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### Removing Obstacles

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# Removing Obstacles

**To better grasp the interplay between culture and religion, Professor Brian Hatcher begins by asking some unsettling questions.**

Story by Candace Schilling



**Brian Hatcher seeks to give his students a sense of the “lived reality” beyond the religious terms and concepts they study in class. (Photo by Marc Featherly)**

contagious,” says IWU theatre major Marti Lyons, who took Hatcher’s classes on Buddhism and Hinduism. “He brought to life a world, a time, and a place I’d never seen.”

Intellectual flexibility

To Midwestern eyes, stepping into Brian Hatcher’s office in Illinois Wesleyan’s Center for Liberal Arts might seem like entering some kind of Eastern shrine. His bookshelves are lined with Bengali texts, and a strand of wooden beads called a mala circles his desk lamp. Nearby are a printed Buddhist mantra and a statue of the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesh.

While talking to Hatcher, the McFee Professor of Religion at Illinois Wesleyan, it’s easy to forget that outside these walls is the gray dreariness of an Illinois winter and not the sights and sounds of India.

Hatcher has made a career out of introducing students to the richness and complexity of Asian religious life in courses like “Buddhism in India and Tibet” and “Asian Religious Literature.” But his classes are aimed at neither conversion nor tourism. Instead, he hopes to fire curiosity about the religions of India, China, Tibet and Japan, while equipping students with the intellectual tools to wrestle with the interplay between religion and culture.

“Professor Hatcher is as brilliant at conveying ideas and relating to undergraduate students as his passion is

Hatcher often thinks of Ganesh — the Lord of Good Fortune and Destroyer of Obstacles — when embarking on a new endeavor.

“I think of him at the beginning of something new,” he says, adding that he likes the idea of a deity working to remove obstacles from his path.

As a secularist who carries no religious banner of his own, Hatcher hopes to bring both objectivity and empathy to his teaching and his scholarship. In particular, he encourages his students to consider the material he teaches outside of the context of their own belief systems.



**Juniors Kari Irwin and Joe Carani deepen their discussions with Hatcher after class. Says one of Hatcher’s current students, Marti Lyons ’08, “He brought to life a world, a time, and a place I’d never seen.” (Photo by Marc Featherly)**

Though he respects each student’s faith, “I teach religion as a cultural product,” he says.

For Hatcher, this is the strength of a liberal arts education: the freedom to raise questions and look beyond one’s own culture and traditions. Studying the liberal arts “is meant to be unsettling,” he says. “You’re taking ownership of what you believe and learning to defend it.”

Hatcher’s students describe him as an energetic, interactive teacher. During class, he typically covers the white board with terms — drawing lines, boxes, and arrows between them to illustrate correct associations. As students in his Hinduism class journey through the terms, he invites them to consider connections between concepts such as “duty and power” or “purity and pollution” in the Hindu worldview.

The textbook he chose for the class, by British anthropologist Christopher J. Fuller, is entitled *The Camphor Flame*. “Many colleagues don’t use this book,” Hatcher tells his students. “They feel it’s too dense. But it takes you into the ‘lived reality’ of Hinduism in contemporary Indian society.”

That “lived reality” is what makes Hatcher’s

lectures come alive for his students.

“His courses differed from many others that I have taken in their clarity and discussion-based focus,” Hatcher’s former student Dan Glade ’05 writes via e-mail. “He pushed my academic development by encouraging critical engagement with texts and ideas, while also critiquing and improving my writing with great scrutiny.”

Hatcher's intellectual flexibility makes him an ideal religious historian, according to IWU Professor of History Michael Young. "There is a group-think, herd-like mentality among academics," says Young, "but Brian bucks those trends."

While many post-colonial studies of India emphasize the violation of native culture by Europeans, Hatcher is more interested in "the way the cultures converged and the interaction between those cultures," Young explains. "Though he wouldn't deny the misery and exploitation of colonialism, he sees the relationship between the two cultures was more nuanced and included mutual exchange."

A series of puzzles



**Hatcher and his son, Gerrit (shown above), visit Raj Ghat, a simple black platform that marks the site of Mahatma Gandhi's cremation in 1948.  
(Photo courtesy of Brian Hatcher)**

all known languages and formats, when he "stumbled upon" what he believes is the only existing copy of an 1841 Bengali pamphlet. This unsigned text recorded a series of discourses given in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the years 1839-40. While the text was labeled "Part One," Hatcher has not been able to locate a second part — if it was ever written. For this and other reasons, the text provided "a series of puzzles to solve," he says. However, it would be over a decade before he decided to try to solve them.

A potential clue to resolving these puzzles took the form of seemingly random Bengali characters printed in between some of the discourses recorded in "Part One." Were these characters the writers' initials, he wondered? If so, to whom did they belong?

"It took a lot of sleuthing to find out who these people were," says Hatcher, who set out to "do a translation [of the discourses], identify these authors, and place the whole thing in its historical context."

In 2007, Oxford University Press published Hatcher's newest book, *Bourgeois Hinduism, or the Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourses from Early Colonial Bengal*. Among its early reviewers was fellow Hinduism scholar Brian K. Pennington, who wrote that the book should firmly establish Hatcher "as one of the most insightful, resourceful, and discerning historians of colonial India writing today."

According to Hatcher, the book originated from a chance discovery he made while still a graduate student. In 1990, he was conducting research at the London-based British Library, which holds over 150 million items in



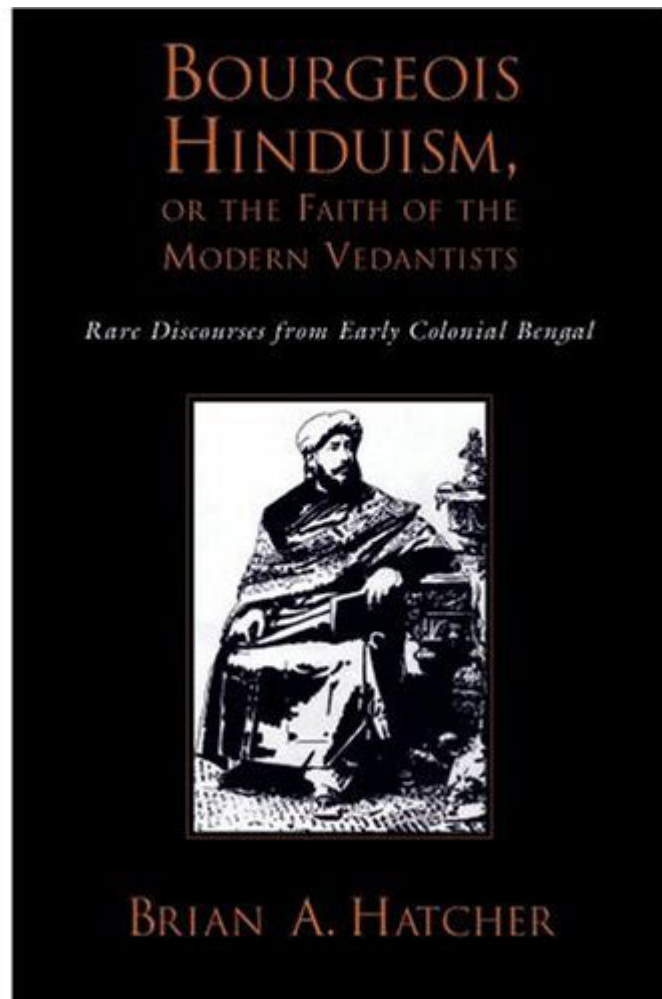
Hatcher's sleuthing led to a remarkable conclusion, revealed in his new book, in which he argues that the authors of these discourses were boldly attempting to establish a new interpretation of Hinduism. He concluded that the discourses were the work of a group of middle-class Bengali scholars, poets, and businessmen. During the 1830s, this class of Hindus had come to enjoy increased prosperity and social engagement.

"These were upwardly mobile men who were looking for a way to be Hindu and enjoy some worldly prosperity" at the same time, Hatcher says. As a result, "they began to articulate a code of religion congruent with their bourgeois aspirations." This code was unprecedented in many respects. Yet the proponents of this newfound religious identity also called upon ancient sources of Hindu spirituality as a guide for developing a modern form of theism they referred to as "Vedanta."

During his latest trip to India in the spring of 2007 — while conducting a research project funded by a Fulbright–Hays Senior Research Fellowship — Hatcher journeyed back to several towns near Kolkata that he had first visited as a graduate student. Here he witnessed concrete evidence of changes to the Indian economy since moves toward liberalization during the 1990s. This trip helped confirm a core thesis of his new book. Hatcher argues that many of the aspirations and tensions embodied within today's Indian middle class "can, in fact, be thought of as standing in some kind of continuity" with the "bourgeois Hinduism" articulated in those 19th-century discourses he discovered in the British Library.

In this respect, Hatcher hopes the book will not only help revise our understanding of religious change in early colonial Calcutta but will also promote further reflection on the ways contemporary middle-class Hindus seek "meaningful linkages between spiritual concerns and material aspirations."

Opening eyes



Hatcher's newest book, published by Oxford University Press, is *Bourgeois Hinduism, or the Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourses from Early Colonial Bengal*.



At first glance, Hatcher might seem an unlikely guide to the culture and customs of Asia. Raised in a fairly typical suburban family in Minnesota, Hatcher says, “it may have been Asia as a ‘fascinating other’ that grabbed me.”

He majored in chemistry as an undergraduate at Carleton College, but his life changed when he took an elective in Chinese philosophy and another in Indian history.

**Among the stunning sights Hatcher took in on his most recent trip of India was this vista at twilight at Sunderbans Tiger Sanctuary, West Bengal. (Photo by Brian Hatcher)**

studying the religions of Asia and India,” he says. “I graduated knowing I didn’t want to work in chemistry.”

“I started reading about religion on my own and by the end of my junior year, I was

While working on his Master’s of Divinity at Yale, Hatcher began the study of Sanskrit. He went on to earn his doctorate in the comparative study of religion from Harvard University. During his graduate studies at Harvard he made his first two extended trips to India for language study and research.

Hatcher joined Illinois Wesleyan’s faculty in 1992 immediately after completing his graduate work at Harvard. He says that since that time IWU students have helped him evolve and refine his teaching style.

“My students have made me more aware of myself as a teacher and, early on, they helped me balance lecture and active learning,” he says.

He has returned to Asia many times, sometimes with his wife, Alison, and their 16-year-old son, Gerrit. In 1998, Hatcher and IWU history major Andrew Busch ’98 were awarded a Freeman Foundation Student–Faculty Fellowship to conduct summer research in the country.

Hatcher “was a great guide, but he also understood that many things are best learned alone,” says Busch, who is now pursuing a doctorate in American studies at the University of Texas in Austin. “He gave me the freedom to experience India for myself.”

During their six-week stay in the country, the pair examined the significance of the late 19th-century Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna. Busch had become interested in the topic after taking Hatcher’s “Hindu Religious Tradition” course and wanted to consider how later generations go about preserving, or perhaps altering, the message of a religious leader. In India Busch was able

to visit sites associated with Ramakrishna's life and to discuss his legacy with devotees and scholars, primarily in Kolkata.

The experience "opened my eyes to the poverty and other infrastructural problems in the world, but I also got to witness the astounding acts of kindness that conditions like that can bring forth," Busch says.

Hatcher brings the vibrancy of Asia even to those students who haven't traveled to the subcontinent. Brian Egdorf '08 is a double major in French and Francophone studies and English literature. He took Hatcher's first-year Gateway course, "Orientalism/

Occidentalism," an experience that "pretty much set the rhythm for my entire undergraduate career," Egdorf says.

"It wasn't necessarily the material we covered in class, it was how it was covered," Egdorf recalls. "He took academics off its pedestal and made it more approachable for a freshman undergraduate." Despite Hatcher's "blue-jeans approach," Egdorf says, he was "never lacking brilliance."

Hatcher hopes that his work will inspire students and researchers to venture even further into worlds he has allowed them to glimpse. In this respect, his teaching mirrors his scholarship.

"I intend a lot of my work to be background for the questions other people may ask," he says.