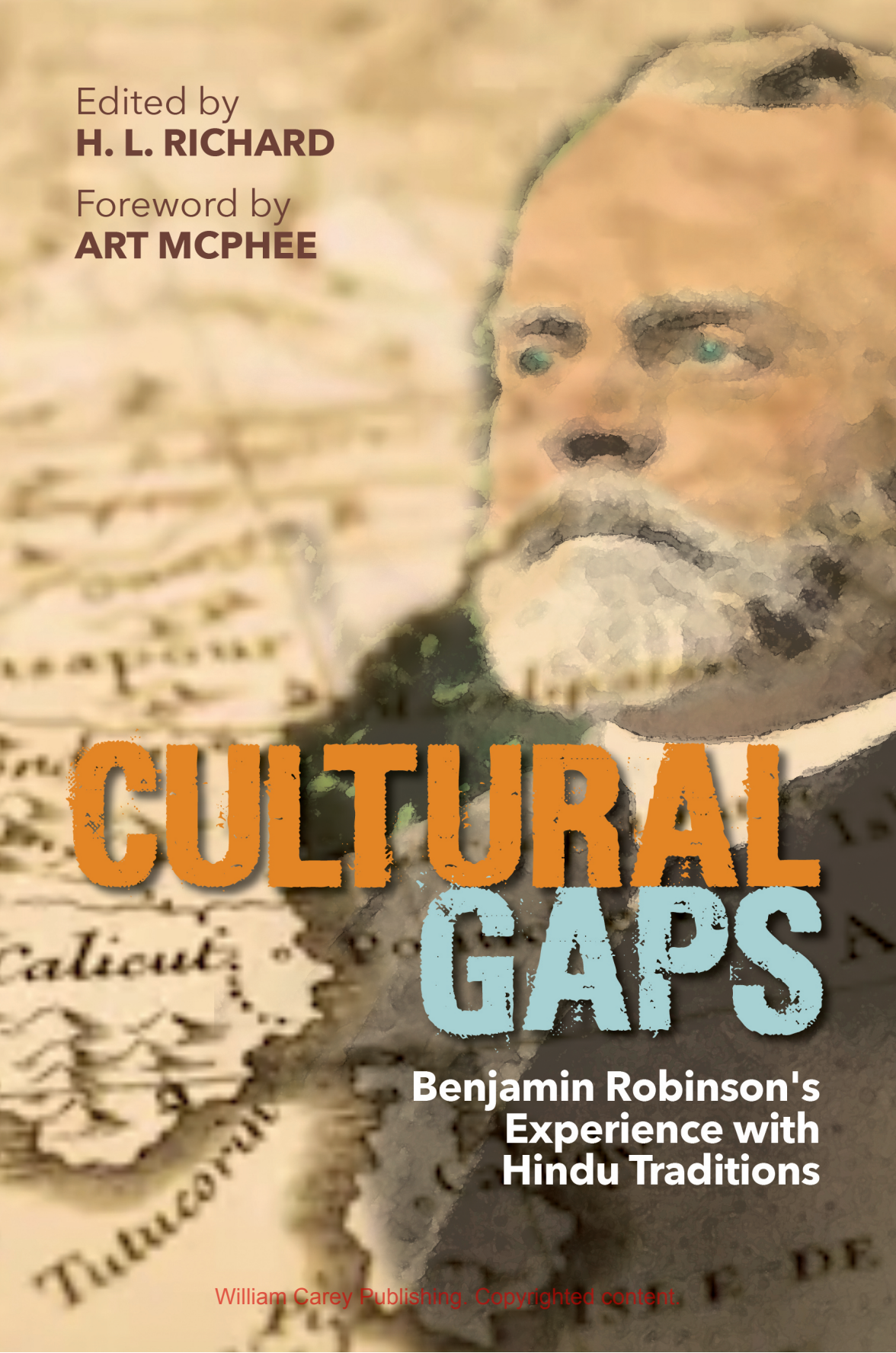


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Chapter 1

The Beginning of Understanding and Conviction

How far does my life defile Christ's message?

–Benjamin Robinson

Awe striking terror, vortex vast,
Life's whirl must predetermine Caste,
From highest God to lowest germs,
The God have worship, writhe the worm.[26]

The Hawk and the Dove

The goodness of King Shibi breathed fragrance through the three worlds. The gods Indra and Agni resolved to test his devotion. Indra became a hawk, Agni a dove. Pursued by the hawk, the dove fled to the king, sheltered behind him, and craved his protection. He promised that he would give his own life rather than give it up to death. As he was speaking, the hawk claimed that the dove was created on purpose for his food, and belonged to him of divine right. The king said, "It is your bounden duty, your lawful right, and virtue to slay and eat, but I have given my word to this dove; cannot you seek some other and be happy?"

"No," said the hawk, "none is so sweet as that, and unless you give me an equal weight from your own royal person, I will not forgo my right."

"Very good," said Shibi. Scales were ordered, the dove put into one, flesh cut from the king's own body in the other, but they could not outweigh the dove.

26. This little rhyme cannot be traced on the Internet. It is presumably from the language-learning manual that Robinson used in his early years in India, so perhaps it is a translation of a Kannada saying or a local production in English. There are resonances with the great vision of chapter 11 of the Bhagavad Gita, but no particular verse suggests what is stated here.

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Shibi placed his head to the sword. Then Indra and Agni flamed forth in their divine splendor, and set the seal of their blessing on his true devotion.[27]

So I read in early Kannada studies,[28] and pondered. Is the dove created on purpose to be food for the hawk? Is it the hawk's bounden duty, its lawful right, and its virtue to slay to eat? Does the birth-condition determine the life-function? Is the being of gods and kings so determined? Does caste mean birth-condition, which determines the custom, and right, of men inevitably? Is caste as divinely ordained as the right of the hawk to slay and eat?

The divine law[29] teaches that the vast vortex of created life, which is terrible beyond words, and ever passes through becoming, growth, and death, includes all—from Brahma, the highest divinity, down to the lowest plant-germs. The Most Glorious, who is above speech and thought, for the sake of preserving all this creation ordained distinctive duties for those who sprang from His mouth, arm, thigh, and foot.[30] The deeds of men that spring from mind, or voice, or body bear fruit of bliss or woe. Through faulty deeds of the body, man reaches plants; through those of the voice, birds or wild animals; through those of the mind, low birth-condition. If goodness constitutes the chief element of being, divinity is reached; if passion, manhood; if darkness, animal forms.[31]

Caste

I read such words. Something of their meaning dawned upon me. I had thought of universal right binding upon all men. Eternal and unchangeable in principle. Pure, sober, kindly, godly lives would surely witness that to every Kannadiga man. A friend, an assistant commissioner in Mysore, told me that one night when camped out, as he sat in his tent he heard the Kannadiga

27. This is a common folktale that appears in the Mahābhārata epic a few times; see 3.131, van Buitenen 1975, 470f. Robinson's conclusion praising King Shibi's "devotion" (*bhakti*) is intriguing, as the story rather highlights his commitment to truth or to dharma. See my introductory comments on Robinson's failure to recognize the centrality of *bhakti* to living Hindu traditions (pg. xxvii–xxviii).
28. Robinson used here and in many other places the antiquated term *Kanarese*, which I have replaced throughout with the now-standard *Kannada* (referring to the dominant language spoken in the state of Karnataka) or *Kannadiga* (the people who speak the Kannada language).
29. This presumably refers to dharma.
30. This is clearly a reference to the Puruṣasūkta, Rig Veda 10:90, particularly verse 12 on the creation of the four *varnas* from mouth, arm, thigh, and foot of the Cosmic Man. Note that the Rig Veda makes no association of different occupations related to these four social groups, about which the author of the hymn assumes basic knowledge. (See also note 38 in this chapter.)
31. This is a reasonable summary of some Upanishadic teaching, like Bṛhadāraṇyaka U. 4.4 or Chāndogya U. 5.10.7, or the Bhagavad Gita 14.5–20, etc.

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men outside say, "This *sahib*[32] doesn't say ____, doesn't drink brandy. What can he be?"

One deep-thoughted man solved it by saying, "Why this *sahib* must belong to the missionary caste."

The Lingāyats are bearers of the Linga, the god Siva's most sacred symbol, on their breasts. Brāhmans count them as heretics.[33] Once their faith was the state religion of Mysore.[34] Talking with one of their spiritual directors (gurus) in the courts of a temple, I asked him where, if I wished to become his disciple, he could teach me, and on what conditions I could be received into their community. He said, "If you complied with our conditions, received our teaching, and after probation were approved, we could receive you into our religion (our system of religious thought), but into our caste—never; that is impossible."[35]

As he used the word *jāti*—which we render caste, the constitution with which and the condition into which one is born—he spoke with reverent awe and a depth of meaning I could not then fathom. The meaning and mystery of caste began to unfold.

32. *Sahib* is an Urdu term (from Persian) meaning lord or master, commonly used by Indians toward all Europeans during the colonial era.
33. The concept of "heresy" in Hindu traditions hardly exists in the Christian sense of a teaching that violates orthodox standards. There is no single Hindu orthodoxy; there is a rubric where distinctions are made between *āstika* and *nāstika*, often defined as "believing" and "unbelieving," usually with the added note that it is believing or not believing the Vedas that is the distinguishing issue. The Lingāyats rejected the Vedas, probably the reason why Robinson's Brāhman friends referred to them as heretics. (See also note 35 of this chapter.)
34. The *Imperial Gazetteer of India* states this, particularly dating the supremacy of Lingāyatism in Mysore from 1350 to 1610 (Cotton et al, 1908, 202).
35. Robinson is touching on the complex relationship between caste and *sampradāya* (sect, tradition, theology), and is assuming too much of an assimilation between the two. The Lingāyats are a multi-caste confessional movement that was originally an anti-caste movement; today they often function like a caste but maintain aspects of a *sampradāya* (community based on a traditional teaching). See Schouten 1995 on the Lingāyats, and see A. M. Shah's seminal paper on the neglect of "sects" (*sampradāyas*) in the study and understanding of Hindu traditions (Shah 2006). The greatest change in this area in recent decades is the shift to conversions to Hinduism, a trend begun by the Hare Krishna movement which gradually has been assimilated by more mainstream Hindu traditions (Julia Roberts being a recent Hollywood convert to Hinduism). The caste status of such people is one of many complexities related to outsiders converting to Hinduism. (See Venkatesan Vembu's satirical piece about Julia Roberts' caste at http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-dear-julia-roberts-1423112.)

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Three Types of Brāhmans

Often Brāhmans are grouped together as one caste. In Karnataka there are three great series of castes among them. The Smārtas, followers of the sacred *smriti*, the traditional interpretation of scripture, worship Siva. In religious thought they are *advaitins* (i.e., non-dualists), holding that the only real substance is one, alone; all that appears is in truth only seeming. They bear three white ashen marks drawn horizontally through a round spot on the forehead, across each breast, and three times on each arm. The Mādhavas, who are followers of Madhvāchārya, taught exactly the opposite. They are *dvaitas*, or dualists, and maintain the eternal difference of finite selves from Vishnu, the great Supreme. They bear a vertical black mark drawn through a black, round spot above the nose, and the seal of Vishnu on forehead, breast, and arms. The Srivaishnavas bear the trident in the middle of the forehead—the center line red and the two outer ones white. They worship Vishnu, and in religious thought they are modified non-dualists, holding that the distinction of creator and created must subsist eternally, excepting that finite selves may gain closest unity with the divine.

The facial expression and bearing of each of these three castes is as different from each other as their caste marks and religious systems of thought.[36] A Smārta friend once said to me that the Mādhavas worshipped Hanuman,[37] the monkey-god, until they became monkey-headed; that they insisted on duality until it developed self-assertion to excess, while his own non-dual system led to a truer sense of proportion as to the relative value of the individual ego. My teacher was a Srivaishnava, who bore the honorific title *Ayyangāra.* I had a friend who was called a Srivaishnava, wore the same caste marks, and bore the priestly title *Acharya.* In the course of our study the differences of caste among Brāhmans was suggested. I said, "Is not _____ *Acharya* one of your own caste?"

"Certainly not," he said. "For the sake of influence and position we should pay deference to him, but really we could not own him as of our caste."

36. Certainly there were differences among these Brāhman groups in theological system and in "caste marks" (an antiquated term referring to forehead markings, which often included even those that have nothing to do with caste, like the simple *bindi* (dot) that is worn as makeup by most modern Indian women). But that one could tell what type of Brāhman a person was by their "facial expression and bearing" seems hyperbolic (at best). Robinson's descriptions of the teachings of these groups is valid, but the issue raised in the previous note comes into play; *Srivaiṣṇavism* is not a Brāhman group but a sampradāya with distinctive beliefs and practices which are maintained by many non- Brāhmans as well as Brāhmans. Mādhva Brāhman theology is rightly defined, but among Mādhva Brāhmans today there are many who care little for philosophy/theology, but merely maintain a caste identity.

37. Robinson's original text reads "Hanumanta," also in a later reference.

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So one began to learn that each of the three great castes of Brāhmans was divided into many castes which could not become one.[38]

The Brāhman's birth is the everlasting[39] essential form of dharma—duty, right, virtue.[40] He is born for the sake of dharma, and exists for the divine scripture. His heart is the home of prayer. He is guardian of the scripture, and of its sacred powers; he alone can lead to the highest. That ideal has been written into the very life-texture of the worthy Brāhman. Wide and deep as are the differences among themselves, the difference between them and all other castes is far wider and deeper. I have seen a Brāhman woman, scowling, hiss a lad of another caste away from her, so that he should not come within the proscribed distance, and his presence defile. A dalit[41] coming along a public bridge saw a Brāhman coming from the other end of the bridge; he turned back, and went off the road, lest in crossing the bridge he should come within defiling distance.[42]

The Complexity of Caste

The other castes, heretics, and dalits baffled and bewildered me by their number and deep differences. Each is a complex series of castes which cannot become one. Each insists upon its own caste rights as divine and unalterable for all within its circle. The unclean dalits—who must live apart, outside town or village—would no more tolerate the presence of a Brāhman in their parts than a Brāhman would tolerate them in a Brāhman street.

But the differences between the castes themselves seemed to me then little compared with the gulf between them all and myself. With all my heart I wished to be helpful to everyone, and, if it might be, lead them to the truest manhood and to God. Every day one saw the gulf deepen, broaden.

38. There is potential confusion here related to the fact that "caste" is used to translate two different Sanskrit terms. *Varna* is the simpler term, as there are only four *varnas* and all Brāhmans by definition share the Brāhman *varna*. But Robinson is mostly referring to *jāti*, which is a more dynamic term, as there is no set number of *jātis* and there are many Brāhman *jātis*.
39. Robinson used the antiquated term "ever-during."
40. What exactly Robinson means by saying that the Brāhman's "birth" is the "essential form of dharma" is not clear to me or to those I have consulted about this matter. The status and enjoined behavior of the Brāhman points to the ideals of Hindu life or dharma; this seems to be the point.
41. Robinson used the dated term "outcaste." Here and throughout his text I substitute the modern term "dalit," which means the broken or oppressed.
42. Urbanization in India has brought drastic change in this area. Note that much had already changed by Robinson's time, as the earlier practice of "unseeability" had ceased (see Hutton 1961, 81).

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