent' of the text.¹⁷ It is true that India has long known the word *tantrasāstra* 'the teachings of the tantras', and the adjective *tāntrika*, as distinguished from *vaidika* (Vedic) 'to contrast the aspect of religion cum ritual from orthodox non-Tantric Hinduism'.¹⁸ However, as Woodroffe himself had already pointed out in 1922, the abstract category of 'Tantrism' is clearly a modern Western construction.¹⁹

This is clearly not the place to attempt a definition of ‘Tantrism’—a formidable, perhaps impossible task which has been undertaken by far more able scholars. Nevertheless, we need at least to set some general parameters for our discussion of this term. As Douglas Brooks argues, ‘Tantra’ is not something that can be defined as a singular, unified category; rather, it can only be described by means of what J. Z. Smith calls a ‘polythetic classification’, in which ‘large number of characteristics are possessed by a large number of class members’.²⁰ Although different scholars have offered various enumerations of such characteristics, Brooks suggests the following ten properties of ‘Tantric’ phenomena: (1) they are extra-Vedic, that is, not part of the conventional canon of Hindu scriptures; (2) they involve special forms of yoga and discipline such as the technique of *kuṇḍalinīyoga*; (3) they are at once theistic and nondualistic; (4) they employ elaborate speculations on the nature of sound and the use of *mantras*; (5) they involve the worship of symbolic diagrams, such as *yantras* or *maṇḍalas*; (6) they place special stress on the importance of Guru; (7) they employ the bi-polar symbolism of the god and goddess; (8) they are secret (*rahasya*) in the sense that gurus restrict teachings to those whom they deem qualified; (9) they prescribe the use of conventionally prohibited substances (e.g., wine, meat, sexual intercourse) in ritual; (10) they require special initiation (*dīkṣā*) in which the criteria of caste and gender are not the primary tests of qualification.²¹

The question of the historical origins and early development of the diverse traditions that we now identify as ‘Tantra’ remains among the most contested problems in the history of Indian religions. It could well be said that ‘the history of Tantrism is impossible to write’ based on the sheer poverty of data at present.²² A variety of scholars have argued for a pre-Aryan or Dravidian origin of Tantric practices, rooted in the primordial worship of the earth or the cult of the mother-goddess. However, as Goudriaan concludes, the most we can say is that, although Dravidian or pre-Aryan origins may be possible, Tantric traditions have clear relations to the Vedic tradition as well.²³

There has been equally heated debate over the primacy of Buddhist or Hindu Tantra. At present, this question seems unanswerable. Historically, the oldest texts bearing the title ‘tantras’ are Buddhist, beginning with the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, which is thought by some to have been written possibly as early as the third century CE.²⁴ However, the Hindu Tantric traditions are generally thought to have evolved out of the earlier traditions of Śāktism—the worship of the cosmogonic female principle, Śākti (power), which appears in the form of various goddesses such as Durgā, Kālī and Tārā. Beginning in the early centuries of the common era, and growing into a flourishing cult by the sixth to seventh century, the cult of Śākti in various Goddess form spread throughout India and formed the substratum for what would gradually evolve into the Hindu Tantric traditions.²⁵ These traditions also spread throughout the Vaiṣṇava and Śaivite communities since at least the fifth century, developing into the Pañcarātra school and the Śaivite Āgamas.²⁶ In any case, although their precise historical origins are very much uncertain, it seems clear that most of the literature which we now commonly identify as ‘Tantrism’ did not reach their height of development until much later, sometime around 1000 CE. The majority of the classical Sanskrit tantras, such as the *Kulāmṇava tantra*, the *Svacchandatantra*, the *Mālinīvijayatantra*, the *Vijñānabhairava tantra* and the texts associated with the Kashmir Śaivite school, were probably composed between the ninth and fourteenth centuries.²⁷ However, a wide variety of non-Sanskritic, vernacular ‘Tantric’ traditions would continue to spread throughout India up to the present century, often mixing with elements of alchemy, magic and more popular ‘occult’

practices, and in many cases persisting to this day in regions such as Bengal, Orissa and Assam.²⁸

The Golden Age of the Vedas and the Dark Age of Kālī: Tantra in the Orientalist Imagination

The tenets of the Shaktas open the way for the gratification of all the sensual appetites; they hold out encouragement for drunkards, thieves and dacoits; they present the means of satisfying every lustful desire . . . and lead men to commit abominations which place them on a level with beasts.—*Calcutta Review*, 1885, no. xlvii, p. xxiv.

Whatever may be the precise historical origins of the various texts and practices we now identify by the name, the category of 'Tantrism', used to refer to a distinct and well-defined body of Hindu belief and practice, really only makes its first appearance in the writings of the Orientalist scholars and Christian missionaries of the nineteenth century. Even as Western scholars began to construct and imagine the abstract entity known as 'Hinduism', so too, they began to imagine 'Tantrism' as one of its primary, though also least admirable, components. Whereas earlier historians like David Kopf had painted a generally benign image of Orientalism, more recent scholars like Gauri Viswanathan, Bernard Cohn and Ron Inden have pointed to the deeper political motives behind British Orientalist scholarships.²⁹ As Cohn suggests, the detailed study and categorization of Indian culture was a critical part of the colonizing project. In order to be governed, India had first to be analyzed, statistically accounted and systematically categorized: 'the conquest of India was a conquest of knowledge . . . The vast social world that was India had to be classified, categorized and bounded before it could be hierarchized'.³⁰

As Inden has persuasively argued, the India of Orientalist scholarship was progressively constructed as the quintessential 'Other' of the West. Beginning in the late eighteenth century and culminating in late nineteenth and early twentieth century accounts, India came to be imagined, defined and reified as an essentially passionate, irrational and erotic world, a land of 'disorderly imagination instead of a world-ordering rationality', set in opposition to the progressive, rational and scientific world of modern Europe.³¹ According to the widely read ethnographer Herbert Risley, for example, the 'peculiarities of the Indian intellect' may be identified as 'its lax hold of facts, its indifference to action, its absorption in dreams, its exaggerated reverence for tradition'.³² 'Tantrism', it would seem, formed a critical part of the broader Orientalist project of imagining India, precisely because the Tantras were generally regarded as the most extreme, most sexual, most 'irrational', most corrupt embodiment of the worst tendencies in the Indian mind.

The British Orientalists were not, of course, the only Westerners writing about the Tantras in the nineteenth century. Several other French, Dutch and German authors, such as Auguste Barth, Maurice Winternitz, Louis La Vallée Poussin and many others, had also made some inquiries into the Tantras (though often based largely on British accounts).³³ Yet precisely because they held *political* and *economic* power in India, the British had an especially vested interest in understanding the various religious groups under their rule and of controlling those which seemed potentially threatening or subversive. Hence the British authors produced not only the most detailed accounts of the Tantras but also the ones that would be most widely read throughout the Western world up to the middle of this century.

Up until the end of the eighteenth century, as we see in the works of the earliest British authors in India such as John Holwell, Alexander Dow, Nathaniel Halhed and even in his James Mill monument to imperialism, *The History of British India*, ‘Tantrism’ had not yet emerged as a distinct category or a definable body of texts.³⁴ Even the great early Orientalist William Jones makes only the briefest reference to a body of texts called ‘Tantras’. In his essay ‘On the Literature of the Hindus’ (1790) Jones merely lumps the Tantras together with ‘Mantra, Āgama and Nigama śāstras’ as an appendage to the Vedas, and are said to consist mainly of incantations.³⁵ H. T. Colebrooke—Jones’ fellow pioneer Orientalist and Indo-Europeanist—appears to have a much greater familiarity with various texts called Tantras, and cites the *Rudrayāmala Tantra* and *Kālī Tantra*, *Nīrvāṇa Tantra* and *Bīra Tantra*, among others.³⁶ However, for Colebrooke, the Tantras are only worth mentioning as the antipode of the Vedas. Whereas the Vedas embody everything that is noble, pure and admirable in the Hindu tradition—its pristine monotheistic past—the Tantras embody all the polytheism and idolatry that has corrupted Hinduism in modern times:

Most of what is taught [in the Vedas] is now obsolete; and in its stead, . . . rituals founded in the Purānas and observances borrowed from a worse source, the Tantras, have . . . [replaced] the Vedas.³⁷

Rather significantly, perhaps the first detailed discussion of the ‘Tantras’ comes from a Christian missionary—the energetic Baptist Reverend, William Ward. In Ward’s eyes, Hinduism as a whole was defined as ‘the most puerile, impure and bloody of any system of idolatry ever established on earth’, a religion of ‘idle, effeminate and dissolute people’ of ‘disordered imaginations who frequent their temples for the satisfaction of their licentious appetites’;³⁸ and the Tantras were the quintessence of this degenerate Hindu spirit. Writing in 1817, Ward described the insidious practices of the ‘Tantrus’—practices which involved ‘things too abominable to be revealed to a Christian public’, and which caused even his Indian informant to blush with shame. In one particularly vivid account, which would become widely read in the nineteenth century, Ward recounts the insidious ritual of the ‘Chukra’ (*cakra*), or ‘circle’, of Tantric practice:

Many of the tantrus . . . contain directions respecting a most . . . shocking mode of worship, which is understood . . . by the name of Chukru. These shastrus direct that the person . . . must, in the night, choose a woman . . . as the object of worship . . . he must take . . . the daughter of a dancer, a kupalee, a washerman, a barber, a chundalu or a Musalman or a prostitute; and place her on a seat . . . and then bring broiled fish, flesh, fried peas, rice, spirituous liquor, sweetmeats, flowers and other offerings . . . To this succeeds the worship of the . . . female, who sits naked * * * * * Here things too abominable to enter the ears of man, and impossible to be revealed to a Christian public, are contained . . . The learned brahmun who opened to me these abominations made several efforts—paused again, began again . . . before he could mention the shocking indecencies prescribed by his own shastrus . . . [the woman] partakes of the offerings, even of the spirituous liquors, and flesh, though it should be that of a cow. The refuse is eaten by the persons present, however different their casts . . . The priest then . . . behaves towards this female in a manner which decency forbids to be mentioned.³⁹

In Ward’s opinion, the ‘sensual rites and black magic’ of the Tantras were the clearest sign that the Hinduism of his time was indeed at low ebb, that it had degenerated sadly into polytheism, immorality and idolatry:

At present, the persons committing the abominations are becoming more and more numerous and . . . the ceremonies are more and more indecent. They are performed in secret; but that these practices are becoming very frequent is a fact known to all.⁴⁰

The next stage in the development of the category begins in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, in the writings of Orientalist scholars such as H. H. Wilson (1786–1860). In Wilson's account of 1828, which would become among the most often cited and most influential in the latter nineteenth century,⁴¹ a distinct set of texts called the 'Tantras' really emerges as a clearly defined and relatively unified body of Indian literature. For Wilson, the Tantras are now considered a 'singular category'. Even though 'they are infinitely numerous', they are all nonetheless 'basically the same',⁴² such that a scholar need not read more than one or two Tantras to understand this (largely worthless) form of Hindu religion. Like most of the Orientalist scholars, Wilson laments that the immoral and perverse practices of the Tantras are becoming more and more prevalent in his own day, that they 'have been carried to more exceptionable extremes in modern times', and are thus a clear sign of the progressive degeneration of Hinduism in present era. The 'nonsensical extravagance and absurd gesticulations' of Tantric ritual have become 'authorities for all that is abominable in the present state of Hindu religion'.⁴³

However, it is not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that we find the abstract category of '*Tantrism*' as a true '*ism*', a unified and singular body of beliefs and practices, emerge as a well-defined category in the Orientalist construction of 'Hinduism'. It was the great Sanskritist Sir Monier-Williams who was perhaps the first to employ the term '*Tantrism*' as a singular and monolithic class, which he identifies with '*Śāktism*', and which he disparages as the most degenerate and decadent form of Indian religion:

the system they [the Tantras] inculcate . . . for convenience may be called *Tantrism* or *Śāktism* . . . *Tantrism* or *Śāktism* is *Hinduism* arrived at its last and worst stage of medieval development.⁴⁴

The classical tradition of the Vedas, Monier Williams laments, had become 'in the Tantras, exaggerated and perverted', adulterated and mixed together with 'terrible and horrible things', with 'conjugal union and adulterous passions', with 'sanguinary sacrifices and orgies with wine and women'.⁴⁵ Much of the Tantras, he suggests, are nothing more than black magic and 'unmeaning sound', whose primary aim is 'for acquiring magical power and for destroying one's enemies'. As a whole, they may be summarized as mere 'witchcraft, which to Europeans appears so ineffably absurd that the possibility of any person believing in it seems itself incredible'.⁴⁶

By the early twentieth century, as we see in scholarly histories of India like those of J. N. Farquhar and W. H. Moreland, and above all in more popular works like D. L. Barnett's *Antiquities of India*, '*Tantrism*' has now become infamous: it is now widely known as a scandalous teaching which makes it a 'sacred duty to practice incest', engaging in 'black art of the crudest and filthiest kind' in which 'a veritable devil's mass is purveyed in various forms'.⁴⁷ At the same time, Western Orientalist views of the Tantras had begun to inform the ways in which many Indian intellectuals understood their own traditions. As we see above all in the case of Western educated Hindu reformers like Rāmmohun Roy and his followers in the Brāhmo Samāj, the Tantras have now been singled out as the clearest sign of all the polytheism and idolatry of modern popular Hinduism, which had corrupted the pure monotheistic tradition of the

Vedas. Following the lead of the Orientalists, Rāmmohun and his fellow reformers looked back to the noble, rational religion of the Vedas as India's Golden Age, while they despaired of the modern 'Age of Kālī' in which the perverse rites of the Tantras ran rampant. Steeped in 'idol worship, superstition and the total destruction of the moral principle', Tantrism had come to represent, in the eyes of most educated Indian elites, a 'horrendous and debased form of religion and a radical departure from the authentic Hindu tradition'.⁴⁸

Tantra, Sex and Secrecy in the British Victorian Imagination

'In matters of sexuality, we are, all of us, the healthy as much as the sick, hypocrites nowadays'—Sigmund Freud⁴⁹

In order to understand the construction and re-construction of the category of the Tantras in the Western imagination, we must also place it against the backdrop of the broader programs of colonial morality and British attitudes toward sexuality in the nineteenth century. The British interest in the sexual perversions of the Tantras, it would seem, was a part of a much broader concern with sexuality and its aberrations in the Victorian era. Following the lead of Michel Foucault, a wide range of scholars have shown that the British upper and middle classes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were by no means simply the puritanical prudes that they have commonly been imagined to be. On the contrary, Foucault suggests, they were fascinated by sexuality and discussed it in endless detail. 'Paradoxically it was during the nineteenth century that the debate about sexuality exploded. Far from the age of silence and suppression, sexuality became a major issue in Victorian social and political practice'.⁵⁰ Categorization, classification and control over sexuality was a critical element in the regulation of society: 'The array of sexual discourses . . . exploited sexuality's secrets. Sex began to be managed . . . perversion became codified . . . Sexuality proliferated as the power over it was extended'.⁵¹

However, as Peter Gay points out, discussions of sexuality had to take place in the proper contexts—either privately, in the closed realms of secrecy, or, publicly, through the proper social conventions and scientific discourse.⁵² The Victorian era, in fact, witnessed a tremendous proliferation of medical and pseudo-medical treatises on sexuality, in both its proper and perverse forms. Viewing any deviation from 'normal' sex as morally suspect, the Victorian imagination was obsessed with the identification, classification and enumeration of sexual aberrations, with the detailed scientific descriptions of every imaginable perversions or fetish. Among the most popular works in late nineteenth-century Victorian England was Richard von Krafft-Ebing's textbook, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), which became the most influential catalogue of deviations. Under the protective cover of 'medical nomenclature', and with the 'posture of moral outrage', Victorian readers 'could indulge in this medicoforensic peep-show of sexual hyperaesthesia, paresthesia, aspermia, polyspermia, spermatorrhea, sadism, masochism, fetishism, exhibitionism, psychic hermaphroditism, satyria, and nymphomania'.⁵³

Among the most sinister perversions, in the eyes of many Victorian authors, were those which, under the guise of transcendental ideals, confused the religious and sensual spheres. British middle and upper class sensibilities of the late nineteenth century insisted on the proper separation of religion and sexuality: excessive religious celibacy and sexual licentiousness were both considered destructive perversions or mental maladies. The British respectable classes of the nineteenth and early twentieth century came

increasingly to regard only one form of sexual relation to be proper and healthy—namely, heterosexual marriage. Only the married life offered the *via media* between celibacy and licentiousness, which ‘repairs the Fall and leads us from earth to heaven’.⁵⁴ Moreover, in an era which valued economic productivity, the generation of capital, efficiency and restraint in the consumption, healthy sexuality had likewise to be useful, productive and efficient: ‘“normal” heterosexuality appeared in one guise . . . attraction between men and women that led to marriage and a family. Normal sex was consistent with the values of Victorian industrial society—it was another mode of production’.⁵⁵ The British interest in Indian sexual practices—and above all the ritual practices of the Tantras—was a central part of this broader fascination with sexuality and its aberrations. Just as the imperial project involved a certain of ‘colonization of the body’—that is, a systematic analysis, classification, medical diagnosis and institutional control of the bodies and diseases of colonized people—so too, it involved a certain ‘colonization of sexuality’—an investigation, classification and control over the sexual practices and aberrations of those under imperial rule.⁵⁶

As the great critics of Orientalism, such as Edward Said and, more recently, Anne McClintock have argued, imperialism as a whole was very often a ‘gendered’ project. The colonial West was consistently imagined as the masculine, rational, active power which ‘penetrates’, ‘possesses’ and rules the Orient, which is imagined as ‘feminine’, irrational, passive: ‘the sexual subjection of Oriental women to Western men stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled . . . Orientalism took perverse shape as a male power fantasy that sexualizes a feminized Orient for Western possession’.⁵⁷ For many Orientalists, India was imagined as the ‘feminine’ land par excellence, the land of weakness and passivity, set in opposition to the strength and virility of the West. As Robert Orme described the Indian in 1782, ‘Breathing in the softest climates, having few wants and receiving the luxuries of other nations with little labor . . . the Indian must have become the most effeminate inhabitant of the globe’.⁵⁸

Not only was India commonly imagined as an inherently ‘feminine’ land, but it was also often conceived as the quintessential realm of sexual perversions, abnormal carnal desires and licentiousness. ‘Anything and everything that deals with sex, procreation, union and human passion is worshipped and glorified’, George MacMunn concludes in his widely read account *The Indian Underworld*.⁵⁹ The Indian was consistently depicted in colonial discourse as ‘thoroughly and threateningly libidized’. While the Indian male was commonly portrayed as weak and effeminate but also lascivious, depraved and morally corrupt, the Indian female was imagined to be excessively sexual, ‘dark and seductive’, insatiable in her carnal appetites.⁶⁰ Embodied in the horrific image of the violently sexual goddess Kālī, the India of the British imagination was seductively mysterious, yet also intimately bound up with ‘debauchery, violence and death’.⁶¹

With their apparently obscene confusion of religion and sexuality, and their deliberate violation of laws of caste and marriage, the Tantras came to represent the quintessence of this inherent tendency toward depravity. To the British scholar of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the idea that any religious group could utilize human sexuality in ritual was thus an ‘unthinkable travesty of decorum and reasonableness. Such acts were only possible by those depraved souls who used religion as a guise to cloak their prurient interests’.⁶² As Miranda Shaw suggests, the use of sexual practices in Tantric worship represented a phenomenon similar to that of the *devadāsīs* or temple courtesans—‘an unfamiliar and disquieting sight to the colonial gaze’:

Analyses of the colonial encounter in India have exposed ways in which colonial and indigenous world views clashed in the traits they attribute to maleness and femaleness . . . The scholarly characterizations of the Tantric . . . yoginis as lewd, sluts and depraved and debauched betray a vestige of Victorian indignation not only at nonmarital sexual activity but also at the religious exaltation . . . of women.⁶³

Sacrificing White Goats to the Goddess: The Tantras and the Fear of Subversive or Revolutionary Politics

Secrecy goes with savagery.—Sir George MacMunn, *The Religions and Hidden Cults of India*⁶⁴

Rise up, O sons of India, arm yourselves with bombs, dispatch the white Asuras to Yama's abode. Invoke the Mother Kālī . . . The Mother asks for sacrificial offerings. What does the Mother want? . . . fowl or sheep or buffalo? No. She wants many white Asuras. The Mother is thirsting after the blood of the Feringhees [foreigners] . . . chant this verse while slaying the Feringhee goat: with the close of a long era, the Feringhee Empire draws to an end! Kālī rises in the East!—*Yugantar* [Bengali journal], 1905⁶⁵

Based in large part on the descriptions of Orientalist scholarship, British government officials and colonial administrators also began to take an interest in the Tantras and to contribute a new element to the imagining of 'Tantrism'. For the most part, the Tantras were an object of fear and intense anxiety among the colonial authorities, who suspected them of revolutionary agitation and subversive plots. Throughout the European colonial imagination of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it would seem the fear of violent, subversive political activities often went hand in hand with the fear of transgressive or immoral practices among the natives under their rule. As we see in the cases of the Mau Mau in Kenya or in various native uprisings in South and North America, political rebellion was, in the colonial gaze, often associated with immorality, sexual transgression and the violation of social taboos. The rebellious colonial subject threatened not only to subvert the colonial government but to unravel the moral fabric of society itself. 'Colonial rule', Nicholas Thomas comments, 'was haunted by a sense of insecurity, terrified by the obscurity of the "native mentality" and overwhelmed by indigenous societies' apparent intractability in the face of government'.⁶⁶

This deep rooted anxiety is nowhere more apparent than in British fears of the subversive potentials of Tantrism. Since at least the publication of Bankimcandra Chatterjee's novel *Ānandamath*, and growing ever more intense with the rise of the national movement in Bengal, there was an increasing association of the violent and militant Goddesses, Kālī and Durgā, with Indian Nationalism; and, correspondingly there were growing fears among British authorities about possible links between revolutionary nationalist secrecy societies and the esoteric Tantric cult associated with the Goddess.⁶⁷ As Valentine Chirol warned in his widely read work *Indian Unrest*, there was thought to be an intimate connection between the sexual licentiousness of the Tantric secret societies and the subversive acts of the revolutionary political organizations: 'wherever political agitation assumes the most virulent character, there the Hindu revival assumes the most extravagant shapes'; 'the unnatural depravity represented in the form of erotomania is certainly more common among Hindu political fanatics'.⁶⁸

Above all, the horrible, violent figure of the Goddess Kālī and the secret practices of her Tantric devotees were regarded as manifestations of the 'regressive', fanatical, bloodthirsty side of the Indian mind, and therefore a dangerous source of 'sedition and

unrest'. As the Rowlett Commission of 1918 reported, the revolutionary outrages in Bengal were 'the outcome of a widespread . . . movement of perverted religion and equally perverted patriotisms'.⁶⁹ This monstrous fusion of sexual depravity and subversive activities had already been seen in criminal groups such as the infamous Kālī-worshipping Thuggee, and it had reached its most terrifying fruition in the revolutionary Nationalist groups of the twentieth century.⁷⁰ Calling upon the terrible mother Kālī for power, worshipping her with orgiastic violence and even 'sacrificing the white goats' of British officials to the goddess, they threatened the moral and political fabric of the colonial state itself. Indeed, Sir George MacMunn even describes something called a 'bomb worship' practiced among the secret Nationalist groups—a form of 'adoration to Kālī', so that 'the blood craving of the Goddess might be satisfied, the Goddess to feed which . . . many a Magistrate has been bombed'.⁷¹ The fact that Kālī had been appropriated by the revolutionary nationalists was a clear indication of the depravity which now ran rampant in India:

the constant invocation of the 'terrible goddess' . . . against the alien oppressors, shows that Brahminism in Bengal is ready to appeal to the grossest and most cruel superstitions of the masses. The [Swadeshi] movement was placed under the patronage of Kālī and vows were administered to large crowds in the forecourts of her great temple at Calcutta and in her various shrines all over Bengal . . . In its extreme forms Shakti worship finds expression in licentious aberrations.⁷²

India's Darkest Heart: The Tantras in the Victorian Literary Imagination

The infamous rituals and orgiastic practices of the Tantras not only were a central preoccupation of the British colonial administrators and Orientalist scholars; they also entered the Victorian English imagination in a more popular form, permeating British culture by means of newspapers, magazines, advertisements and perhaps above all through Victorian novels. If the India of the Victorian literary imagination was the land of dark, mysterious Otherness, the land of passion and violence, at once seductive and terrifying, then the Tantras were the innermost, deepest heart of this dark world, the source of its simultaneous horror and erotic allure.⁷³ As Benita Parry and Lewis Wurgaft have argued in their studies of Victorian novels between 1880 and 1930, English novelists like Flora Annie Steel, F. E. F. Penny and I. A. R. White, were fascinated, perhaps even obsessed, by what they had heard about the erotic, violent practices of the Tantras. They filled their novels with lurid tales of the horrible, yet strangely seductive Tantric yogis, with their horrible, lascivious goddess, the naked, cruel Kālī. In the often wildly imaginative accounts of the Victorian novelists, the rites of the Tantras become a veritable 'devil's orgy', attended by 'a demon's army', wherein 'cruelty, frenzy, devilment had built themselves a monument to all eternity'.⁷⁴ Engaging in sexual orgies and gruesome, necrophagic rituals, 'eating the flesh and blood as a sacrament', and 'seeking unity with the Absolute through trafficking in demonic power', the Tantric yogi 'reveals India's darkest heart'.⁷⁵ As F. E. F. Penny recounts the hideous rites of the Tantrics in her novel *The Swami's Curse* (1929):

the follower of the Tantric cult professes no austerities. He seeks to kill desire by an unlimited indulgence which brings satiety and extinction. The indulgence is enjoined by his so-called religion; and his depravity is commended as a great virtue.⁷⁶

Flora Annie Steel's novel *The Law of the Threshold* describes an American convert to Tantrism named Nigel Blennerhasset. Accompanied by a lovely Indian girl, Maya Day,

who has been brought up and educated in the U.S., Nigel travels to India in order to convert Indians to his perverse Tantric sect. Unbeknown to Blennerhasset and his consort, however, his Tantric cult is being exploited by two Bolshevic-Jewish agents who are working with Indian nationalists in order to overthrow British rule. By appealing to the Indian peoples' natural proclivity toward religious fanaticism, perversion and superstition, they hope to use Tantrism in order to arouse them to widespread violence and thereby to achieve (using Bakunin's anarchist phrase) 'the destruction of law and Order and the unchaining of evil passions'.⁷⁷

Echoing the anxieties of the British government and colonial administrators, the Victorian novelists also expressed and played upon the deep fear of the Tantras as a potential source of political subversion. I. A. R. White's novel *Daughter of Brahma* (1912), for example, picks up on the theme of secret Tantric cults and revolutionary violence, which appeared throughout the works of Chirol, McMunn and other early twentieth-century authors. Inspired by the violent and sexual Tantric goddesses Kālī and Durgā, the Indians are incited to revolt against their colonial rulers, thirsting for 'white goats' to sacrifice to their cruel deities:

Hindu fanaticism and the cults of Kālī and Durgā are directly related to sedition and revolt. A secret Brahminical sect issues a manifesto that arouses a native army to demoniacal fury: 'Arise', the manifesto proclaims, 'and in the name of Durgā use your weapons until no single demon defiles our soil! . . . To every man who dips his hand in the blood of a white goat it shall be counted more than all the virtues'.⁷⁸

But clearly, the descriptions of the terrifying and yet also disturbingly seductive Tantras that we find throughout colonial writings and Victorian literature reflect as much of the British subconscious as of the 'Indian Mind'. As Wurgaft argues, these highly fanciful descriptions are a clear example of the 'mechanism that psychologists call projection: the displacement of one's own deep-seated wishes and fears onto some external object'. For Victorian novelists writing in India, the image of the Tantras was often a powerful projection of their own repressed desires, fears and anxieties, objectified in the mirror of an exotic Other.⁷⁹

The repressed thoughts of the irreproachable masters were brought to the surface by India and were projected onto Indians as proof of their depravity . . . They were repelled because they saw their society's taboos violated and were involved in the betrayal, they were allured by the forbidden and shameless depravity.⁸⁰

Deodorizing and Reforming the Tantras: Arthur Avalon and the Re-Imagining of Tantrism

Although his scholarship is now considered highly suspect and flawed, Sir John Woodroffe (1865–1936) must be acknowledged as a remarkable pioneer, and even as the 'father' of the modern study of the Tantras. Certainly among the most fascinating and enigmatic figures in the history of British India, Woodroffe appears to have led a kind of dual life, working publicly as a respected British judge, and studying privately as scholar of the Tantras. 'The son of Advocate-General of Bengal, Roman Catholic, Oxford graduate, Tagore professor of Law Calcutta University, judge on the High Court of Calcutta, Woodroffe was a complex bicultural personality who had to mediate . . . between two very different symbolic universes of the English lawyer and the Hindu pundit'.⁸¹ In his private life as a scholar of the Tantras, Woodroffe assumed the pseudonym and alternate identity of 'Arthur Avalon' (taken from an idyllic island of

Celtic mythology, the last resting place of King Arthur), under whose name he published a vast corpus of writings, translations and commentaries on the Tantras.

Woodroffe, it would seem, took it upon himself to defend the tradition of the Tantras. He was in fact the first in a long line of Western scholars who would attempt to rescue the Tantric tradition from its many critics among the Orientalists and colonial administrators. His mission, as he puts it, is to show that this tradition is 'so reasonable' that it cannot be misconstrued as the 'absurd and altogether immoral thing which some have supposed it to be'.⁸² Unfortunately, as many authors have pointed out, Woodroffe often went far in the opposite direction, attempting to provide a kind of 'prophylactic against prejudice'. Depicting the Tantras as a noble, philosophical and intellectual tradition, he marks the beginning of a 'hidden legacy of reform' in the modern study of Tantra.⁸³

According to Woodroffe's reformed version of Tantra, this tradition is by no means opposed to the teachings of the Veda and the Upaniṣads. On the contrary, it contains 'doctrines of a lofty speculation' which form the innermost essence and continuation of the 'orthodox' Vedic tradition.⁸⁴ The religion of India as a whole, he believes, is not the chaotic plurality of beliefs that it is often imagined to be. Rather, it forms a coherent, unified systematic whole, a single Bhārata Dharma or Āryan Religion:

To the Western, Indian Religion seems a jungle of contradictory beliefs amidst which he is lost . . . it has been asserted that there is no such thing as Indian religion, though there are many Religions in India. This is not so . . . There is a common Indian Religion . . . Bhārata Dharma, an Āryan Religion held by all Āryas.⁸⁵

The Tantras form an integral part of this greater 'Āryan Religion', in direct continuity with the primordial teachings of the Vedas and Vedānta. 'The Vedānta is the final authority and basis for the doctrines set forth in the Tantras'; 'the Tantra śāstra . . . has been for centuries past one of the recognized scriptures of Hinduism, and every form of Hinduism is based on Veda and Vedānta'.⁸⁶ Indeed, the Tantras are nothing other than the practical application and ritual means of the teachings of the Vedānta, which in Woodroffe's view is the essence of Indian philosophy:

The Śākta Tantra simply present the Vedāntik teachings in a symbolic form for the worshipper, to whom it prescribes the means whereby they may be realized in fact. Vedānta in its various forms has for centuries constituted the religious notions of India, and the Āgamas . . . are its practical expression in worship and ritual affording the means whereby Vedāntik doctrine is realized.⁸⁷

Not only are the Tantras in basic continuity with the most noble traditions of the Vedas, Woodroffe suggests, but they are also in basic agreement with the latest discoveries in modern European science, and 'in conformity with the most advanced scientific and philosophic thought of the West'.⁸⁸ As such, many of Woodroffe's interpretations of the Tantras involve a rather weird mixture of Western scientific terminology (evolution, matter, energy, etc.), and Sanskrit philosophical language. With the findings of modern science, the Tantras agree that all matter and all energy is essentially one, and that there is ultimately no duality between the physical and the mental or spiritual world:

This basic unity, this oneness of origin that underlies all forms in creation is a fact of spiritual experience which is being increasingly corroborated by the results of . . . Science. The Cartesian dualism of mind and matter no longer holds . . . the missing

links pertain only to the superficies of the process of Evolution and, probed deeper, the universe reveals an unbroken Continuum over all the tiers of existence.⁸⁹

The Tantras, moreover, describe the 'evolution' of the world by means of the Goddess Śakti, who is the driving power of Energy and Matter. The aim of this cosmic evolution is the birth of the highest man, the self-realized yogi, who has discovered his own ultimate unity with all things:

In the highest man evolution on the material plane ends. Evolution takes place through the Power of God which is always transforming itself into higher forms in order that Spirit may be freed of the bonds of Mind and Matter . . . This is the Eternal Rhythm of the Divine Mother as Substance-Energy.⁹⁰

Not only does Woodroffe wish to find parallels between the Tantras and modern science, but more strikingly, he also has a persistent desire to find parallels with the traditions of the Catholic Church. Like the ancient and carefully guarded liturgy of the Church, he suggests, the Tantras have preserved throughout the ages an elaborate ritual tradition, whose true aim is to awaken higher spiritual emotions. In the following rather bizarre passage, Woodroffe goes so far as to compare the Catholic liturgy, point for point, with a Tantric ritual, identifying specific ritual elements with corresponding Sanskrit terms:

So, as the Council of Trent declared, 'the Catholic Church, rich with the experiences of ages and clothed with their splendour, has introduced mystic benediction (*mantra*), incense (*dupa*) water (*acamāna*), lights (*dīpa*), bell (*ghanta*), flowera (*puṣpa*), vestments and amble magnificence of ceremonies in order to excite the spirit of religion to the contemplation of the profound mysteries which they reveal'. As are its faithful, the Church is composed of both body (*deha*) and soul (*ātma*). It renders to the lord (Īśvara) a double worship, external (*bāhyapūja*) and interior (*mānasapūja*), the latter being the prayer (*vandana*) of the faithful.⁹¹

A devout Roman Catholic himself, Woodroffe appears to have found in the Tantras an echo of his own very traditional and conservative beliefs. As we see in his massive two-volume translation of *The Principles of Tantra*, composed by the Tāntrik pundit Shiva Chandra Vidyarnava Bhattacharya, the Tantras are presented as a highly conservative and orthodox response in defense of Hindu orthodoxy against the onslaughts of 'modernism' and secular reforms—one which closely parallels the defense of traditional Catholicism against modernity in the early twentieth century:

The present work is a defense of the Tantra . . . undertaken in the interests of Hindu orthodoxy in its Tāntrika form against Secularism . . . and various reforming movements, of which . . . the Brāhma Samāj was a leading type . . . The book reads like an orthodox Catholic protest against 'modernism' and is interesting as showing how many principles are common to all orthodox belief, East or West.⁹²

In order to prove that the Tantras contained noble philosophical teachings, in line with the Vedas, Vedānta and Western science, Woodroffe was forced to go to great lengths to rationalize, explain or excise the more offensive aspects of this tradition. A large portion of his work was devoted to a kind of 'moralizing censorship of Tantric eroticism'.⁹³ Above all, Woodroffe had to rationalize the Tantric use of substances and practices which are normally forbidden and considered immoral in Hindu society, namely, the *pañcatattva*, or so-called 'five Ms' of meat (*māmsa*), fish (*matsya*), wine (*madya*), parched grain (*mudrā*) and sexual intercourse (*maithuna*). The secret rites of the

Tantra, he explains, are strictly closed to the ordinary *paśu* or bestial man of worldly desires; they can only be revealed to the true *vīra*, the hero or spiritually evolved man, who can fathom their deeper spiritual meaning. In their highest understanding, the meaning of these practices is not literal and physical, but rather symbolic—‘of a purely mental and spiritual character’. Thus wine (*Madya*) represents the ‘intoxicating knowledge acquired by yoga; meat is not any fleshy thing but the act whereby the *sādhaka* consigns all his acts to [God]; *Matsya* is that knowledge by which the worshipper sympathizes with the pleasure and pain of all beings. *Mudrā* is the act of relinquishing all association with evil . . . and *Maithuna* is the union of Śakti Kuṇḍalinī with Śiva in the body of the worshipper’.⁹⁴ In fact, Woodroffe goes as far as to argue that the Tantras may be considered in many respects even more ‘ethical’ in their sexual attitudes than many of his own often hypocritical, countrymen:

There is nothing ‘foul’ in them except for people to whom all erotic phenomena are foul . . . the ancient East was purer in these matters than the modern West, where, under cover of a pruriently modest exterior . . . extraordinarily varied psychopathic filth may flow. This was not so in earlier days . . . when a spade was called a spade and not a horticultural instrument.⁹⁵

It is no accident that Woodroffe believed the most noble of all Tantras to be the curious and rather suspicious text known as the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* (‘the Tantra of the Great Liberation’). As a number of scholars have argued, it is quite probable that this text was a fabrication of the late eighteenth century and that it bears the heavy imprint of Western moral, philosophical and even legal ideas. Indeed, some have even suspected that it may have been the fabrication of Rāmmohun Roy or his guru, Hariharānanda, promoted as an ‘ancient text’ to legitimate certain of his own social and religious reforms.⁹⁶ Not only does the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* present a highly Vedāntic vision of the supreme Brahman conceived in monotheistic, non-idolatrous terms; and not only does it contain an enormous and highly unusual amount of material on orthodox laws of caste, marriage, inheritance and other legal matters;⁹⁷ but it also strongly downplays and moralizes the more objectionable erotic aspects of Tantric practice, mentioning them only by means of ‘great euphemisms’. ‘It endorses rituals that would not be threatening to a Western outlook’, giving a ‘monistic interpretation to Tantric practices’.⁹⁸ As such, it is generally said to be less popular among many Tantrics than among many Hindu reformers and Western scholars, precisely because ‘certain of its provisions appear to display unnecessary timidity’ and even a ‘puritanical outlook’. One pundit even spoke of this text rather scornfully as a ‘*woman’s tantra*’.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, in Woodroffe’s mind, this extremely idiosyncratic, highly suspicious and quite probably intentionally ‘deodorized’ text represents the quintessence and most noble exemplar of the Tantric tradition.

Conclusions: Imagining and Re-imagining ‘Tantrism’ in the Twentieth Century

This article has of course been restricted to the genealogy of Hindu Tantrism, and specifically the construction of this category in Western, primarily British, discourse. However, I would hope that these insights would also have broader implications for the imagining of Buddhist Tantrism and for construction of these categories within Indian discourse. In a future study, in fact, I hope to address the other side of the question, by exploring Indian responses to and counter-constructions of Tantrism, and the complex cross-cultural dialectic between Eastern and Western imaginations.

Finally, I would also hope that these comments might have some implications for the ongoing imagining and re-imagining of the category of 'Tantrism' in our own era. For it has been largely through the dialectical interplay of these two constructions of Tantrism—the Orientalist denigration and Woodroffe's defense and deodorization—that this category has been passed on to modern historians of religions.

As we see in the works of the great early twentieth century Indologists—Heinrich Zimmer, Agehananda Bharati, Giuseppe Tucci, Mircea Eliade—most of these authors have on the one hand accepted the Orientalist assumption that Tantra in some sense embodies the most extreme, most 'other' aspect of the Indian mind. But they have on the other hand also for the most part followed the lead of Woodroffe in his more positive appraisal and defense of the Tantras. Indeed, in many cases they have turned the Orientalist model completely on its head, by praising the Tantras as a much needed affirmation of the human body and sexuality. 'In the Tantra', as Zimmer puts it, 'the manner of approach is not that of Nay, but of Yea . . . the world attitude is affirmative . . . [M]an must rise through and by means of nature, not by rejection of nature'.¹⁰⁰

The Romanian born Mircea Eliade, for example, stands out as among the most important historians of religions to take interest in the Tantras. In his classic *Yoga: Immorality and Freedom*, Eliade conceives of Tantra as a new 'valorization' of the powers of nature, a vindication of the human body and sexuality. The Tantric use of sexual rites, for example, is said to reveal the most profound experience of freedom, unleashing the 'terrifying emotion one feels before the revelation of the cosmic mystery'.¹⁰¹ Still more importantly, Eliade imagines Tantra to be a kind of living remnant of the oldest, most primordial layer of Indian consciousness, dating back to pre-Āryan days when popular religion and worship of the Mother Goddess had not yet been overtaken by the priestly, androcentric Āryans. Embodying the 'great underground current of autochthonous spirituality', the 'irresistible Tantric advance in the medieval period implies a new victory of the pre-Āryan popular strata'.¹⁰² In short, although he casts it in a far more favorable light, Eliade continues the old Orientalist image of Tantra as the Extreme Orient or India's darkest heart—the most primordial layer of 'aboriginal' India.

At the same time, most of the more respectable scholarly discussions of the Tantras in the last decade have in turn reacted strongly against this romantic celebration of Tantra. Instead, most contemporary scholarship has in many ways continued in the tradition of John Woodroffe, by defending the Tantras against charges of immorality and licentiousness, and by concentrating primarily—and often exclusively—on the philosophical and intellectual dimensions of the tradition. As we see, for example, in the recent proliferation of literature on the Kashmir Śaivite Tantric tradition, most of the recent scholarship has been almost entirely philosophical, highly cerebral and purely textual in its focus.¹⁰³ Padoux, for example, has argued strongly against those who identify Tantrism as a primarily ritual or practical tradition, insisting instead that it is first and foremost a philosophy and a speculative metaphysical system, with a highly sophisticated world-view (*Weltanschauung*). 'Tantric traditions are gnoses: deliverance or powers come through knowledge . . . knowledge is always some secret doctrine, which . . . is the base upon which the tradition rests'.¹⁰⁴

If space allowed, I would of course want to pursue this genealogy further still, into our own generation and the increasing preoccupation with Tantrism in the Western mind. Indeed, not only has there been an increasing proliferation of scholarly works on the Tantras, but Tantra has come to enchant the Western popular imagination and popular religion. As we can now see in any corner bookstore, in a relentless barrage of New Age literature and best-selling paperbacks bearing titles like *Tantric Paths to Ecstasy* and *Tantric*

Sex for Couples (not to mention popular films like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*), Western audiences continue to seize upon this category as the most exotic, most alluring aspect of the mysterious Orient itself.¹⁰⁵

To close, I would simply like to offer a few suggestions as to how we might begin to reimagine and redefine the category of Tantrism in contemporary discourse. Although deeply problematic and ambiguous, this is also a potentially useful and perhaps unavoidable category for the understanding of certain aspects of South Asian belief and practice. First of all, as I have explained, I would agree for the most part with Douglas Brooks and his argument for a polythetic rather than a monothetic definition of Tantra. Rather than identify a single essence, a polythetic definition simply delineates a given set of shared characteristics and family resemblances: for example, the claim to extra-Vedic authority, the use of special forms of bodily discipline and yogic techniques, the explicit transgression of established laws of caste and purity, the use of forms of initiation in which caste and gender are not the primary tests of qualification, and so forth.¹⁰⁶ To use the terms of Jonathan Z. Smith, the category of 'Tantrism' is thus best used and understood as a product of the 'scholarly imagination', a tool or heuristic device which we employ in order to organize and interpret a given set of phenomena. Like most categories in the history of religions, however, this is also a highly pluralistic and fluid category, in need of ongoing critical examination and re-definition—less a neat and narrowly circumscribed entity than a kind of 'messy hodge-podge' or 'heap of rubbish'.¹⁰⁷

Secondly and more importantly, however, I would also agree strongly with Jeffrey Kripal and his recent work on Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, in which he argues for a far more 'embodied' and contextualized approach to Tantra. Most recent scholarship, Kripal suggests, has for the most part followed in Woodroffe's legacy, by limiting itself to highly abstract, philosophical Sanskrit texts, while ignoring the more concrete historical contexts in which Tantra is practised:

Scholarship on Tantra . . . is still working in the legacy of its founder, John Woodroffe, whose work was marked by profound philosophical . . . and moral biases and an apologetic designed to rid Tantra of everything that smacked of superstition, or scandal. Writing within this 'Victorian' tradition, numerous scholars have attempted all sorts of mental gymnastics in a desperate effort to rescue the tradition from its stubbornly 'impure' ways.¹⁰⁸

What is most needed now is a study of the 'Tantras' seen neither as a seedy cabal of libertines and subversives, nor as an abstract set of purely philosophical texts; rather we need to take Tantra seriously as a living, embodied tradition, with an enormous diversity of forms and variations within its many social and historical contexts. We need, in short, to move beyond the abstract level of disembodied Sanskrit texts, 'to *present Tantra not in its ideal state but in its lived compromises and contradictions*'.¹⁰⁹ Douglas Brooks' recent work on South Indian Tantra, and Alexis Sanderson's work on the social and political context of Kashmir Śaivism are important steps in this direction. But perhaps the most promising of the recent efforts is Kripal's own work on Rāmakṛṣṇa, where he argues strongly for a deeply contextual approach to the study of Tantric traditions, based on the lives of real human beings, 'with all their warts', and intimately tied to the social, historical and political circumstances in which they emerge. Much further work, however, remains to be done in order to ground those traditions which we wish to call 'Tantric' very concretely within their historical, social, economic and political contexts. Perhaps, then, we might begin to move beyond the construction of Tantrism as the exotic 'extreme

Orient' and instead as a very concrete, very historical—even if rather messy and problematic—category in the history of religions.

Notes

- 1 *The Life and Teaching of Naropa*, New York, Oxford 1971, p. 102.
- 2 *Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*, Albany, SUNY 1990, p. 31. 'An objective assessment of Tantrism is not easy, for the subject is controversial and perplexing. Not only do . . . theorists give different definitions of Tantrism, but its very existence has sometimes been denied . . . But it so happened that it was in texts known as *tantras* that Western scholars first described doctrines and practices different from those of Brahmanism and classical Hinduism . . . so the Western experts adopted the word Tantrism for that particular, and for them, repulsive aspect of Indian religion' (Padoux, 'Tantrism: an Overview,' in M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York, Macmillan 1986, vol. XIV, pp. 271–2). John Woodroffe himself had also made this point long ago (*Shakti and Shākta*, New York, Dover 1978, pp. 54–5).
- 3 See Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, Oxford, Blackwell 1990.
- 4 *Hinduism*, London Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge 1894, p. 129. On the 'generally pejorative assessment of the Tantras in European authors, see Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, Albany, SUNY 1988, p. 205, and David Kopf, *The Brāhmo Samāj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1979, p. 265. As Kopf comments, 'The enduring legacy of Orientalism is a contrasting set of images: the golden age, which is Indo-Aryan, classical Brahminical, and elitist, versus a subsequent dark age, which is medieval, popular, orgiastic and corrupt . . . An age of Kāli . . . descended upon the subcontinent as Indian culture became tribalized, its heroic classicism swamped by orgiastic religion and witchcraft' ('A Historiographical Essay on the Idea of Kāli', in T. Stewart [ed.], *Shaping Bengali Worlds, Public and Private*, East Lansing Asian Studies Center 1989, p. 114).
- 5 *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, New York, Vintage 1981, p. 25. See also Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: the Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*, London, Longman 1981. As Weeks comments, 'the Western experience of sex . . . is not the inhibition of discourse, but is rather a constant deployment of discourses on sex, and this ever-expanding discursive explosion is part of a growth of control over individuals through the apparatus of sexuality' (pp. 6–7).
- 6 See Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination, 1880–1930*, London, A. Lane 1972; Lewis Wurgaft, *The Imperial Imagination: Magic and Myth in Kipling's India*, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press 1983, pp. 55–6.
- 7 See R. K. Dasgupta, 'A British Worshipper of the Mother', *The Statesman Puja Supplement* (2 October 1959). Jeffrey J. Kripal, 'Woodroffe, Sir John', unpublished manuscript, p. 1; Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, Garden City, Doubleday 1970, p. 9; J. Duncan M. Derrett, 'A Juridical Fabrication of early British India: The Mahānirvāṇa Tantra', in *Essays in Classical and Modern Hindu Law, II, Consequences on the Intellectual Exchange with the Foreign Powers*, Leiden, Brill 1977, pp. 197–242. See also my essay, 'The Strategic Uses of an Esoteric Text: the Mahānirvāṇa Tantra', *South Asia* 18 (1995), pp. 55–82.
- 8 The question of the imagining of 'Tantrism' by nineteenth-century Indian authors—who were by that time deeply influenced by Western Orientalism and British morality—is an extremely complicated one, and one which I plan to pursue later in a separate study. Here one would need to look at the discussion of the Tantras among the early Hindu reformers such as Rāmmohun Roy, among influential Indian saints and mystics such as Rāmakrishna and Vivekenanda, and finally among later Indian scholarship.

To cite just one of many examples of the Indian attitude, Benyotosh Bhattacharya described the Tantras as follows, 'If at any time the mind of the nation as a whole has been diseased, it was in the Tantric age, the period immediately preceding the Muhammedan conquest of India. The story related in the Tantric works is . . . so repugnant that . . . all respectable scholars have condemned them wholesale . . . no one should forget that the Hindu population of India as a whole is even today in the grip of this very Tantra in its daily life, and is suffering from the very disease which originated 1300 years ago . . . Someone should take up the study comprising the diagnosis, aetiology, pathology and prognosis of the disease, so that more capable men may take up its eradication in the future' (*An Introduction to Buddhist Esotericism*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsiclas 1980 [1931], p. vii). J. N. Bhattacharya offers a similar description of the 'fiendish Tantrics', holding 'bacchanalian orgies of such a beastly character that it is impossible even to think

- of them without horror' (*Hindu Castes and Sects*, Calcutta, Editions Indian 1968 [1896], pp. 325–6).
- 9 For a good discussion of the imagining of Buddhist Tantrism, see Donald Lopez, 'The Heart Sūtra as Tantra', in his *Elaborations or Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sūtra*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996: 'Tantra functions as a lamented supplement in the European construction of an original Buddhism . . . tantra is emblematic of the category of the other in Indian religion, that factor in contradistinction from which an orthodoxy is defined by the Western scholar. Tantra, so generally excoriated as non-Buddhist, as popular, as degenerate, as a late development, proves to be the condition for the very possibility of representing an original Buddhism' (pp. 22–3).
 - 10 On this point, see Jeffrey Kripal, *Kālī's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Rāmākrishna*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1995, pp. 28f.
 - 11 Lopez, p. 26.
 - 12 S. C. Banerji, *A Brief History of Tantra Literature*, Calcutta, Naya Prokash 1988, p. 1.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1899.
 - 15 Banerji, p. 2.
 - 16 Cintaharan Cakravarti, *The Tantras: Studies on their Religion and Literature*, Calcutta, Punthi Pustak 1963, p. 1f. On the etymology of the term, see also Lopez, p. 13.
 - 17 'A Survey of Tantric Hinduism for the Historian of Religion', *History of Religion*, 20 (1981), p. 348.
 - 18 Padoux, 'Hindu Tantrism', in M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religions*, New York, Macmillan 1986, vol. XIV, p. 273. Kulluka Bhaṭṭa, the well-known commentator on Manu, says that Śruti is of two kinds, Vaidik and Tāntrik (Woodroffe, p. 85).
 - 19 'The word "Tantrism" assuredly is a Western creation. India traditionally knows only texts called Tantras. These texts . . . fall far short of covering the entire Tantric literature; nor are only Tantric texts called Tantras' (André Padoux, 'A Survey of Tantrism for the Historian of Religions'. Review article of *Hindu Tantrism*, by Sanjukta Gupta, Dirk Jan Hoens and Teun Goudriaan. *History of Religions* 20 [1981]: p. 350).
 - 20 *The Secret of the Three Cities: An Introduction to Hindu Śākta Tantrism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1990; see Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1986, pp. 1–8. As Brooks argues, a phenomenon need not call itself Tantric to be Tantric. A text, tradition or individual need only possess a significant number of those characteristics that define Tantrism as a polythetic class' (p. 53).
 - 21 Brooks, p. 71; Goudriaan lists 18 characteristics, which overlap for the most part with Brooks' enumeration (in Sanjukta Gupta, Dirk Jan Hoens and Teun Goudriaan. *Hindu Tantrism*, Leiden, Brill 1979, pp. 7–9).
Alternatively, Madeleine Biardeau and André Padoux have suggested that the most fundamental characteristic of the diverse group of texts, practices and beliefs we call 'Tantrism' is the explicit use of *kāma*—desire in all its forms—as an instrument to liberation. Rather than rejecting human desire, the material body and the physical world, Tantra affirms the presence of divinity and power within all things of this universe. Tantric practice is intended to tap into and manipulate that power, to harness it toward the end of salvation, and, ultimately, to transform the human body itself (Padoux, 'A Survey of Tantric Hinduism', p. 350; cf. Biardeau, *Clefs pour la pensée hindoue*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France 1972, p. 209).
 - 22 Padoux, 'Hindu Tantrism', p. 275.
 - 23 Gupta et al., pp. 20ff. On the popular association of Tantra and pre-Aryan traditions, see, for example, Narendra Nath Bhattacharya, *History of the Śākta Religion*, Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal 1974; Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1971; Wendel Beane, *Myth, Cult and Symbols in Śākta Hinduism: Study of the Indian Mother Goddess*, Leiden, Brill 1977.
 - 24 Gupta et al., pp. 20f.
 - 25 See D. C. Sircar, *Śakti Cult and Tārā*, Calcutta, University of Calcutta Press 1967.
 - 26 On the Pāñcarātra tradition, see F. O. Schrader, *Introduction to the Pāñcarātra and the Ahirbudhnya Samhitā*, Madras, Adyar Research Library 1977; On the Śaivāgamas, see Mark Dyczkowski, *The Canon of the Śaivāgamas and the Kujikā Tantras of the Western Kaula Tradition*, Albany, SUNY 1988.
 - 27 Padoux, 'Hindu Tantrism', p. 275; Gupta et al., pp. 25f.

- 28 On the non-Sanskritic, vernacular tantric traditions, such as the Bāuls, Sahajiyās and other groups in Bengal, see, for example, Shashibhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults as a Background to Bengali Literature*, Calcutta, Firm KLM 1950; Edward C. Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā Cult of Bengal*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1966; June McDaniel, *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1996; Kripal. On the South Indian Tamil tantric schools, see Douglas Brooks, 'Encountering the Hindu Other: Tantrism and the Brahmins of South India', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60 (1992), pp. 405–436.
- 29 Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New York, Columbia University Press 1989: 'Behind Orientalism's exhaustive inquiries, its immense scholarly achievements . . . lay interests that were far more than scholarly . . . Warren Hastings clearly understood the driving force of Orientalism to be the doctrine that 'every accumulation of knowledge and especially such as is obtained by social connection with people over whom we exercise a dominion . . . is useful to humanity'. Hastings' argument is an . . . unabashed rationalization of the dialectic of information and control that Edward Said has characterized as the basis of Orientalism' (p. 28)
- 30 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command', in *Subaltern Studies*, vol. IV, R. Guha (ed.), Delhi, Oxford 1985, pp. 276, 283–4. 'Caste and religion were the sociological keys to understanding the Indian people. If they were to be governed well, then it was natural that information should be systematically collected about caste and religion' (Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi, Oxford 1987, p. 243).
- 31 Inden, p. 49. 'Discourses on India have wanted to represent the actions of Indians as expressions of a . . . tradition or morality differing from the Western one. The Indian mind . . . is inherently imagination rather than rational: it thinks in mythic, symbolic and ritualist rather than in historical and practical terms. That mind is governed by passions rather than will, pulled this way and that by its desire for glory, opulence and erotic pleasures or total renunciation rather than prompted to build a prosperous economy and orderly state. The Indian mind is devoid of . . . scientific rationality' (pp. 263–4).
- 32 *The People of India*, Calcutta, Thacker, Spink & Co. 1908, p. 265.
- 33 According to Barth, although the Tantras may contain some theosophical and moral reflections, the Śākta is nonetheless 'nearly always a hypocrite and debauche' (*The Religions of India*, London, Trübner 1891 [1879], pp. 199f; for Winternitz, the primary content of the Tantras is 'wild superstition, occult humbug, idiocy, empty magic and a cult with a most objectionable morality . . . distorted by orgies' ('Die Tantras und die Religion der Śākta', *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift*, Heft. 300 [1916]). According to Poussin, Tantrism has two distinct elements: 1. vulgar magical rites; 2. theurgy or techniques for compelling a god to act ('Tantrism [Buddhist]', in J. Hastings [ed.], *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. XII, New York, Scribner's 1992, pp. 194–5). Many other great European Orientalists such as Max Müller have virtually nothing at all to say about the Tantras.
- 34 Cf. Mill, *The History of British India*, London, J. Madden 1858, vol. XII. For selections from Dow, Holwell and others, see P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the 18th Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1970. The Tantras are also nowhere mentioned in the other early histories of India such as C. Stewart's *History of Bengal from the Mohammedan Invasion to the Conquest by the English*, London, Black Parry 1813.
- 35 *The Works of Sir William Jones*, Delhi, Agam Prakasham 1977 [1799], vol. IV, pp. 93ff.
- 36 *Essays on Hindu Religion and Ancient Indian Literature*, vol. II, Delhi 1977, pp. 185f.
- 37 'On the religious Ceremonies of the Hindus' [1805], in H. T. Colebrooke, *Miscellaneous Essays*, London, Trübner 1837, p. 111. See also David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Modernization, 1773–1835*, Berkeley, University of California Press 1969, pp. 41f.
- 38 Ward, *A View of the History. Literature and Religion of the Hindoos*, London, Kingsbury, Parbury and Allen 1817, vol. II, pp. lxxvi, xlix, xlii, xxii.
- 39 *A View of the History*, vol. I, p. 247. For a discussion of Ward's view of Tantra, see John Woodroffe (A. Avalon), *Principles of Tantra: The Tantratattva of Śrīyukta Śiva Candra Vidyāṇava Bhaṭṭācārya Mahodaya*, Madras, Ganesh 1960.
- 40 Ward. See also Woodroffe, Preface to *Principles of Tantra*, vol. I, pp. 2, 3.

- 41 'Since Wilson's time all who have dealt with the Tantras appear to have adopted second-hand the accounts given by him and Ward' (Woodroffe, *Principles of Tantra*, p. 4).
- 42 Wilson, *Essays and Lectures, chiefly on the Religion of the Hindus*, London, Trübner 1846 (originally published in *Asiatic Researches*, 1828 and 1832). 'The Śakti is personated by a naked female to whom meat and wine are offered, and then distributed amongst the assistants . . . it is terminated with the most scandalous orgies amongst the votaries' (*ibid.*, pp. 257–8).
- 43 *Religious Sects of the Hindus*, E. Rost (ed.), Calcutta, Susil Gupta 1858, p. 140.
- 44 *Hinduism*, pp. 122–3. Somewhat earlier, in 1874, scholars like J. Talboys Wheeler, had begun to speak of the 'so-called Tantric religion', in which 'nudity is worshipped in Bacchanalian orgies which cannot be described (*The History of India from the Earliest Age*, London, Trübner 1874, p. 364).
- 45 *Hinduism*, p. 116; *Brahmanism and Hinduism*, London, Macmillan 1891, pp. 180ff. 'The rites, or rather, orgies, of the left hand worshippers presuppose the meeting of men and woman of all castes in the most unrestrained manner . . . But the object of these worshippers is not merely to break through the restraint of caste and give themselves up to licentious practices. They also aim at acquiring magical and mystical powers' (*ibid.*, p. 127).
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 47 Quoted in Woodroffe, *Principles of Tantra*, p. 5. According to Farquhar, the Tantras are 'fundamentally an unlimited array of magic rites drawn from the practices of the most ignorant and stupid classes' (*An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1920, p. 200). According to Moreland, 'the name of tantrism covers . . . an unattractive cult full of spells and magic, dominated by sexual ideas and expressing power in terms of violence and cruelty' (*A Short History of India*, London, Longmans 1936, p. 291).
- 48 'A Defense of Hindoo Theism', in I. C. Ghose (ed.), *The English Works of Rāja Rāmmohun Roy*, New Delhi, Cosmo 1982, vol. I, p. 9, vol. II, p. vii. Cf. Kopf, *The Brāhmo Samāj*, p. 625.
- 49 'Sexuality in the Aetiology of Neuroses', in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Writings of Sigmund Freud*, New York, Modern Library 1953–75, vol. III, p. 266.
- 50 Weeks, pp. 6–7.
- 51 R. Wuthnow et al. (eds), *Cultural Analysis: The Work of Peter Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault and Jurgen Habermas*, Boston, Routledge 1993, pp. 171–2. 'The medical examination, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report . . . function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power. The pleasure that comes of exercising power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, brings to light' (Foucault, p. 45).
- 52 Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud, Volume I: Education of the Senses*, New York, Oxford University Press 1984. 'In the age of Victoria perhaps more than any other, the boundaries between erotic expressiveness and reserve were shifting, problematic . . . The old paternalistic order was crumbling, most visibly among the middling classes in Western Europe . . . In this increasingly opaque, anxiety provoking situation, it was only rational for the bourgeoisie to develop a desperate commitment to privacy and to mount . . . a search for refined variants of earthy desires' (p. 36).
- 53 Steven Kern, *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1992, pp. 334–5. For similar works see Chapman Cohen, *Religion and Sex: Studies in the Pathology of Religious Development*, 1868 (reprint, London, Foulis 1919). As Foucault comments, 'what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, madmen, women and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex, reveries, obsessions, petty manias. Whence the setting apart of the "unnatural" as a specific dimension in the field of sexuality' (pp. 38–9). ('Sex, Secrecy and the Politics of Sahajiyā Scholarship', unpublished ms., North Carolina State University, Raleigh 1990, p. 35).
- 54 John Maynard, 'Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion', *University of Hartford Studies in Literature* 19 (1987), p. 61. As Tony Stewart comments, 'religious celibacy was destructive as was sexual license, prostitution adultery, unmarried sex, masturbation, divorce, widow remarriage and flirtation. What remained was married sexuality, with only one marriage per lifetime. Celibacy is religion without sex; licentiousness, sex without religion. The via media of married religious sexuality allows but one unified discourse' ('Sex, Secrecy and the Politics of Sahajiyā Scholarship', unpublished manuscript, p. 35).
- 55 For all that the Victorians were not the prudes . . . of modern myth, their sexual world was not a place where biology went unrestricted . . . what helped to make sex a potent force . . . was the Victorians' ability both to express and to contain sexuality . . . Those limits were set by the

- prevailing idea of 'normal sex': that is, heterosexuality . . . With growing insistence society . . . demanded the childbearing marital union' (Anderson, *When Passion Reigned*, pp. 17–8). See also Peter Cominos, 'Late Victorian Sexual Respectability and the Social System', *International Review of Social History* 8 (1963), pp. 18–48, 216–50.
- 56 See David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth Century India*, Berkeley, University of California Press 1993.
- 57 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, New York, Routledge 1995, p. 14. As Said put it, 'enlightenment metaphysics presented knowledge as a relation of power between two species . . . the male penetration and exposure of the veiled, female interior and the aggressive conversion of its "secrets" into a visible male science of the surface' (*Orientalism*, New York, Knopf 1979, p. 23).
- 58 Robert Orme, *Historical Fragments of the Moghul Empire*, London, F. Wingrave 1782, p. 472. As Sara Suleri comments, 'the feminization of the colonized subcontinent remains the most sustained metaphor shared by imperialist narratives from ethnographic, historical and literary fields . . . the "strength" of the colonizer is always delineated against the . . . colonized race's "weakness"' (*The Rhetoric of British India*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1992, p. 19).
- 59 Sir George MacMunn, *The Indian Underworld*, London, Macmillan 1933, p. 61.
- 60 See Mrinalini Sinha, 'The Age of Consent Act: The Ideal of Masculinity and Colonial Ideology in Nineteenth Century Bengal' in *Shaping Bengali Worlds, Public and Private*, T. Stewart (ed.), East Lansing, Asian Studies Center 1989, pp. 99–111. 'The British image of the Indian woman, and their notion of sexuality among natives was that of a draining and destructive experience' (Wurgaft, p. 51).
- 61 Wurgaft, p. 49.
- 62 Stewart, pp. 32–3.
- 63 *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 8–9. On the British denigration of the devadāsī tradition, see Frédérique Apfel Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, Delhi, Oxford University Press 1985.
- 64 London, Macmillan 1933, p. 156.
- 65 Quoted in Valentine Chirol *Indian Unrest*, London, Macmillan 1910, p. 346.
- 66 *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1994, p. 15. See Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1990. On the fear of the 'wild man' or savage in South America, see Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1987.
- 67 See Leonard Gordon, *Bengal: The National Movement, 1876–1940*, New York, Columbia University Press 1974; Ernest Payne, *The Śāktas: An Introductory and Comparative Study*, New York, Oxford University Press 1933.
- 68 Chirol, p. 30.
- 69 Quoted in Payne, *The Śāktas*, p. 101. 'The sense of the regressive character of Hindu belief was reflected in the British absorption with the cult of Kālī . . . During the first two decades of the 20th century when "unrest" and "sedition" among the native population began to plague the Anglo-Indian ruling elite . . . it cited the cult of Kālī . . . as its most fanatical expression' (Wurgaft, p. 66).
- 70 On Thugs, see Sir Francis Tukur, *The Yellow Scarf: The Story of the Life of Thuggee Sleeman or Major General Sir William Henry Sleeman, 1788–1856* London, Dent 1961; *Selected Records Collected from the Central Provinces and Berar Sretariat relating to the Suppression of Thuggee* Nagpur, Govt. Print 1939. On the use of the image of Kālī by revolutionaries in the Bengal National Movement, see Gordon, pp. 80ff.
- 71 Sir George MacMunn, *The Religions and Hidden Cults of India*, New York, Macmillan 1932, p. 156.
- 72 Chirol, pp. 102–3. See J. C. Oman, *Cults, Customs and Superstitions of India*, London, Unwin 1908.
- 73 As Parry comments, 'The Tantric tradition . . . whose texts do not teach to subdue the senses, but . . . to harness them in the achievement of ecstasy was frequently invoked by the British as evidence of India's depravity and intimacy with the forces of darkness. The rites of this system gave expression to inclinations which were rigorously suppressed in Imperial Britain . . . Indians were feared not only as subjects who had once rebelled . . . but as perverts threatening to seduce the white world' (*Delusions and Discoveries*, p. 149).
- 74 *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 17.
- 75 *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 149.

- 76 *The Swami's Curse*, London, Heineman 1929, p. 48.
- 77 *The Law of the Threshold*, London, Heineman 1924, p. 371.
- 78 Wurgaft, p. 67; cf. I. A. R. White, *Daughter of Brahma*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill 1912, pp. 305–6.
- 79 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 80 Parry, p. 99.
- 81 Kripal, 'Woodroffe, Sir John', p. 1. See also Bharati, p. 9.
- 82 Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shākta*, p. xii.
- 83 Kripal, 'Woodroffe, Sir John', Dasgupta, 'A British Worshipper of the Mother', p. 1.
- 84 Woodroffe, *Principles of Tantra*, p. 5.
- 85 Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shākta*, p. 1.
- 86 *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 365.
- 87 *Ibid.*, pp. 587, 589.
- 88 *Ibid.*, p. 3. 'He was one of the most vigorous advocates of the experimental nature of Indian religious thought and proclaimed its ultimate coincidence with modern science' (Halbfass, p. 400).
- 89 M. P. Pandit, Introduction to *The World as Power*, trans. John Woodroffe, Madras, Ganesh 1974, pp. vi–vii. 'The Primary doctrine of Advaita Vedānta is Unity . . . All are connected one with the other . . . practical Science is charged with the same mission. Railways, steamers, aeroplanes, the telegraph, the telephone, all help to establish the idea of the unity of mankind, to foster a wide view of the universe' (p. 4).
- 90 *The World as Power*, p. 91.
- 91 Woodroffe, *Principles of Tantra*, p. 63.
- 92 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 93 Kripal, 'Woodroffe, Sir John', p. 1.
- 94 *Tantra of the Great Liberation*, p. cxix.
- 95 Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shākta*, p. 134.
- 96 See my 'The Strategic Uses of an Esoteric Text'.
- 97 See J. Duncan M. Derrett's discussion of the legal issues which, he argues, were closely related to the changes in British Indian law at the end of the eighteenth century ('A Juridical Fabrication of Early British India: The Mahanirvana Tantra', in *Essays in Classical and Modern Hindu Law*, Leiden, Brill 1976, vol. II, pp. 197–242). See also my 'The Strategic Uses of an Esoteric Text.'
- 98 June McDaniel, *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1989, p. 104; cf. Wendy O'Flaherty, (ed.), *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1989, p. 134.
- 99 Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shākta*, p. 594; preface to *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*, p. xii.
- 100 Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, New York, Meridian Books 1956, p. 576. As Philip Rawson likewise affirms, 'In complete contrast to the strenuous "No" that official Brahmin tradition said to the world, Tantra says an emphatic . . . "Yes!" It asserts that, instead of suppressing pleasure . . . and ecstasy, they should be cultivated and used . . . Tāntrikas suspect the officially-approved No-sayers who hate the world . . . of a hidden self-indulgence' (*The Art of Tantra*, London, Routledge 1973, p. 10).
- 101 Eliade, p. 259.
- 102 *Ibid.*, pp. 201–2.
- 103 See Padoux, *Vāc*; Paul Muller Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Śiva: Kaula Tantricism of Abhinavagupta and the Non-Dual Shaivism of Kashmir*, Albany, SUNY 1989; Mark Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism*, Albany, SUNY 1987; Dyczkowski, *The Canon of the Śaivāgamas*.
- 104 *Vāc*, p. 42 and 42n.30.
- 105 The New Age and popular occult literature on Tantra is far too vast to engage here; for a very fine discussion of Western appropriations of Tantra, see Rachel Fell McDermott, 'The Western Kālī', in J. S. Hawley and D. M. Wulff (eds), *Devī: Goddesses of India*, Berkeley, University of California 1966.
- 106 Brooks, pp. 71f.
- 107 Smith, p. 18.
- 108 Kripal, *Kālī's Child*, p. 28.
- 109 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

HUGH B. URBAN is Assistant Professor of Comparative Studies at the Ohio State University. In his first book, he plans to explore the changing role of the Tantric traditions of Bengal during the British colonial era. He also has much broader comparative interests in the topic of secrecy as a cross-cultural category and has written widely on a variety of Indian, European and contemporary American esoteric traditions.

334 Dulles Hall, 230 W. 17th Avenue, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210, U.S.A.