

Male  
Homosexualities  
*and World Religions*

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*Pierre Hurteau*



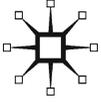
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WORLD RELIGIONS

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*Pierre Hurteau*

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

More than a year has passed since the first publication of this book in French. I have taken advantage of this first English version to take into consideration recent material related to my topic and to clarify my thoughts on certain aspects. Some readers suggested that I further clarify certain theoretical questions, especially regarding the use of the words “homosexual” or “homosexuality,” which can vary greatly depending on historical or cultural context. They’ve also proposed that I further affirm my position for a greater recognition of the diversity of experiences of men who have sex with men and for more social justice for them. The concept of globalization, which includes diversity but also universalization of the Western model of gay rights, has been revised to make room for the threats they may pose in a non-Western context.

I want to express my gratitude and thanks to those who allowed me to persevere. The religious sphere encompasses a vast realm of knowledge and human experience, in many cases traditions going back to thousands of years. Research material on homosexuality within the various religious traditions is not always accessible, given the taboo that has long surrounded the issue and that, unfortunately, still persists. First, I want to thank Raynald, my life partner of over 30 years, for his invaluable advice, encouragement, and moral support in difficult times. I also extend my gratitude to friends and former colleagues who have patiently read the manuscript and made valuable suggestions and corrections: Shrinivas Tilak, independent scholar and writer of many books on Hinduism; Frederick B. Bird, Professor Emeritus of religion at Concordia University; Clarise Samuels, Canadian short story writer; and Ross Higgins, anthropologist and lecturer at the Université du Québec à Montréal. My thanks also go to my friends Waldeck Sylvestre and Paul-Emile Pierre who have so kindly introduced me to Kreyòl Ayisyen.

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I also wish to thank Burke Gerstenschlager, religion/philosophy academic editor at Palgrave Macmillan, for having confidence in my work, and for his help at every stage of the realization of this project. I also extend my thanks to his assistant, Madeleine Crum, and Deepa John who managed with great professional skill and patience the copyediting and typesetting processes.

## INTRODUCTION

Binary distinctions are an analytic procedure, but their usefulness does not guarantee that existence divides like that. We should look with suspicion on anyone who declared that there are two kinds of people, or two kinds of reality or process.

—Mary Douglas<sup>1</sup>

The idea of writing this book appeared to me several years after reading the collective work *Homosexuality and World Religions*, published in 1993. The thought of putting views of different religious traditions side by side seemed interesting. It permitted me to put certain judgments about homosexual practices in perspective and compare their levels of tolerance for homosexuality.

After spending my first summer as a pensioner luring bass, pike, and sturgeon in the St. Lawrence River, the cold winter of 2006 invited me to exchange the fishing rod for my computer keyboard and begin work on my project. After a short examination of the book that was the source of my motivation, I felt I had to approach the subject differently. *Homosexuality and World Religions* was the result of the collaboration of several specialists from each of the traditions studied. So, I had to ask myself, could I honestly face the challenge alone, without specialized academic training in the religions to be addressed, with the exception of Christianity and Buddhism? Upon reflection, I convinced myself that those others before me, such as David Greenberg (1988) and Louis Crompton (2003), had successfully attempted a similar experiment while researching homosexuality throughout civilization.

Such a project usually must rely on other experts who work from primary sources. Working alone may be perceived as a handicap, insofar as access to primary sources is then possible only through translated material. Involuntary exclusion of certain sources may happen simply due to the absence of translations.

However, several reasons drove me to take on the adventure. A single author could provide more cohesion. Such cohesion was lacking in *Homosexuality and World Religions*. After reading it, I wondered about the effectiveness of its approach with readers with no particular knowledge of these religious traditions and who are abruptly plunged into a complicated and scholarly discussion about homosexuality. For the reader to grasp the doctrinal foundation and the scope of any religious discourse or teaching on homosexuality, it becomes essential to provide a brief overview of the religious traditions and their developments. Also, for the same reasons, any thorough analysis of the discourse on homosexuality is not possible without first taking a close look at the religious views on sex in general. Therefore, each chapter follows the same pattern: (1) the religious tradition itself, (2) the religion's views on sexuality, and finally (3) the religion's views on homosexuality.

Mary Douglas's assertion, quoted in the epigraph, accents the underlying theme of the book. Serious differences lie at the core of diverse experiences of sexuality in the religious traditions of the world. These differences cannot be reconciled by means of

a reductive discourse that seeks to understand homosexuality through universalizing binomial concepts, such as the heterosexuality/homosexuality dichotomy. This prospect imposes that I endorse a context-sensitive and historicist methodology, thereby treating information according to specific context, such as historical period, original culture, and social organization.

I chose to focus my attention on the following religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religions. I could also have included extinct religions, but there is material in abundance concerning Roman, Greek, or even ancient Near East religions. I may also add that, from the very start, I wished to reach the widest audience possible, including professional educators and social workers in search of a solid understanding of the experiences of men sexually attracted to men. For that reason, I excluded chthonic religions; they may generate great academic interest, but they have a weaker social impact. The general public is not familiar with diacritical marks used to transliterate foreign languages. For this reason, I have decided not to use them, and I write foreign words close to the way they are pronounced. I decided to use Chinese characters in order to avoid any possible confusion, as this language is not alphabetic, and only ideograms can deliver with certainty the meaning of words.

Canada and Western societies as a whole are increasingly faced with cultural diversity, and the solutions that are adopted to integrate marginal sexualities have acquired their own history and social dynamic. Other societies have chosen different paths. The paradigm of sexual orientation projected homosexuality as a fundamental characteristic of the person. It specified a type of personality with rights and distinct legal protections. This emancipation pattern originated from the emergence of human rights philosophy in the West, something that did not necessarily occur in other cultures. Gay youths living in America or Europe, with non-Christian family backgrounds, are sometimes torn between the values and perceptions of their own community of origin and those of the host society. The weight of tradition often reduces them to stay in the closet for fear of displeasing their family and being ostracized by their community. At the same time, we must also recognize that, in the present era of globalization and the Internet, it seems almost impossible to encounter communities unaware of the debates and the successful struggles of gay movements dedicated to the promotion and protection of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights across the world. Several groups promoting and protecting the rights of gays and lesbians from the five continents are united in the *International Gay and Lesbian Association*, which organizes international conferences to discuss the situation of gays and lesbians worldwide. Thanks to the Internet, many homosexuals in Africa, Asia, or South America and the Caribbean, where homophobia triumphs and in several cases where homosexuality is totally illegal, can have access to the actual experiences of gays living in countries where homosexuality is legally and socially accepted.

Already the reader may sense that my goal is to write about homosexualities, that is to say, the variety of sexual encounters between men. Some men occasionally have sex with men but marry and have families. Others, for various reasons, have the feeling of living their whole sexual life outside of heteronormativity. Given these different contexts, what is then the true meaning of the word “homosexuality”? The term was first coined in the second half of the nineteenth century by the Austrian journalist Károly Mária Kertbeny, an activist in favor of decriminalizing homosexual relations. The word was quickly adopted by the pioneers of sexology and psychiatry to describe a congenital disease of the sexual instinct, which fails to turn naturally to the opposite sex.<sup>2</sup> If homosexuality is linked to some personal, natural instinct, how then can it be

judged as debauchery or sin? The German lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs goes on to define homosexuality (uranism) as a third sex—the soul of a woman being trapped in the body of a man.<sup>3</sup> While these theories found the origin of a pathological inversion of the sexual instinct in some hormonal imbalance appearing during fetal development, Sigmund Freud displaced the origin of homosexuality into the realm of individual psychological development. For him, homosexuality is the result of a poor response to solving the Oedipus complex. The proper solution to the Oedipus complex should normally rest in the boy's identification with masculinity, femininity becoming the natural object of his adult sexual desire. Although, originally, Freudian homosexuality remains intrapsychic, Freud's view of the relationship between a sexual object and sexual identity makes room for the socialization of the individual, so that neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality are the direct result of the natural evolution of the sex drive. With Freud, one slowly departs from the essentialist model of homosexuality, but it is only with the British and American schools of sociology that the constructivist theory of homosexuality becomes fully developed.<sup>4</sup> For this school of thought, eroticism and sexuality are neither determined by biology, nor by the psyche of the person, but are mediated through the symbolic meanings involved in the construction of social reality. Sexuality becomes a cultural and historical category. Social constructivism emphasizes the construction of sex roles and stereotypes, as well as the associated social stigma—all these aspects may be advantageously taken up by gay liberation movements. Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, published in 1976, in a way became the textbook for this stream of thought. This author showed that the medicalization of same-sex activity shifted the focal point from the homogenital act itself to the homosexual subject, who now became a category of person: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species."<sup>5</sup> The concept of sexual orientation appeared in the 1960s, but its genealogy goes back to the medical discourse of the late nineteenth century. At the turn of the twentieth century, the state apparatus took over from medicine and tried to control the activities of the homosexual through legislation. Thus, the British politician Henry Labouchere introduced Section 11 in the *Criminal Law Amendment Act* of 1885 (48 & 49 Vict. c. 69). The amendment advocated the concept of gross indecency to punish any form of sexual contact between men in private or in public. In fact, it was used to arrest and try Oscar Wilde in 1895.

The constructivists present homosexuality as an identity construct historically linked to the European culture of the mid-nineteenth century. It cannot and should not be applied or superimposed on other periods of history as it was, for instance, carried out by John Boswell.<sup>6</sup> His temerity generated much debate as he sought to demonstrate the existence of a large gay subculture in full medieval Christianity as well as the existence of a liturgy for celebrating homosexual unions.<sup>7</sup> Among the advocates of the constructivist approach, George Chauncey has shown that male sexuality in 1900 was not structured on the binary opposition—homosexuality/heterosexuality—but rather on the polarity of normal man/effeminate man (fairy, sissy, queen). At least 30 more years had to pass by before the subject's sexual identity would be defined not through gender identity but through choice of the sexual object.<sup>8</sup> David Halperin tried to show that pederasty in Ancient Greece had nothing in common with the concept of homosexuality understood as some sort of identity, something that appeared only later in the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

However, critics of the constructivist school often blame Halperin for losing sight of the subjective, intimate, and emotional aspect of any sexual experience, whether it happened 20 centuries ago or now, in favor of his insistence on discursive practices and social institutions. In the end, should we not all be looking for homosexualities through time and space instead of a single model? Homosexuality is open today to a variety of

experiences and the patterns or styles often contrasted in history by constructivism do in fact coexist. One simply has to witness a Gay Pride Parade to realize that sissies, transvestites, transgender, and hypermales are together celebrating sexual diversity, or anything but heteronormativity. This diversity goes beyond borders, as it will be demonstrated in the following chapters. Whether it is in Indian, Chinese, Thai, or Iranian culture, there are several ways to account for the experiences of men who have sex with men. The relevance of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of the homosexual closet leaves no shadow of a doubt: there are, of all times and places, "universalizing" and "minoritizing" views of the homosexual experience.<sup>10</sup> While the first explanation proposes to see homosexuality as a tendency present in every person without any reference to gender, the second seeks instead to identify homosexuals as a distinct group of persons whose gender is either ambiguous or inverted. I will not hesitate to apply Sedgwick's analysis of Western homosexuality to a cross-cultural analysis of homosexuality. For instance, in the case of India, the reader will observe that both views have been present throughout the ages; the separatist or minority view that still exists today has in fact been in existence in the Indian tradition for a long time. The dominant or universalizing view often sees homosexual relations as a kind of natural outburst of male sexuality without any relation to forms of psychological disorder. Accordingly, the person indulging in the act may not acquiesce to any form of subordination—physically, as in anal penetration, or socially, in expressions other than the love of boys (Arab-Persian and Chinese cultures) where the age difference strictly defines the roles in terms of activity and passivity. Universalizing views continue to exist in many cultures, especially when access to female partners is difficult because of taboos surrounding the socialization of women or in situations of scarcity (e.g., in prison). Also, the periodization imposed by the constructivist theory is maybe more a product of an ideological viewpoint than the result of careful observation and confirmation of the presence of homosexual desire as "an essential phenomenon," in various cultures and across different periods.<sup>11</sup> With this affirmation, I am not saying that the modern homosexual model focused on self-conscious orientation and individual rights is trans-historical. I'm just stating that homosexual preference or the desire for sexual intimacy with a member of the same sex cannot be locked in a period of history. We have to look for a model that allows for continuity or similarities, and discontinuity or significant changes.

Inclusiveness should not become synonymous with uniformity. It must give way to the right to express personal difference and dissent. We have found ways to conceive of homosexuality as varying from one religious tradition to another. Even within each of these traditions, divergent viewpoints are represented. The HIV epidemic has led many governments and social actors in non-Western countries to open their eyes to the presence of gays and homosexuals within them, as we encounter in India, Thailand, or even in Haiti. While Joseph Massad argues against a universalizing sexual epistemology imposed by the Gay International, which results in the occultation of same-sex desires that do not espouse gay subjectivity, I do wonder about the fate many Cameroonians, Egyptians, or Indians, for example, would endure without this kind of advocacy. With globalization, recognition and protection of gay rights are spreading rapidly around the world. João Trevisan sees some merit to the rejection by certain Brazilian gay activists of the gay identity model. Defining someone as homosexual and categorizing desire may further encourage normalization in the form of ghettoization and separation instead of a true sexual liberation. While acknowledging the validity of this claim, Trevisan has this to say:

Yet if these objections to the "construction of a gay identity" are valid, it is also true that desire cannot be denied a name, and certainly note for mere reasons of methodology.

From the simple fact that something resembling homosexual desire exists, it has to be referred to by some kind of designation. Otherwise we will return to the time of suffocating and hypocritical invisibility which only reinforced the mechanisms of repression.<sup>12</sup>

However, constructivism remains a highly useful tool to put things into perspective, and contextualize the concept of homosexuality. Without losing sight of its precious teachings and without attempting to reframe history in favor of the concept of homosexuality as sexual orientation, I will use the word “homosexuality” whenever experiences clearly describe sexual contacts between men, while also being aware of the context, such as gender transgression, active or passive sodomy, pederasty, and so on. Sometimes I will preferably make use of the word “homoeroticism,” especially when it comes to describe intense amorous desires and emotions between males without any explicit sexual encounter. My position on the use of the word “homosexual” is quite similar to João Trevisan’s. Whatever the form homosexual desire takes, it will always raise doubt. As Trevisan says: “Gay men are exactly that: doubtful—the ones who cause doubt. In other words, they are those who confirm uncertainty, who open a space for difference and who constitute a symbol of contradiction confronting the bounds of normality.” While being aware of all the academic debates around the word and the linguistic niceties they may procure, Trevisan thinks there is some valid reason to assume the risk of being imprecise:

When confronted by this same dilemma, Michel Foucault commented, “what is important is *not to be* homosexual but rather to *furiously seek to be* gay (my emphasis). To ask ourselves about our relationship to homosexuality is above all to desire a world where sexual relationships are possible, more than simply to desire a sexual relationship with someone of the same sex.” Foucault refers to a state of coming-to-be and being-in-change which seems to me very interesting precisely because it does not claim that homosexuality is a condition in the sanctuary of normality, nor does it refrain from fomenting the nuances of desire which can continue changing indefinitely within the space of a labyrinthine definition.<sup>13</sup>

Trevisan speaks of gay men but his reasoning certainly applies to nonheterosexuality or queer sexuality. Ambiguity calls for complexity and not confusion in the treatment of diversity. Many spaces are present in-between the poles of heterosexuality and homosexuality understood as homosexual orientation. Writing about the politics of difference, Janet Jakobsen has this to say: “The spaces in-between are particularly hard to work with because they are sites of multiple and ambiguous meanings. They lack the clarity of precisely delineated sites of identity and the theoretical purity of the fully open sign.”<sup>14</sup>

Some readers will wonder why yet another book on male homosexuality and religion. Why not a book about female homosexuality and religion, to date a seldom treated topic? My area of expertise is clearly male homosexuality, and I would not dare venture into that field alone and without extensive research. There are certainly a multitude of explanations for the dearth of books on the subject. Among them is surely the fact that, typically, only men held knowledge and authority in religious matters. Few writings were produced by women until recently. Another significant reason is that female sexuality is often seen as a threat to masculinity, male power, and even a man’s ability to achieve a meaningful spiritual life. Social control and power are key components in the traditional definitions of gender roles, and two women having sex does not threaten the social structure because they both hold subordinate positions in society.<sup>15</sup> Female sexuality is generally viewed in many traditions as a threat to man’s ability to control his sexual drive, just like masturbation and homosexual practices. Curiously, only women dressed as men were

considered to be a challenge to male domination, the key issue.<sup>16</sup> Socially constructed gender roles tend to preserve a male-advantaged gender hierarchy, and any behavior that interferes with or renders doubtful those gender boundaries must be reprobated.<sup>17</sup> In this context, it is not surprising to find in many societies a stigma on sexual relations between males, especially those that are similar to vaginal penetration, while sexual relations between women are considered harmless.<sup>18</sup>

The book will perhaps raise more questions than answers. My only hope is that it will open doors to all those who wish to bring about a dialogue between the religious traditions in order to break the boundaries of the Eurocentric perspective and celebrate sexual diversity across the planet. Sites of nonheterosexual identity are multiple and give rise to various forms of struggle for more justice and the right to live side by side with heterosexuals.

# HINDUISM

## RELIGION

The population of India stood at 1,028,610,328 people in 2001<sup>1</sup> and is expected to reach 1,263,543,000 in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Here, Hinduism is practiced by 80.5 percent of the population while 13.4 percent are Muslims and 2.3 percent identify themselves as Christians.<sup>3</sup> The census figures for 2001 show clearly that Hinduism holds a majority in the whole country apart from a few regions where significant Buddhist minorities (Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Sikkim), Muslims (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra, and Kerala), Sikhs (Punjab), and Christians (Kerala and Tamil Nadu) live. Also worth mentioning is the presence of 4,225,053 Jains, mostly concentrated in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh.

In Nepal, 80 percent of the population (23 million)<sup>4</sup> adhere to Hinduism and in Sri Lanka there are about 1,329,020 Hindus, mostly of Tamil origin, accounting for 7.88 percent of its total population.<sup>5</sup> Slightly more than 10 million Hindus reside in Bangladesh, 10.5 percent of its inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> In Mauritius, half of the 1 million inhabitants are Hindus,<sup>7</sup> and almost 500,000 adherents live in the United Kingdom<sup>8</sup> and nearly 300,000 in Canada.<sup>9</sup>

The etymology of the word “Hindu” goes back to the Persian “Sindhu”—used, in the past, to describe the people who lived across the river Sind, better known as the Indus River. Its etymology does not refer to any belief system, though it does refer today to an adept of the Hindu religion. Almost all Hindus live on the Indian subcontinent, more specifically in India, and their belief system and practices are intimately linked to the people living in this geographical area. Hinduism, the largest religious mosaic in the world, has evolved tremendously over the ages, but it is constantly growing by incorporating different beliefs and philosophies. Although there is a chronology of its development, from pre-Vedism to Vedism and then Brahmanism at the time of the Puranas, the newest forms do not always supersede the older ones.

Hindus refer to their religious system by the words *sanatana dharma*, meaning the eternal law. This conveys the idea that there is an immanent cosmic order that looks over nature and to which humans must conform to live in cosmic harmony. In this sense, *dharma* rather refers to a lifestyle than to any adhesion to a set of religious beliefs. The origin of this concept is first found in the ancient Vedic concept of *Rta*. The ancient concept of *Rta* expresses the idea of a regulative principle in nature and human society. Thus, *Rta* means that cows give milk, just as the sun rises and sets daily, or that water flows in rivers and streams (*Rig Veda Samhita* IV.23.8–10).<sup>10</sup> Cosmic energies (*Deva*)—Agni the fire, Indra the thunder, and the sun Surya—but also hostile forces (*Asura*)—Vrtra the dragon—and different spirits (*gandharva*, *apsara*), all are subject to *Rta*.<sup>11</sup> Men’s action and those of the gods contribute to maintaining the cosmic order in balance through

liturgy, especially with the performance of sacrifices and chanting Vedic hymns. Cosmic order is the manifestation of the ultimate reality (*Brahman*) or truth (*satya*). The *Rig Veda Samhita* X (Ch. 85, 1–2) celebrates the relationship between truth and cosmic law; truth sustains all things and the gods are concrete manifestations of the power of this impersonal cosmic law.<sup>12</sup> From the standpoint of ultimate truth, reality is one. A monistic point of view was further developed in the Upanishads. There, *Brahman* means the vast totality of reality, the One, the reality hidden behind impersonal phenomena. *Tat tvam asi*—you are also this—this great truth (*mahavakya*) marks the presence of the divine in everything.<sup>13</sup> The self, the center of individual personality, the *atman* is also a spark of the divine, *Brahman—ayam atma brahma*.<sup>14</sup>

The Vedic hymns reflect an older religion, corresponding to mass migrations toward the Indo-Aryan Punjab during the second millennium BC. These migrations probably came from the Sintashta-Petrovka culture of the southern Urals and other cultures from the river Amu Darya in central Asia.<sup>15</sup> These pastoral cultures knew the wheeled cart and had domesticated the horse. They mixed with the urban existing civilizations of the Indus Valley.<sup>16</sup> These pre-Aryan civilizations were probably issued from the Neolithic agricultural settlements established from 7000 BC in the Kachi plain at Mehrgarh.<sup>17</sup> This site was abandoned between 2600 and 2000 BC, as the cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa flourished. The archeological study of all these sites shows that there was continuous development from one site to another, as evidenced by the use of amulets and terracotta figurines, anthropomorphic (mostly women, but also men sitting in a yogic position) or zoomorphic representing bulls, elephants, antelopes, and tigers.<sup>18</sup> Several elements of the pre-Aryan civilization were incorporated into the Vedic religion. The Vedic god Rudra lived in the forest and was honored as lord of the animal life, Pashupati, a title that would later be attributed to Shiva,<sup>19</sup> who is often accompanied by Nandi the bull. Several objects in the form of an erect penis (*lingam*) or a receptacle recalling the vagina (*yonī*) were also found in many of these ancient sites. Yet again, the lingam, alone or inserted into the female organ, is traditionally associated to Shiva, the creator, uniting with his consort Parvati.<sup>20</sup> The act of copulation is so fusional that Shiva is sometimes portrayed as a hermaphrodite (*Ardhanarishvara*).<sup>21</sup> Being the creator, Shiva needs the material energy (*shakti*) of the Mother Goddess (Mahadevi). Shiva is also called *Mahayogi*, the great yoga guru wandering naked in the forest. However, he remains a yogi with great sensuality and power of seduction.<sup>22</sup> His erect penis, more importantly, symbolizes not generation but voluptuousness (*bhogavahamidam lingam*) and according to the *Shiva Purana*, people can attain final release (*mukti*) by touching it and meditating on it.<sup>23</sup>

The ancient Vedic religion focuses primarily on ritual sacrifices, accompanied by hymns and incantations (*mantra*) to the forces of nature such as the sun, storm, rain, fire, and so on. Offerings are carried to the devas in the ritual of fire sacrifice, an attempt to coax them to do their job of maintaining cosmic order. The Upanishad literature that developed from 800 BC focuses on final release (*moksha*) of the individual from the cycle of rebirths (*samsara*). Here, the sacrifice ritual becomes internalized through discipline of the body and mind.<sup>24</sup> A new path to the absolute is gradually taking shape, based on renunciation through various techniques of asceticism, including breath control (*pranayama*), meditation (*dhyana*), and mind concentration (*samadhi*).<sup>25</sup> These techniques allow the “self” or *atman*, the inner divine light, to shine in the human body.<sup>26</sup> Consciousness of the unity of *atman* and *Brahman* is the perfect knowledge, for everything—the gods, human creatures, their perceptions, and feelings are guided by the mind, which is nothing but *Brahman* (*pranayama brahma*), the infinite source of life.<sup>27</sup> The ultimate reality, the One, transcends any form or attribute (*nirgunam Brahman*), but may appear in the world in anthropomorphic forms (*Brahman* or *Isvara sagunam*).<sup>28</sup> Devi (the Goddess),

Shiva, or Vishnu are personal manifestations of *Brahman*, which remains veiled (*maya*) while manifested in the world, thanks to its ability to create the illusion.<sup>29</sup> The material universe unfolds itself as if it were the stage for a puppet theater on which were played (*lila*) the adventures of a multitude of gods who embody the divine by appearing in human or animal shapes (*avatara*). The Upanishadic literature already expresses this idea of a material revelation (*Saguna Brahman*) of the absolute and invisible reality of all things,<sup>30</sup> though it will attain its full growth in Epic and Puranic literature.<sup>31</sup> Besides the yoga of knowledge (*jnana yoga*) practiced by the wise ascetics, the idea of liberating the individual through love or devotion (*bhakti yoga*) to a personal God appeared in the *Bhagavad Gita*, composed in the second century BC as part of Book VI of the great epic the *Mahabharata*. Song 12 of the *Bhagavad Gita* promises release from the cycle of rebirths and unity with the One to the faithful devotee who dedicates his thoughts and actions to his love (*bhakti*) for Lord Krishna. Verse 5 expresses an essential truth in *bhakti* movements emerging from the Middle Ages, particularly in South India (Tamil) and Bengal: “Greater is their trouble whose minds are set on the Unmanifested; for the goal—the Unmanifested—is very difficult for the embodied to reach.”<sup>32</sup> *Bhakti* movements will be discussed further ahead.

The Brahmin caste incorporated into Vedic religion non-Aryan cultic elements such as pre-Vedic, proto-Tantric elements in which both eroticism and asceticism found a place. On the outskirts of Aryan society lived beggars who wandered barefoot (*vratyas*, *ajivikas*, and *yatis*) perpetuating the traditions of the Indus civilization. This eventually led to movements known as Shaivism, Shaktism, and Tantrism.<sup>33</sup>

Around 500 AD, the Brahmins (priests) systematized the ancient Vedic religion by reacting against ascetic currents and the ideal of renunciation through practices of control of the senses and meditation. Brahmanism was somehow a reaction against new spiritual movements such as Buddhism and Jainism. The orthodox Brahmins then proposed an ingenious system that would address the necessities of life as they evolve through a lifetime, in accordance with one’s social status and one’s duties in society. The idea of dividing society into castes certainly goes back to the Vedic period. The hymn to the sacrifice of the primordial man (*Purusha Sukta*) does mention that the Brahmins or priests were born from his mouth, the *Rajanyas* (*Kshatriyas*) or warriors from his arms, the *Vaishyas* (merchants and farmers) from his thighs, and the *Shudras* from his feet.<sup>34</sup> Overall, the *Rig Veda* did not exhibit a system of social castes (*varnas*<sup>35</sup>) as elaborate as what would come later, after 500 AD, particularly with the *Manu Smriti* and the *Dharma Shastras*. These later texts, written between the first BC and the fourth century AD, specified the roles and duties of each of the four classes or castes, while maintaining a hierarchy between them. The *Shudras* were positioned at the bottom of the scale,<sup>36</sup> with a duty to serve and obey the first three classes whose members were called “twice born” (*djiva*).<sup>37</sup> Shastric literature devised the theory of the four stages of life (*asrhamadharmas*), which provided for each male “twice born” a schedule to achieve all four objectives of any human existence (*purushartha*): profit (*artha*), pleasure (*kama*), duty (*dharma*), and release (*moksa*). Thus, after spending a period of training in chastity (*brahmacharya*) with a guru who would introduce him to the sacred texts and grammar,<sup>38</sup> the twice-born bachelor then enters the cycle of social and economic life and enjoys the pleasure of marrying and begetting a son (*grihastha*).<sup>39</sup> After completing his family duties, in his sixties, the “twice born” will retreat to a hermitage (*vanaprastha*)<sup>40</sup> to engage in the reading of sacred texts and various austerities to purify the mind. After the third period, toward the end of his life, the hermit has no need for mortification. Having renounced all material possessions (*sannyasa*), he can finally go, wandering freely, with no permanent dwelling and devote all his time to the practice of yoga and meditation.<sup>41</sup>

The Hindu caste system is inseparable from the law of karma and the successive incarnations (*samsara*) of the individual soul, until it has reached perfection. Any act or thought produces an effect, either in this life or another. Thus, one's rank in the social hierarchy results from one's conduct in his or her previous life, but it also offers an opportunity to improve one's position in future lives on account of a good conduct in this life. This idea was already expressed in the Upanishads,<sup>42</sup> but finds its fullness in the epic literature, particularly in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Krishna teaches the path of Karma Yoga to Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers, at war with their cousins the Kauravas for the succession to the throne of Hastinapura. Arjuna is devastated by the idea of attacking his cousins, to the point where he lets his bow slip from his hands. He is bewildered by grief and Krishna comes to his rescue.<sup>43</sup> Lord Krishna teaches him the true path of obtaining release by fulfilling one's duty according to one's status (*svadharma*). Arjuna belongs to the warrior caste (*Kshatriya*)<sup>44</sup> whose duty is to engage in combat without any personal expectation as to the result.<sup>45</sup> Just as the Upanishads offered a reinterpretation of the Vedic sacrifice (*yajna*), accomplishing one's duty without seeking reward or merit also constitutes a reinterpretation of it. This reinterpretation is used to justify the caste system, but it also offers a path to salvation for those who are excluded from Vedic rituals reserved for the "twice born," or those who cannot waive their social duties in the manner of the renunciant engaged in meditation. Whether a *Brahmin* or a *Shudra*, whose sole function is to serve the other castes, the one who performs with detachment the duties of his caste will achieve perfection, true knowledge, and identification with the Absolute (*Brahman*).<sup>46</sup> The fulfillment of duty in total and joyful self-abandonment is true devotion (*bhakti*), the love of God who gives eternal peace.<sup>47</sup>

Jainism and Buddhism are certainly forms of protest against the Vedic tradition, which ensured primacy to the *Brahmins*. Epic and Puranic stories are looked on as a reinterpretation of Brahmanism in favor of the *Shudras* and popular religion. Among these rearrangements, a few words on the *Bhakti* movement, whose origins date back to the beginning of the Christian era, are in order.<sup>48</sup> The *Bhagavad Gita* by its insistence on devotion to Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu, did provide the initial start for the devotional movement that ran through the Middle Ages and modern times, until today. Devotion then revolved around the creator Brahma, Vishnu, and his avatars (especially Rama and Krishna), or Shiva and his wife Mahadevi Kali, the female personification of creative energy (*shakti*). The movement of devotion to Vishnu (*Vaishnava*) developed particularly in Tamil Nadu between the eighth and tenth centuries, thanks to 12 mystics, the Alvars, who sang in temples their dedication to Vishnu, and whose songs were collected in the *Nalaya Prabandham*. Among these poets and mystics, there was the very popular Andal (eighth century) who expressed his devotion to Vishnu by taking the appearance of a fiery female lover in 30 Tamil hymns known as the *Tiruppaavai*. Tradition ascribes the development of devotion to Shiva (Shaivism) to 63 saints from southern India (Tamil Nadu especially) in the seventh and eighth centuries. Devotion to the Goddess (*Shakti*) also took shape during the same period. In all its forms, *bhakti* is always an outpour of feelings from the heart toward the divine. Human love and eroticism are the chosen symbols of the fusion of a human soul with the divine. Among the main *vaishnava* practitioners figured Sri Ramanuja (1031–1137), the holy founder of *srivaishnava*, a devotional movement that preached total abandonment (*prapatti*) in the hands of Narayana (another name for Vishnu), who is an attribute (*vishesha*) of the One, *Brahman*.<sup>49</sup> Vaishnava piety was transported to northern India, starting from the thirteenth century, and often focused on devotion to the avatars of Vishnu, Rama, and Krishna. A native of Uttar Pradesh, Ramananda (d. 1470) spread in Varanasi the devotion to Rama in Hindi, seventh avatar of Vishnu, and welcomed among his

followers Muslims, women, and the untouchables. Devotion to Rama was popularized in the north through Goswami Tulsidas's work in dialectical Hindi (1532–1623), the *Ramcaritmanas*. The poem recounts with a personal touch the well-known epic of the *Ramayana*, depicting how Sita, a devoted wife, was abducted from her faithful husband Rama. The poem goes on to relate how the couple was reunited with the help of the monkey Hanuman who helped Rama rescue his beloved Sita, then a prisoner of the demon Ravana. Hanuman symbolizes total abandonment, service for the love of God. A native of Bengal, Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1533) popularized the devotion to Krishna, metaphorized by Krishna's love for his cowherd girls (*gopis*), particularly Radha, who performed the cosmic dance (*rasa lila*) circling around the young Krishna playing the flute. Considered the founder of a new movement called *Vaishnava Gaudiya Vaishnava*, Shri Chaitanya and his immediate followers (the six Goswamis) believed that devotion to Krishna and his wife Radha is the only way to salvation. They based their teaching on the *Bhagavata Purana*, which summarized all the Vedic literature, and taught that Krishna was the divine reality itself, the source of all incarnations.<sup>50</sup> Chaitanya and his followers were particularly fond of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* (twelfth century), which poetically expressed the love of god through the erotic play of Krishna and his mistress<sup>51</sup> Radha and her companion *gopis*, in the secrecy of the Vrindavan forest. Just as in the Western ideal of *amour courtois* where separated lovers are dying to be reunited one day, in Radha and the *gopis*' longing to meet Krishna lies the essence of true love. It stands for the metaphor par excellence of the love that must exist between human beings and the divine. This idea of separation seems to be the feeling that nurtures the *gopis*' love-desire for Krishna while distressed and maddened by his absence.<sup>52</sup> One of Chaitanya's biographies often speaks of his personal despair and anxiety at the thought of being separated from the Lord Krishna.<sup>53</sup> The awakening of the feelings evoked by the recollection of moments of pure bliss (*Madhurya rasa*) in the presence of Krishna opens the heart to the love of God (*bhakti raganuga*) and leads to states of intense emotion (*bhava*) and ecstatic love (*prema*).<sup>54</sup> At the time of Chaitanya, there already existed a Bengali literary tradition,<sup>55</sup> inspired by Tantric Buddhism, that promoted sexual expression of human love as an embodiment of the divine. According to this esoteric doctrine, known as Sahajija (*sahaja* means natural), enlightenment must be achieved in the microcosm of the human body. Through sexual intercourse the true nature of the self can be achieved with the union of masculine and feminine opposites. Although the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement opposes this doctrine and preaches that love play (*lila*) between Krishna and Radha should strictly be interpreted allegorically, many authors believe that this doctrine has had a positive influence on the works of Jayadeva, the poet Chandidas Bahu (fourteenth century) and his *Shrikrisnakirtan*, and Chaitanya.<sup>56</sup> Today, the International Association for Krishna Consciousness (also known by its acronym ISKCON), founded in New York in the 1960s by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), claims to belong to the movement founded by Chaitanya.

The symbolism of sexual union also holds a singular place in the various Shaiva movements that worship the presence of the absolute in Shiva. The latter is considered as an expression of the absolute undifferentiated consciousness that inhabits all of creation. The world is a reflection of the universal consciousness and its unfolding is made possible by differentiating its energy, its *shakti*. Kashmiri Shaivism (Pratyabhijna), whose most prominent representatives are Vasugupta (ninth century) and Abhinavagupta (tenth century), teaches that the path of realization is completed by recognizing (*pratyabhijna*) the true identity of the universe, the individual soul (*jiva*), and of Shiva. The individual soul, whose self-awareness is limited, needs to be awakened to its pure, transcendental reality, with the help of yogic meditation techniques. Yoga seeks to awaken

the practitioner (tantric) to the creative force (*shakti*) that lies at the base of the spine, the *muladhara chakra*, in the form of a coiled snake (Kundalini).<sup>57</sup> From this point, the creative energy travels through the five chakras along the spine to a chakra located above the skull (*sahasrara chakra*) to be reunited with Shiva. Sexual union is a means of union with the Absolute because it represents the union of masculine and feminine polarities, Shiva-Shakti. Chapter 29 of the *Tantra Loka* of Abhinavagupta is a prime example of the reinterpretation of the Vedic sacrifice in a tantric context.<sup>58</sup>

The Goddess is also seen by some *Bhakta* as the Supreme Being. Thus, for Ramakrishna (1836–1886), an eminent saint and inspiration for a monastic order bearing his name but founded by his disciple Swami Vivekananda, the relationship of the devotee to the divine was expressed at times in the form of the child-mother (*santana bhava*) relationship or at others in the form of the passion that exists between lovers (*vira bhava*).<sup>59</sup> Theologians believe that *Bhakti* and *Tantra* are more appropriate for the present age, the Age of Kali (*Kali Yuga*), one marked by the decline of spirituality in human beings and their turning away from Vedic lessons.<sup>60</sup>

## SEXUALITY

We have seen that pleasure and sexuality take up an essential part of the Hindu view of life, the *Dharma*. Before addressing the issue of how homosexuality is viewed by Hinduism, there is a need to further specify the Hindu general discourse on sexuality in itself. As in many religious systems, sexuality appears in several myths about the origins of the world and life. However, there are exceptions; for example, it is absent from the famous hymn *Purusha Shukta* of the *Rig Veda*. It imagines the creation of the universe and social order (*varna dharma*) as the dismemberment or sacrifice of the Primordial Man (*Purusha*).<sup>61</sup> In this myth of origin, what caused the appearance of the world owes nothing to sexuality; creatures are the result of some sort of multiplication by division. Another hymn from the *Rig Veda*, the *Nasadyia Shukta*, features, preexisting any form, the Absolute (*tadekam*), which creates the universe, including the devas, through its own energy (*tapas*), awakening in itself the desire for love (*kama*) and the creative energy symbolized by semen (*retas*).<sup>62</sup> The dyad *tapas/kama* is found in one of the oldest hymns, as is the idea that mindfulness and control of the creative energy by the austerities produces heat (*tapas*), which in turn promotes the desire to procreate. Related to this myth, the hymn *Hiranyagrabha Sukta* tells of Prajapati's birth, the lord of creation or divine order, which will be known later under the name of Brahma, born from a golden embryo.<sup>63</sup> Later texts like the *Shatapatha Brahmana* and the *Manu Smriti* mention the formation of a golden egg floating on the primordial waters, out of which came, after one year, Prajapati.<sup>64</sup> Prajapati creates the world by the heat (*tapas*) he produces, which leads next to his dismemberment and that is why he is considered to be *Purusha*.<sup>65</sup> The concentration necessary to create energy at the macrocosmic level may be transferred to the microcosmic level. Man through ascetic discipline may bring about the concentration of energy.<sup>66</sup> While asceticism concentrates energy, the creative act disperses it and breaks it down. Therefore, Prajapati, exhausted and fearing death, had to regain his strength<sup>67</sup> turning to the god of the sacrificial fire Agni for help.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the Vedic sacrifice is the preferred method for restoring creation and ensuring the continuity of life through the changing seasons and to ensure immortality.<sup>69</sup> The *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad* says that originally there was only the Self (*Brahman*) existing as a person (*purusha*) who had to cope with fear and loneliness. Desire (*kama*) to break with this world of loneliness and absence of pleasure grabbed the Self, which split in two, a male a female part and from the union of both were born all sexed beings.<sup>70</sup> The union of male and female symbolizes