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Brahma and the Problem of Popularity

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OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

BRAHMA AND THE PROBLEM OF POPULARITY

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
graduating with University Honors

In
HON 300.12 Capstone

by
Grant Cayton

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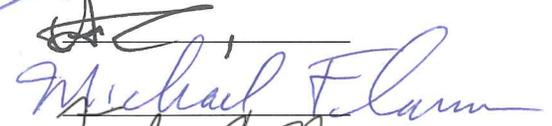
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Abstract

Brahma, the creator god, theoretically occupies a major position in Hinduism but, in practice, receives virtually no *bhakti*-style devotional worship. The study examines potential causes of Brahma's lack of popular worship through analysis of existing scholarship, and through in-depth interviews with eight Hindus. These subjects were asked to give their own explanations and evaluate scholarly theories on Brahma's unpopularity in devotional worship. Among scholarly theories, Km. Rajani Mishra's states that after creation, Brahma has nothing to offer humanity, and argues that Brahma's character was not compelling enough to retain followers. Alternatively, Greg Bailey suggests that Brahma's role as creator ties him to *pravṛttidharma*, a worldly mindset that prevents him from granting salvation. Brahma's negative depiction in mythology may also play a role. The subject interviews indicate that Brahma is well respected, and the primary cause of his unpopularity remains unclear. Some saw him as subservient to other gods and thus undeserving of worship. Others stated, like Mishra, that Brahma has nothing to offer Hindus after creation. Bailey's theory of *pravṛttidharma* was controversial, with some arguing that *bhakti* deities are based on tradition and not considerations of *pravṛttidharma*. Most subjects agreed that Brahma once possessed more followers. Some argued Brahma was subject to slander and his appealing characteristics were absorbed by other gods. Others speculated a historical disaster may have caused the cult's deterioration. Still others argued that Brahma never had a widespread following. When combined with existing scholarship, the interviews suggest that unknown historical factors, along with Brahma's position in mythology, resulted in his cult's decline, but indicate that Brahma still enjoys considerable respect among most Hindus.

Chapter I

Introduction

Long ago in the realm of the gods, Brahma the Creator and Vishnu the Preserver began to battle over who was superior. Seeing the danger of their actions, Shiva the Destroyer assumed the form of a great pillar of fire between them. Brahma and Vishnu said to each other, “What is this column of fire that has risen up? It is beyond the range of senses. We have to find its top and bottom.”¹ Vishnu took on the form of a boar and burrowed down in search of the pillar’s base. Brahma took the form of a swan and flew up to find its top. On his way, Brahma encountered a Ketakī flower drifting down from above. Brahma said to the flower, “Dear friend, hereafter you must do as I desire. In the presence of Viṣṇu you must say like this. O Acyuta, the top of the column has been seen by Brahmā. I am the witness for the same.”² Returning to the ground, Brahma found Vishnu exhausted and ashamed, for he could not find the source of the fire. Brahma told Vishnu that he had reached the pillar’s top, and the flower repeated his lie. Vishnu began to pay homage to Brahma, but Shiva, angered by the falsehood, leapt from the fire. Vishnu was blessed for his humility. Brahma, however, was cursed. Shiva said to him, “O Brahmā, in order to extort honor from the people you assumed the role of the lord in a roguish manner. Hence you shall not be honored, nor shall you have your own temple or festival.”³

So goes a myth of conflict between the *Trimurti*, the greatest Hindu gods, told in the *Śiva-Purāna*. With the number of Hindu deities, it is no wonder quarrels occasionally spring up. The saying that Hindus follow 330 million gods may be hyperbole, but it captures the pantheon’s

¹ “*Videyeśvarasamhitā*,” in the *Śiva-Purāna*, vol. I, trans. a Board of Scholars (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973), 7:14.

² *Videyeśvarasamhitā*, 7:24-25.

³ *Videyeśvarasamhitā*, 8:9-11.

staggering size. From wild yet regal Shiva, to Vishnu and all of his avatars, to the myriad great goddesses, there is a deity for every Hindu to love. In Hinduism, devoting oneself to a god has a practical purpose. Behind this transient world is the eternal reality, Brahman. Where Brahma is the male god of creation, Brahman is the genderless, formless basis for the universe that both men and gods originate from (Westerners may even be familiar with the word Brahmin, a third term that refers to the caste of priests in Hindu society. Each is theoretically distinct, but as they are derived from the same root word, they can sometimes blend together in practice and cause confusion). Ancient Hindus believed that since all creation was linked through Brahman, the Brahmin priests could perform rituals that would influence the cosmos and ensure worldly rewards.⁴ Though many such rituals are still performed, Hinduism eventually came to focus on *moksha*, liberation from reincarnation, resulting in union with Brahman. Worldly desires bind a soul to the cycle of reincarnation, *samsara*. *Bhakti*, total devotion to a deity, is a common path to *moksha*, for it orients one's thoughts towards their god instead of worldly desires. Among Hindus, however, virtually no one devotes themselves to the creator god, Brahma.

The dearth of a Brahma following in Hinduism is conspicuous. Theoretically, Brahma is matched only by Vishnu and Shiva. Both other members of the *Trimurti* possess titanic followings. How is it that Shiva, the god who waits to destroy all creation, can command a wealth of devotees while the creator of the universe has next to none? Through careful study of scholarship and dialogue with modern Hindus, a possible answer emerges. These scholarly works and interviews suggest that Brahma is viewed in a positive light, despite his lack of worship, and that it is due to a combination of historical factors and Brahma's cosmological role that he goes without followers.

⁴ S.N. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008), 9.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Introduction to Work on Brahma

Hinduism commands a vast body of scholarship which explores diverse topics. Of all of the books or articles written about Hinduism, though, few works are dedicated to the study of Brahma specifically. There is, in contrast, literature of all kinds dedicated to the study of Brahma's competitors for worship, with John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff's *Devi: Goddesses of India*⁵ and Wendy Doniger's *Shiva: The Erotic Ascetic*⁶ serving as examples. Brahma can be found, however, referenced in works he is not the primary subject of, such as Doniger's aforementioned work. In *Shiva: The Erotic Ascetic*, Doniger spends one chapter comparing Shiva and Brahma with special focus on Hindu myths that tie together the themes of sexual power and creation. Doniger also provides sparse references to Brahma in her work *On Hinduism*.⁷ Here, Doniger discusses Brahma's role in various creation myths such as his birth from Vishnu's navel,⁸ the creation of creatures,⁹ or his contest with Vishnu to determine the identity of the supreme god.¹⁰ Doniger states early on that the *Trimurti* is "a false construction, since Brahma was never worshiped like the other two,"¹¹ however, and *On Hinduism* devotes little space to Brahma (One should note that Doniger primarily interprets Hinduism through the lens of feminism and sexuality. As a result, she primarily focuses on Brahma's sexual activity).

⁵ John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, *Devi: Goddesses of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 6.

⁶ Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Shiva: The Erotic Ascetic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁷ Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁸ Doniger, *Hinduism*, 165.

⁹ Doniger, *Hinduism*, 195.

¹⁰ Doniger, *Hinduism*, 245.

¹¹ Doniger, *Hinduism*, 23.

Scholarship devoted to Brahma does exist, though, and certain trends emerge within it, providing some basis for speculation as to his unpopularity.

Though the field of Brahma scholarship is small compared to the entire body of Hindu scholarship, it is not bereft of material. *Brahma Worship: Tradition and Iconography*,¹² by Km. Rajani Mishra, surveys Brahma's religious characteristics over 62 pages. Mishra first examines Brahma's position within the Purana scriptures. She concludes that Brahma once had an active following in India, and that religious works such as the Mahabharata may have been products of Brahma's (now-defunct) cult, edited into a form that praises Vishnu instead. She also makes the claim that Brahma's modern lack of worship can be traced to his role as the creator, whose work "was a single act of creation, and once accomplished, it has lost its interest for the Hindu race."¹³ Mishra continues by describing places sacred to Brahma, such as the town of Pushkar,¹⁴ and recounting how Brahma is traditionally depicted in art. Mishra regards Brahma's contemporary unpopularity as a result of his position as creator, in addition to the work of rival cults.

Greg Bailey's *The Mythology of Brahma* serves as a longer study of Brahma's character and role in the Hindu canon.¹⁵ Bailey examines if, and how, Brahma was worshiped in ancient India; what early gods inspired Brahma, or otherwise fulfilled his role as creator god before he emerged into Hinduism; how Brahma is depicted in relation to Hinduism's conception of the universe, and its creation; how Brahma is connected to worldly action, where Vishnu and Shiva are characterized by renunciation of worldly action; and what role Brahma plays in the myths of avatars, as well as what characteristics these roles imply about him. Bailey concludes that Brahma embodies the aspects of worldly life and ritualism present in Hinduism, while his rivals

¹² Km. Rajani Mishra, *Brahma Worship: Tradition and Iconography* (Delhi: Kanishka Publishing House, 1989).

¹³ Mishra, *Worship*, 14.

¹⁴ Mishra, *Worship*, 22.

¹⁵ Greg Bailey, *The Mythology of Brahma* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Shiva and Vishnu can embody worldly life while also providing a path to transcendence Brahma cannot, as Brahma's "desires are concentrated on worldly concerns, which can only hinder any chance of gaining knowledge of spiritual truth."¹⁶ This theme reoccurs through much of the scholarship Brahma appears in, along with other themes of bad conduct and ungodly behavior, and may represent an important source of his current-day unpopularity.

Scholarly Evidence of the Early Brahma Cult

Though the field of Brahma scholarship is relatively small, certain trends emerge within it. While no significant *bhakti* cult of Brahma exists in the present day, multiple scholars posit that Brahma may have possessed some following before the modern period. According to Mishra, the only significant center of Brahma worship in the present day is the small town of Pushkar in northeast Rajasthan.¹⁷ Mishra notes that the Mahabharata and Padma Purana scriptures depict Pushkar as a great *tirtha*, or sacred site. The former states that Pushkar is "the first of holy places"¹⁸ and the latter relates how the area obtained its holiness when Brahma dropped a lotus there.¹⁹ Mishra also notes that the Kurma Purana accords special importance to the Pushkar *tirtha* that most other scriptures do not. She reasons that, as the *tirtha* section was inserted around 1250 A.D., Brahma likely had an active cult in the Pushkar area at least as late as 1250 A.D.²⁰ Mishra presents evidence that further suggests Brahma once possessed a cult in western India. Firstly, the Mahabharata contains a depiction of a Brahma festival taking place in

¹⁶ Bailey, *Mythology*, 236.

¹⁷ Mishra, *Worship*, 22.

¹⁸ Mishra, *Worship*, 22.

¹⁹ Mishra, *Worship*, 23.

²⁰ Mishra, *Worship*, 23.

the area around present-day Delhi in the *Virataparvam* section, and notes that one passage contrasts the Matsyas who honor Brahma with the impure and irreligious Bahlika people.²¹

Mishra concludes that archeological findings support the notion of an extinct Brahma cult, which suggests some historical event may have wiped out Brahma's following, resulting in his modern unpopularity.

Mishra, arguing for the existence of a dead Brahma cult in western India, draws upon various archeological discoveries. Mishra states that Pushkar's modern Brahma temple was built in the 19th century upon older temples.²² Mishra also notes temples from the seventh century A.D. dedicated to Brahma can be found in Rajasthan: at Vasantgad in the independent state of Sirohi, and Sevadi, both near Jodhpur. More temple remains can be found in Chandravan, and in South Gujrat a temple existed that was still used up to 1906.²³ Mishra mentions that the Chalukya Dynasty of Gujrat traces its lineage back to Brahma, indicating he was revered.²⁴ Also of note are seals found at an ancient university in Nalanda depicting Brahma, and dated to the seventh or eighth century: Mishra states that, as Brahma is strongly associated with orthodoxy and the Vedic scriptures, it would be logical to assume those who studied the Vedas saw him as a patron.²⁵ Mishra concludes that between the third and thirteenth century A.D., Brahma received worship in western India.²⁶ The question of why the cult declined naturally arises. Mishra speculates that it may have to do with Brahma's un compelling character.

In regards to Brahma's role as *bhakti* god, Mishra, unlike Doniger, states that he was probably worshiped in this context to some degree. Mishra states "The kind of worship practiced

²¹ Mishra, *Worship*, 24.

²² Mishra, *Worship*, 24.

²³ Mishra, *Worship*, 24.

²⁴ Mishra, *Worship*, 25.

²⁵ Mishra, *Worship*, 26.

²⁶ Mishra, *Worship*, 25.

at *Brahmakunḍa* at Rajgir has already been cited in this context.”²⁷ Mishra notes, however, that “Brahmā, the cosmic creator, is a god of very regulated function. He is neither a shower of boons nor a player of magic...” indicating that Brahma was not seen as being able to deliver salvation by many, and that “Viṣṇu, a grand god, captivated the minds of kings. Śiva was very popular among the masses. Kings and beggars adored him both. Hence both gods became popular.”²⁸ Mishra concludes that the real reason for Brahma’s lack of worship is, that with creation accomplished, Hinduism’s creator god has little to offer the people.²⁹ Though Mishra acknowledges that Brahma may have possessed a *bhakti* following once, she argues some aspect of his character is not compelling in the same way that Vishnu and Shiva are, causing his worship to fade away. If Mishra’s speculations are correct, this implies that while some aspects of Brahma’s character are conducive to worship, Brahma’s “regulated function” of creation may be a cause of his modern unpopularity.

Like Mishra, Bailey acknowledges a period of Brahma worship in India’s history. Bailey cites the scholar A. Chatterjee who, in Bailey’s words, “has proved that the *Sṛṣṭi Khaṇḍa* of the *Padmapurāṇa* is a work strongly influenced by those who held Brahmā to be the highest god,” and that “in parallel passages of the *Matsya* and *Padma Purāṇas*, the text of the latter was altered in such a way that Brahmā instead of Viṣṇu appeared as the highest god.”³⁰ Bailey uses these alterations as evidence of a cult that revered Brahma. Who else would modify scripture in this manner? Bailey, like Mishra, places the date and location of Brahma’s cult in third to thirteenth century western India, though he notes that books three and four of the *Mahabharata* contain evidence that might take the earlier date to the fourth century B.C., and that artwork from the

²⁷ Mishra, *Worship*, 27.

²⁸ Mishra, *Worship*, 30.

²⁹ Mishra, *Worship*, 14.

³⁰ Bailey, *Mythology*, 8.

fifteenth century A.D., centered in Rajasthan and Gujarat, depicts Brahma in a relatively prominent position.³¹ Bailey also speculates that, as Brahma is featured prominently in the myth of the Buddha's enlightenment at Gaya, with Vishnu and Shiva never making an appearance, Brahma might have found worship in Gaya.³² Bailey notes possible Brahma shrines located in Dudahai and Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh, and at Unkal near Hubli in Karnataka (formerly called Mysore), and recommends more research in those areas.³³ Bailey's research further indicates that Brahma once found worship, until something caused his following to decline to its modern state.

When discussing the chronology of Brahma's worship, Bailey makes an important caveat that since much of the evidence of Brahma worship is textual, and Hindu scriptures are difficult to date with any real certainty, any attempt to definitively date the period of widespread Brahma worship will be speculative; Bailey does state, however, that the period of Brahma worship must naturally correspond to the period reflected in the Pali canon, based on the scriptures which show evidence of Brahma worship (the Mahabharata, some Puranas, and the Pali canon).³⁴ Taking this evidence in mind, Bailey speculates that the division of the Pali canon was complete before the second century B.C., with its creation dating back to four or five hundred B.C.: thus Bailey argues Brahma was at least well known in India from the beginning of the fourth century B.C. or somewhat earlier.³⁵ Bailey notes that tracing the period of Brahma's decline is even more difficult than tracing his time of popularity, but gives a cut-off date of widespread Brahma worship as around four hundred A.D., as sections of the Mahabharata that contain Brahma cult

³¹ Bailey, *Mythology*, 25.

³² Bailey, *Mythology*, 28.

³³ Bailey, *Mythology*, 30.

³⁴ Bailey, *Mythology*, 32-33.

³⁵ Bailey, *Mythology*, 34.

influences can be traced to around this time.³⁶

Concluding his discussion of Brahma worship, Bailey debates whether or not Brahma was ever worshipped as a *bhakti* god. Bailey notes how in certain documents, Brahma is given epithets ending with *deva* and *īśa*, and that these types of epithets are often used of *bhakti* gods. Brahma has also been portrayed as receiving *puja* (tribute) in the form of flowers and incense, a traditional form of *bhakti* worship. Lastly, in certain myths, Brahma has been asked to extend his blessing to certain individuals, which would in a sense make Brahma their *bhakti* deity.³⁷ Bailey also cites contemporary Brahma worship in Pushkar and Rajgir as evidence of a possible *bhakti* movement.³⁸ Bailey notes that despite this evidence, there is no known *bhakti* scripture dedicated to Brahma, and that Brahma's role in mythology does not generally correspond to that of a *bhakti* god.³⁹ Unlike Vishnu or Shiva, Brahma does not transcend the value system of the mundane world, as illustrated when he refuses to offer immortality to demons. Brahma's refusal to grant demons immortality is predicated on his adherence to worldly values, where Vishnu and Shiva transcend these values and grant liberation to all of their devotees.⁴⁰ When taken together with Mishra's work, Bailey's speculations at the very least indicate Brahma found some worship in India's past. Why he lacks such worship in the modern period is a matter for debate.

***Pravṛttidharma* as a Source of Brahma's Unpopularity**

One of the key concepts that Bailey explores in *the Mythology of Brahma* is the contrast between the values of worldly action and renunciation, and how Brahma relates to these values

³⁶ Bailey, *Mythology*, 34-35.

³⁷ Bailey, *Mythology*, 35.

³⁸ Bailey, *Mythology*, 36.

³⁹ Bailey, *Mythology*, 36.

⁴⁰ Bailey, *Mythology*, 36.

when compared to other gods. Bailey explains that other scholars, such as G. Dumézil and S. Wikander have chosen to interpret Hindu cosmology, and the three gods of the *Trimurti*, as reflective of the tri-functional ideology that reoccurs in different manifestations of Proto-Indo-European mythology, such as Hinduism. Bailey examines a passage of the *Kathasaritsagara* where Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva observe a battle as a manifestation of the tri-functional ideology. Brahma arrives with his wife Sarasvati, various sages, and personifications of scriptures. His party represents the first function of the triple ideology: priesthood, religion, and sovereignty.⁴¹ Vishnu arrives bearing weapons on a chariot, accompanied by his wives Fame, Fortune, and Victory. He represents the second function— the warrior caste.⁴² Shiva is accompanied by minor gods and various mothers, representing fertility, an important aspect of the third function.⁴³

Bailey argues it would be a mistake to view these gods as mere repetitions of the tri-functional ideology. Bailey states while the ideology has “discernible influence on their roles and on Hindu mythology generally, it is certainly not the only or the most important influence.”⁴⁴ Moreover, Bailey argues it would be wrong to assume that Brahma (or Vishnu and Shiva, for that matter) conforms only to one of the three roles; rather, each god ranges across the functions. Finally, Bailey notes that each god is to some degree associated with asceticism, which struggles to fit into the tri-functional ideology. Bailey argues that the three gods’ association with asceticism points to a distinct value set based on world renunciation, citing similar conclusions by scholars M. Biardeau and Doniger.⁴⁵ Bailey argues that, underneath the mythology of the

⁴¹ Bailey, *Mythology*, 40.

⁴² Bailey, *Mythology*, 41.

⁴³ Bailey, *Mythology*, 41.

⁴⁴ Bailey, *Mythology*, 41.

⁴⁵ Bailey, *Mythology*, 41.

Hindu epics and Purana scriptures in which Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are featured, two opposing ideologies are found: one ideology is that of the regular participant in the caste system and in society, the other the ideology of those who renounce worldly concerns in pursuit of liberation from the material world.⁴⁶ These values are called *pravṛttidharma* and *nivṛttidharma*, respectively. According to Bailey, *pravṛtti* translates to “rolling onwards,” or turning around,” implying activity. *Nivṛtti* is defined as “turning back” or “returning” which implies the abandonment of activity.⁴⁷ Bailey goes on to establish a link between Brahma and the worldly duties of *pravṛttidharma*, illustrating that it is not in his nature to offer the liberation that comes from *nivṛttidharma*, as Vishnu or Shiva might. In modern Hinduism, where the liberation of *moksha* is analogous to salvation, this tie to *pravṛttidharma* may be the cause for Brahma’s unpopularity.

Bailey examines a passage from the Mahabharata to better define *pravṛttidharma* and contrast it with *nivṛttidharma*. The passage reads that “The *dharma* characterized by *nivṛtti* is the unmanifest, eternal *dharma*... *Pravṛtti* is repeated returning [to the cycle of reincarnation]. *Nivṛtti* is the highest refuge.”⁴⁸ Supplementing this passage with an analysis of the Upanishads, Bailey concludes that each school of thought manifested in conflict in early Hindu society. Those following the path of *pravṛtti* “are destined to be reborn in this world after death... live in villages... worship with sacrifices, gratification (*iṣṭapūrta*), and giving.”⁴⁹ Those on the path of *nivṛtti* “live in the forest, have confidence in austerity (*tapas*), and will eventually realize [Brahman].”⁵⁰ Differences between the two modes of *dharma* are developed even more in the

⁴⁶ Bailey, *Mythology*, 41.

⁴⁷ Bailey, *Mythology*, 42.

⁴⁸ Bailey, *Mythology*, 43.

⁴⁹ Bailey, *Mythology*, 43.

⁵⁰ Bailey, *Mythology*, 43.

Puranas and Mahabharata, scriptures following the Upanishads. In the Mahabharata, one character wonders how Brahma can participate in worldly affairs of *pravṛttidharma*, enjoying the offerings made unto him, while remaining “secure in the norm of *nivṛtti*.”⁵¹ He concludes that Brahma and other minor gods, participating in worldly action, are deluded and that they “do not reside on the eternal, stable, and indestructible path.”⁵² Thus, Brahma cannot be the supreme refuge. When modern Hinduism is focused on attaining *moksha* through renunciation, a god of *pravṛtti* might lag behind in worship. Yet why is Brahma so closely tied to *pravṛtti* when gods such as Vishnu or Shiva are not? The answer may lie in his close ties to the cosmic order of *dharma*.

According to Bailey, it is Brahma’s ties to the *dharma* of the world which bind him to *pravṛtti*. *Dharma* is a complex notion, and there is no equivalent word in English. In order to understand *dharma*, one must first understand the concept of the *triloka*, or triple world. The Hindu cosmology consists of three interconnected parts. First is heaven, the abode of divine beings. Next is hell, where demons and evil gods reside. Finally, there is the earth, which is the abode of all living creatures.⁵³ Bailey states that “The network of relationships which ideally should exist between these three groups is determined by a set of injunctions... collectively called *dharma*,” and further elaborates, quoting Biardeau, that *dharma* is “the socio-cosmic order, which is good simply in so far as it is necessary to maintain a happy existence for everything constituted in the ‘three worlds’...”⁵⁴ *Dharma* is thus the collective duty of each being to act in ways that bring the three worlds together and prevent their disillusion. Brahma, who has created the world and its various conditions, is thus innately bound to *dharma*.

⁵¹ Bailey, *Mythology*, 45.

⁵² Bailey, *Mythology*, 47.

⁵³ Bailey, *Mythology*, 47.

⁵⁴ Bailey, *Mythology*, 47.

Brahma's connection to *dharma*, and thus his connection to *pravṛtti*, can be seen in his role as creator. Bailey states that Brahma, as the creator of the universe, is identifiable with *ahamkara*, which is analogous to the ego, out of which individuality manifests.⁵⁵ The *ahamkara*, or Brahma, influences individuals into action and creates the *triloka* as a place of action.⁵⁶ Brahma has created worldly action, but has also been subject to *pravṛtti* by his active desire to create. Contrast a common creation myth featuring Vishnu, where a lotus containing Brahma springs from Vishnu's navel. Vishnu then instructs Brahma to create the world. Though Vishnu is the ultimate source of creation in this myth, he is not bound to worldly action as Brahma is, instead taking a *nivṛtti* renouncer's position. When one is bound up in action, it is difficult to attain *moksha*. In the lotus myth, Vishnu creates without acting, showing that he is closely associated with liberation, while Brahma is not. If modern Hinduism's goal is liberation through renunciation of action, his desire for action would naturally lead to unpopularity.

Brahma's role of active creation, according to Bailey, ties him to the triple world, and thus, cements his position as a god ruled by *pravṛtti*. When Brahma creates the world, according to Bailey, it is due to his desire to take action and create something. Brahma does not create simply as is his duty, but because he is invested in the action of creation. This desire, Bailey says, "is such a pronounced feature of Brahmā in the Purāṇic cosmology that it might exemplify a broader notion of a desire to act, the hallmark of *pravṛtti* values."⁵⁷ Unlike Vishnu or Shiva who exist beyond worldly urges and desires, Brahma's need to create cements him as someone incapable of transcending the world of his own creation. Brahma's children serve as contrast in this regard. Bailey recounts how Brahma's sons, the *prajapatis*, renounce their charge to create

⁵⁵ Bailey, *Mythology*, 87.

⁵⁶ Bailey, *Mythology*, 88.

⁵⁷ Bailey, *Mythology*, 94.

alongside their father through the act of progeneration, and become ascetics.⁵⁸ By renouncing their desires they serve as a *nivṛtti* contrast to their father, who cannot give up his temptations.

In addition to his urge to create, Brahma's intimate relation to the *dharma* of the triple world marks him as ruled by *pravṛtti* values. Recall that *dharma* is the set of rules and relations that preserve righteousness in the triple world, ensure each individual world's proper interaction with the others, and maintain the order of existence. The aspects of *dharma* mark it as a worldly concept, unlike the otherworldly liberation of *moksha* that most Hindus pursue. Brahma is not the only god who is concerned with upholding the laws of *dharma*. Vishnu, for example, is the preserver to Brahma's role as creator and Shiva's role as destroyer: what Vishnu preserves is *dharma*, incarnating whenever righteousness or *dharma* is threatened in the triple world to root out *adharma* and destroy it. Brahma's attitude towards the preservation of *dharma* is different than Vishnu's, however. Brahma is dedicated to the protection of *dharma*, because, as the creator of the triple world, he is the one who has organized its norms and values, and thus, embodies them.⁵⁹ Brahma embodies the worldly values Hindus attempt to transcend, which would make worshipping him in hope of liberation illogical.

Brahma is unwilling to violate certain *dharmic* principles that Vishnu and Shiva as gods of *nivṛtti* values would not fret over, illustrating the fact that he is bound by worldly ideas. Bailey uses the archetypical myth of the conflict between demons and minor gods to demonstrate this point. This kind of myth begins when a demon performs austerities to receive a boon from Brahma. The demon is granted a wish, which they usually use to request immortality. Brahma refuses and grants them great power instead. Brahma then sends Shiva or Vishnu in the form of

⁵⁸ Bailey, *Mythology*, 94.

⁵⁹ Bailey, *Mythology*, 71.

an *avatara* to defeat them.⁶⁰ At first, it seems Brahma is engaging in *adharmic* behavior by granting demons boons. Bailey states, however, that this is a *dharmic* action, as demons are part of the cosmos despite their evil ways; it would be inappropriate to refuse the boon they have earned.⁶¹ Bailey states, however, that if Brahma granted the demons the boon of immortality, this would encroach on the realm of godhood, in violation of *dharma*.⁶² Thus, he sets up the demon's defeat by making them powerful but not invincible. In the epic Ramayana, the demon Ravana asks Brahma that he be rendered immune to attacks from various magical creatures.⁶³ Brahma grants the boon, thus ensuring Ravana will be killed by a human, allowing for the preservation of *dharma*. Bailey states that Brahma, as the creator of the world, "is *dharma* himself," and that the epithet "*dharmamaya*, 'he who consists of *dharma*,' is used of him at least once."⁶⁴ Brahma is locked into the worldly values of *pravṛtti* and *dharma*, where Vishnu and Shiva transcend these values. As Vishnu and Shiva both enjoy worship and both possess a connection to *nivṛtti* which Brahma lacks, Brahma's tie to *pravṛtti* may explain why he currently goes without *bhakti* followers.

Brahma's Worldly Desires

Much of the scholarship surrounding Brahma tends to focus on his character. In particular, it chronicles instances of his immoral behavior, often in contrast with fellow gods Vishnu and Shiva. One frequently studied myth recounts Brahma's incestuous desires, and how

⁶⁰ Bailey, *Mythology*, 73.

⁶¹ Bailey, *Mythology*, 141.

⁶² Bailey, *Mythology*, 74.

⁶³ Bailey, *Mythology*, 143.

⁶⁴ Bailey, *Mythology*, 140.

they lead to his humiliation. In Mishra's work, Brahma's relationship with his spouse Sarasvati is elaborated upon. Mishra recounts that in certain myths, Brahma's desire for his wife is seen as incestuous, as being her creator, he fulfills the role of her father.⁶⁵ Mishra later describes a similar myth where Brahma assumed a mortal form and then split in half to create a daughter. Mishra tells us Brahma "...became fascinated by her charms. But as she was born of his body, Brahmā considered her to be his daughter, and was ashamed of his emotion." Mishra continues that Brahma "committed incest with his own daughter and for this horrible crime was punished by the rest of the gods by having his worship restricted."⁶⁶ Mishra notes, however, that other gods who have committed immoral acts continue to receive worship, indicating that Brahma's unpopularity can be explained through other means.

Bailey also addresses incidents of Brahma's sexual misconduct in his work. Bailey begins by discussing incest myths related to Prajapati, an early creator god with a great number of similarities to Brahma, whose name later became one of Brahma's titles.⁶⁷ Bailey recounts a myth similar to the aforementioned incest story, where Prajapati changed into a stag to have sex with his daughter Uśas, who had taken the shape of a doe. The other gods once again attempted to punish the creator, but his seed was spilled before they could act, causing the gods to feed it to the sacrificial fire which gave rise to numerous creatures.⁶⁸ In a similar myth, Shiva conducted a ritual attended by other gods and their wives. Brahma, seeing the beauty of the various women, spilled his seed on the ground, and it was once again sacrificed on the fire to create creatures, whom Brahma adopts.⁶⁹ Bailey states that this myth follows the incest mythology's theme, for

⁶⁵ Mishra, *Worship*, 3.

⁶⁶ Mishra, *Worship*, 13-14.

⁶⁷ Bailey, *Mythology*, 63.

⁶⁸ Bailey, *Mythology*, 64.

⁶⁹ Bailey, *Mythology*, 64-65.

“the act of spilling his semen at the sight of women forbidden to him is an act of similar gravity.”⁷⁰ Bailey also describes an incest myth in the Matsya Purana that follows the same basic pattern; Brahma was entranced by the beauty of his newly created daughter, had sex with her, and is rebuked by his sons.⁷¹ Bailey states that this myth depicts Brahma as emblematic of the *grhapati* (householder) stage of the Hindu life. The *grhapati*'s duty is to engage in *pravṛtti* activities like procreation and thus, it is permissible to give into a controlled lust. Bailey states that “If... Brahmā craves intercourse out of lust, elsewhere his motive is a legitimate one because it is to increase creation,” tying Brahma’s role as creator to worldly activities such as sex, which implies Brahma’s very nature is in opposition to the goal of *moksha*.⁷²

The theme of Brahma’s lust as a form of creation is dealt with extensively by Doniger, who studies variations of the incest myth and Shiva’s role in it in *Shiva: The Erotic Ascetic*. Doniger describes myths where Shiva creates creatures through sex or incest, but specifies that they originally characterized Brahma.⁷³ Doniger explains that before the myth of sexual creation was conflated with Shiva, he participated as another character in addition to Brahma: sometimes transforming into Brahma’s son to aid in the process of creation,⁷⁴ other times punishing Brahma’s lustful nature by severing one of Brahma’s five heads with his thumbnail.⁷⁵ Doniger explains Shiva and Brahma represent “two different valid forms of creation”⁷⁶ and that sexual creation is permitted to Brahma, for it is his duty. Shiva assists with creation in other ways.⁷⁷ The event of Brahma’s incest is studied again and again in scholarship, further illuminating Brahma’s

⁷⁰ Bailey, *Mythology*, 65.

⁷¹ Bailey, *Mythology*, 119.

⁷² Bailey, *Mythology*, 120.

⁷³ Doniger, *Shiva*, 111.

⁷⁴ Doniger, *Shiva*, 112.

⁷⁵ Doniger, *Shiva*, 123.

⁷⁶ Doniger, *Shiva*, 136.

⁷⁷ Doniger, *Shiva*, 139.

ties to worldly desires. If Brahma is ruled by his sexual impulses, then Hindus may perceive him as unable to help them transcend the ephemeral world.

Competition from Other Cults

Scholarship repeatedly indicates that the cults of other gods have absorbed themes and traits once belonging to Brahma. This appropriation may have rendered Brahma redundant, and thus, unpopular. In her work *Brahma Worship: Tradition and Iconography*, Mishra gives examples of the Vishnu mythology that correspond closely to Brahma's and suggests the former group appropriated these elements from the latter. Mishra writes that Brahma was initially described with the title *Narayana*, which translates to "the abode of men," but can be interpreted to mean "he who dwells in the (causal) waters (*nara*)," referencing the watery state of pre-creation out of which Brahma rose.⁷⁸ Mishra notes, however, that in later periods the epithet *Narayana* came to be virtually exclusively associated with Vishnu.⁷⁹ Mishra also notes that one of Vishnu's most famous incarnations, the boar avatar, may have also been originally associated with Brahma. In the modern telling of the boar myth, after the earth was dragged to the bottom of the cosmic sea, Vishnu took the form of a great boar and lifted the world out of the waters with his snout. Mishra cites a tale from the Brahma cycle, however, where it is Brahma who took on the form of a boar, and lifted the earth out of the primal waters as an act of creation.⁸⁰ Mishra states that the first two avatars of Vishnu, the fish incarnation and the tortoise incarnation, may also have been attributed to Brahma, and that while the name *Prajapati* (Lord of Progeny) came

⁷⁸ Mishra, *Worship*, 9.

⁷⁹ Mishra, *Worship*, 9.

⁸⁰ Mishra, *Worship*, 10.

to denote Vishnu in the Vishnu Purana scripture, she concurs with Bailey that the name originally belonged to Brahma.⁸¹

Mishra argues that one of India's greatest scriptures, the Mahabharata, may have originally contained Brahma elements that were replaced with Vishnu worship. The story of the Mahabharata is the story of two warring factions, cousins known as the Pandavas and Kauravas. The Pandavas were aided by Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu. The Kauravas were led by Bhisma, also called Pitamaha, which is a title of Brahma. Mishra states that the twelfth book of the Mahabharata seldom refers to Krishna or Vishnu as an object of worship and instead praised *Narayana*, already established to be one of Brahma's titles.⁸² This chapter deals heavily with speculation on the creation of the world, which is Brahma's task, and not Vishnu's. The book also continuously states that the reward of the virtuous is to enter into *Brahmaloka*— the world of Brahma.⁸³ Mishra cites the Manu Samhita which states *Narayana* refers to Brahma. She further notes the Satpatha Brahmana which ties *Narayana* to *dharma* (which Brahma is closely associated with), and that the Mahabharata describes the *pancharatra* cult depicted within as related to *Narayana*.⁸⁴ Mishra further elaborates that *Narayana* was a creator god who was not associated with Vedic sacrifice.⁸⁵ As the Mahabharata describes the victory of the *pancharatra* aligned Panduvas,⁸⁶ Mishra argues that the discrepancy found between book twelve of the epic and the others is a result of an attempt to preserve the early cult of Brahma as *Naranaya* while reconciling it with the more modern cult of Vishnu.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Mishra, *Worship*, 10.

⁸² Mishra, *Worship*, 18.

⁸³ Mishra, *Worship*, 18.

⁸⁴ Mishra, *Worship*, 19.

⁸⁵ Mishra, *Worship*, 19.

⁸⁶ Mishra, *Worship*, 18.

⁸⁷ Mishra, *Worship*, 19.

Mishra finally notes that much of Brahma's role as creator has been absorbed by other, more popular, deities. She writes that "his powers as creator are arrogated by *Viṣṇu* and *Śiva* and he is overshadowed. His place is taken by *Śakti*, the feminine principle whose definition includes almost all of *Brahmā*'s characteristics and who almost entirely replaces him as the principle of creation under a garb more appealing to popular imagination."⁸⁸ Doniger echoes Mishra's argument in her work, *On Hinduism*, noting that "Brahma is hardly worshiped at all, and the other two great gods, Vishnu and Shiva, are each both creators and destroyers, as is the other great deity who forms the real quasi-trinity, Devi, the goddess."⁸⁹ Later, Doniger further cites the often retold myth of Brahma's birth from Vishnu's navel, showing how the role of ultimate creator in Hinduism has become obscured. Doniger writes that

When the three worlds were in darkness, Vishnu slept in the middle of the cosmic ocean. A lotus grew out of his navel. Brahma came to him and said 'Tell me, who are you?' Vishnu replied, 'I am Vishnu, Creator of the Universe. All these worlds, and you yourself, are inside *me*.' Vishnu then entered into Brahma's body and saw all three worlds in his belly. Astonished, he came out of Brahma's mouth and said, 'Now, you must enter my belly in the same way and see the worlds.' And so Brahma entered Vishnu's belly and saw all the worlds. Then, since Vishnu had shut all the openings, Brahma came out of Vishnu's navel and rested on the lotus.⁹⁰

In this myth, set after the destruction of the previous world and the creation of the next,⁹¹ the role of creator god is muddled between Brahma and Vishnu. Brahma has been made, in a sense, subservient to Vishnu, as his birth from Vishnu's navel makes him Vishnu's symbolic son. Brahma's subservient position gives Vishnu a claim to the title of Creator. The myth, however, adds ambiguity, as Vishnu soon after enters Brahma, and emerges from him as Brahma just

⁸⁸ Mishra, *Worship*, 57.

⁸⁹ Doniger, *Hinduism*, 99.

⁹⁰ Doniger, *Hinduism*, 165.

⁹¹ Doniger, *Hinduism*, 166.

emerged from Vishnu; notably, though, no mention is made of Brahma claiming Vishnu's position, further implying that Vishnu is naturally entitled to the title of Creator. It is not only Vishnu who takes on Brahma's creative powers. Doniger also recounts Shiva assuming a creative role.

Doniger's *On Hinduism* recounts a myth that contrasts Shiva and Brahma as different forces of creation. Sampling a portion of the Mahabharata, Doniger recounts how

The creator, Brahma, wishing to create creatures, said to Shiva, the first being, 'Create creatures, without delay.' Shiva said 'Yes,' but seeing that all creatures were flawed, he who had great ascetic heat plunged into the water and generated ascetic heat. Brahma waited for him for a very long time and then created another creator, a Prajapati ('Lord of Creatures'). The Prajapati, seeing Shiva submerged in the water, said to his father Brahma, 'I will create creatures, if there is no one who has been born before me.' His father said to him 'There is no other male (*purusha*) born before you. This is just a pillar (or, Shiva who is called The Pillar) submerged in the water. Rest assured, and do the deed.' And so the Prajapati created creatures. They were hungry and tried to eat the Prajapati, until Brahma provided them with food, plants and animals. And then they began to procreate and increase in number.

Then Shiva stood up from the water. When he saw those creatures of various forms, increasing by themselves, he became angry, and he tore off his own *lingam* and threw it down on the ground, where it stood up just as it was. Brahma said to him, hoping to conciliate him with words, 'What did you accomplish by staying so long in the water? And why did you tear out this *lingam* and plant it in the ground?' The Shiva, becoming truly furious, said to Brahma, "Since someone else created these creatures, what will I do with it? These creatures can go on recycling forever, eating the food that I obtained for them through my ascetic heat.' And then Shiva went to his place in the mountain, to generate ascetic heat.⁹²

Doniger explains that in this myth, Shiva is portrayed as a universal creator. By separating his *lingam* (phallus) from his body, Shiva has not lost his creative power, but has spread his creative essence far and wide.⁹³ Doniger also explains that in later versions of the myth, Shiva stayed in the water attempting to generate *tapas* (the power that comes from yoga, or as Doniger translates

⁹² Doniger, *Hinduism*, 195.

⁹³ Doniger, *Hinduism*, 196.

it, “ascetic heat”) to create truly immortal creatures, which makes him more creative instead of less so.⁹⁴ The myth, in addition to establishing Shiva’s creative power, neuters Brahma’s. The myth establishes that Brahma must rely on other gods to create creatures, instead of giving rise to living things himself. With Brahma’s claim to the title of creator weakened, it is possible his worship was abandoned in favor of Vishnu and Shiva.

In *Shiva: The Erotic Ascetic*, Doniger further explores how Shiva has taken on Brahma’s creative aspect. She explains that in mythology, ascetic-minded Shiva often opposes Brahma’s methods of creation, which are usually sexual and often involve incest. Shiva does not oppose Brahma because he is ascetic, Doniger insists, but because Shiva too is a Lord of Creatures, and thus is entitled to create on his own. Doniger cites a myth where Brahma lusts after the goddess Sati, who is forbidden to him, and Shiva responds by stating “I will kill the evil wretch and I myself will then create all creatures, or else by my own *tejas* [sharpness/power]⁹⁵ I will create another to perform creation.”⁹⁶ Doniger states that Shiva’s frequent opposition to Brahma is based on “similarity of purpose,” and cites the many myths of the god Kama, personification of sexuality, where Brahma and Shiva are variously depicted as curing, being cursed by, destroying, and reviving Kama. Doniger states that “Just as Brahmā both curses Kāma and restores him, so Śiva destroys Kāma but simultaneously participates in Kāma’s nature and increases his power.”⁹⁷ Shiva, though an independent creator, absorbed many of Brahma’s myths involving participation in sexual creation. If both Vishnu and Shiva can act as creator then Brahma is redundant in the Hindu pantheon, possibly explaining his lack of worship.

⁹⁴ Doniger, *Hinduism*, 195.

⁹⁵ Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1899), 454.

⁹⁶ Doniger, *Shiva*, 136.

⁹⁷ Doniger, *Shiva*, 140.

Chapter III

Methodology

Compared to other Hindu divinities, Brahma the Creator possesses no *bhakti* cult, and receives only a scant amount of worship. The study aims to gain insight into contemporary Hindu opinion of Brahma, in hopes of better understanding why he does not possess a *bhakti* following comparable to fellow deities Vishnu or Shiva. The data collection method is interviews with Hindus in the areas of central and southern Ohio, and thus, data will consist of their testimony and what can be gleaned from it. The project will consist of qualitative, rather than quantitative research.

Selection of subjects for the project was to be carried out on a word-of-mouth basis, with the researcher also contacting various nearby temples to widen the potential pool of applicants. While travel to other locations with larger Hindu populations, be they other states or countries, was very briefly considered, the constraints of balancing travel and schoolwork as well as the risks posed by the Covid-19 pandemic forbade this course of action. While traveling to India would have been ideal for its extremely large number of Hindus and diversity of Hindu belief, the country was hit especially hard by the pandemic and thus it would not have been practical to travel there. The safety of the researcher, interview subjects, and others was the top priority as the interviews were carried out over a high point in Covid-19 cases, and thus, the number of subjects was limited. The total pool of subjects was eight interviewees as a result. Three subjects were contacted through the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Four subjects were university students. The final subject was an acquaintance of the researcher. The pool of respondents consisted of five men and three women. The youngest respondents were 19 years of age with the oldest being 73 years of age. All subjects were informed of the purpose of

the study and its status as an honors project for Ohio Wesleyan University.

In order to conduct the study, a general list of topics was prepared based on existing literature about Brahma, primarily Bailey's *Mythology of Brahma*, as it is the most comprehensive available work. The primary list of questions is as follows:

1. Tell me about how you practice Hinduism. What gods or goddesses do you worship? Were you raised into the school of Hinduism that you follow, or did you pick it up later in life? What is important to you about Hinduism?
2. What do you know about Brahma? What can you tell me about his aspects? Are there any myths about Brahma that you are familiar with?
3. How do you relate to Brahma? How do you feel about him? Do you pay him homage or is he not an important part of your life?
4. Scholar Greg Bailey has supposed that Brahma is not worshiped today based on his relation to *pravṛttidharma* and ritual values, which he sees as unpopular. Is this a fair assessment, or do you disagree?

These questions, save question four, are designed to be as open-ended as possible allowing the subject of the interview to speak their mind with as genuine a response as possible. The first question helps establish the respondent's background and general knowledge of Hinduism, while the second question helps gauge their knowledge of Brahma and his mythology, if any. Question three is meant to spark discussion of Brahma, and is intended to encourage further dialogue, which constitutes the bulk of the interview. Question four encourages subjects to respond to Greg Bailey's theory of the unpopularity of *pravṛttidharma* in an era where Hinduism is primarily focused on cosmic concerns such as *moksha*. This theory was chosen as the basis for a question as other theories for Brahma's unpopularity, such as his incestuous conduct, could

conceivably be answered by question three. These questions are also not absolute; other questions were to be asked as appropriate during the interview, with these four serving as a starting point.

The interviews were recorded on a model 11 iPhone, while the researcher simultaneously took notes on significant portions of the subject's testimony. The interview recordings were then transcribed by the online transcription program otter.ai (free account version), and the transcriptions edited by the researcher to correct any of the program's dictation errors. If face-to-face interviews were not possible for certain respondents, the interviews were held over the ZOOM streaming service, and recorded through the aforementioned method as well as ZOOM's recording feature.

Recommendations

The primary limitation of this study was its sample size and small geographical scope. In the future, if others were to attempt a similar experiment, it would be best if as many Hindus as possible from as many areas as possible were interviewed, to ensure that Hindu thought in all of its diversity is represented in the study. Based on the format of one-on-one interviews, it is unknown how feasible this would be unless several researchers collaborated on the project. A more formalized series of questions may be beneficial as well. While the freeform nature of each interview proved a boon as it led to new avenues of research, it sometimes proved difficult to direct interview subjects towards certain questions. A happy medium between spontaneity and structure is recommended. It is also recommended that the study be carried out during a time when it is safe to travel, as the Covid-19 pandemic served as the main limiting factor for the number of interviews.

Chapter IV

Results

The following summaries highlight the most noteworthy aspects of each respondent's testimony. As the size of each response combined was far too great to include, the key points of each interview have been recorded, with direct quotations where possible.

Interview One Summary

The subject of the first interview is a member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, better known as the Hare Krishnas or ISKCON. When asked to explain his history with Hinduism, he described his worship as *bhakti yoga*, or as he put it, "connection through devotion with the supreme." The respondent stated that his family had always been Krishna worshipers and that he was raised into the tradition, but attained a better knowledge of Hinduism only after he began to read scripture. The subject explained that loving god awakens spiritual happiness in men, as opposed to sensory happiness, and stated that the Veda scriptures hold the most accurate depiction of God, though he acknowledged others have a degree of truth.

When asked to describe Brahma, the subject described Brahma as "a post, just like the president of the United States is a post." The role of Brahma, according to the subject, is taken on by virtuous souls who reincarnate into the position to create in the name of the supreme God, Vishnu. The subject stated that "you can become Brahma, I can become Brahma, I can get the post if I'm qualified, just like anybody can become the president of the United States, if they're qualified." According to the subject, after one hundred years in Brahma's lifetime (which are much longer than earthly years) the current Brahma vacates his post and a new one arises. The

respondent explained that Brahma is subservient to Vishnu, as “He's not the primary creator. The primary creator is Vishnu, because Brahma is born on the nape of the lotus that grows out of the navel of Lord Vishnu.” The subject described Brahma as “a great devotee of the Lord. . . empowered by the Lord to create.” Relative to humans, the subject stated Brahma is not the true God, but is “much more elevated than us. . . He knows more than us.”

When asked if Bailey’s theory that Brahma’s unpopularity can be traced to ritual values was correct, the subject stated “No, he’s a great devotee of the Lord. Actually, he was imparted realization within his heart. Then he appeared and he was on this lotus, and then he was thinking, ‘what am I supposed to do?’ He heard the word that he should do penance. . . he meditated and then from within his heart enlightened began, and that’s how he became enlightened,” and that “there are not many temples of Brahma. There are many temples of Shiva. I think there is a little history behind that.”

Interview Two Summary

This respondent is also a member of ISKCON. When asked about his religious background, he stated that he was not taught the true scope of Hinduism by his family, as a result of the vast expanse of material the religion has to offer. He stated that the real basis of understanding comes from the messages of ISKCON’s founder, Abhay Charanaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami. The subject stated that in his understanding of Hinduism, we are all part of God, and unable to be happy through material pleasures. Thus, “We are part of God and we have to connect with Him. If we connect with him, then we can [go] back to Godhead,” and find true happiness.

When asked why people pick someone like Vishnu or Shiva over Brahma as a *bhakti*

god, the subject answered that “All power came from Lord Vishnu or Krishna. Krishna gives power to Brahma.” The subject, turning to the house in which the interview was conducted, elaborated that Brahma is like the carpenter who constructed the building. Though Brahma built the house, he did it at the behest of someone else. The subject also referenced a myth where Brahma was cursed by his wife to never be worshiped again as a possible cause. The subject, when asked about his opinion on Brahma’s character and morals, described him as a “very realized person,” and worthy of respect. Though the subject may not worship Brahma, he did not view Brahma in the negative light certain myths depict him in.

When asked about Bailey’s *pravṛttidharma* hypothesis, the subject responded that it was “fine,” without elaboration.

Interview Three Summary

The third interview concluded ISKCON’s participation in the project. The subject thus echoed many ideas from the previous interviews. The subject explained that in terms of his background, he was not born into Hinduism, but found Hinduism later in life while seeking to understand the universe better.

The subject explained that Krishna, or Vishnu, is the highest form of God, and that Brahma is born from Vishnu. As Brahma is the creator of the manifest world, Vishnu’s various incarnations can be traced back to him, but Vishnu in the end is the highest god and worthy of worship. The subject compared Brahma to a great engineer of the universe. The subject stated that we cannot know Brahma directly, but can learn about him from scripture. When asked if Brahma could be a *bhakti* god, the subject stated that his role as a servant of Vishnu prevents him from being a path to *moksha*; he is, however, capable of granting boons. Once again, Brahma

was described not as a person but as a position, and the subject stated that other universes are managed by other Brahmas. The subject described Brahma as “no different than you or I, he is just very advanced.”

Interview Four Summary

The subject, when asked to describe his religious background, stated he was born Hindu in India, but not into an orthodox or conservative family. The subject previously considered himself an atheist, which his family accepted. The subject later converted to what he called “a pure Hindu,” and described his favorite god as Ganesha, the Remover of Obstacles. His family’s patron god is Shiva, and his family visits a Shaivite temple yearly for rituals.

When asked about his impression of Brahma, the subject stated most non-Hindus would think Brahma is disliked, but this is not the case. He elaborated that many perform sacrifices for Brahma, and that his family performed *puja* for Brahma a year before the interview. The subject stated Brahma was cursed by Shiva for speaking evil words (one of the many versions of the *Śiva-Purāna* myth), and that henceforth he would not be worshiped, possibly explaining Brahma’s nonexistent following. The subject noted, however, that he has heard of an increase in Brahma worship in certain places. Brahma is not at fault for his lack of worship, the subject stated; he affirmed that Brahma is for the most part good. The subject noted that, in the myth, Brahma’s other faces attempted to stop the evil face from its actions, indicating Brahma is mostly moral. The subject stated that some are beginning to realize that Brahma is not evil, and that this is increasing his worship.

When asked if Brahma is responsible for *samsara* or worldly problems, the subject responded that all three members of the *Trimurti* are responsible, and that is only if one considers

worldly existence a problem: the subject sees the trails of mortal life as a method for spiritual evolution, and thus, Brahma cannot be blamed for the suffering in this world. When asked about whether or not Brahma is subservient to the other members of the *Trimurti*, he stated that most Hindus believe all three are equal, but an outsider may get the impression Brahma is lesser from his small cult.

Interview Five Summary

The subject described his religious background as very orthodox. The subject's father is very invested in ritual practice, while his mother is interested in scriptures such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana. The subject stated that he would not be a complete person without Hinduism in his life. The subject's family is Shaivite, but also pays respect to other gods, including Jesus Christ. The subject stated that he does not lean towards the worship of any particular god.

When asked about Brahma, the subject described him as "well respected," but acknowledged that he lacks a cult following and possesses no devotional scriptures or *bhakti* movement. When asked to explain Brahma's lack of popularity, the subject first referenced different myths explaining the situation, such as Shiva cursing Brahma for deceit, or a sage cursing Brahma for rudeness. The subject stated that Brahma was once widely respected in the Puranic age, but as Vishnu's cult arose, Brahma became less popular. Vishnu the preserver, the subject said, can be seen as a god relevant in developing civilization, but a creator god like Brahma has no role after creation. The subject then described various rhetorical techniques the cults of Vishnu and Shiva used to take prominence, stating "Vishnu [is depicted with] an umbilical cord lotus with Brahma on top. This basically states Brahma is the child of Vishnu,

Brahma comes from Vishnu, which wasn't the case earlier.”

When asked about Bailey's theory of *pravṛttidharma* and *nivṛttidharma*, the subject stated it had some merit as Brahma, “theologically. . . was never meant to give liberation.” The subject states that rituals are secondary to *dharma*, and that following *dharma* is enough to give one *moksha*. The subject also stated that Brahma's unpopularity may be based on the vast number of aspects Vishnu and Shiva possess, which allow different types of people to easily empathize with them, where Brahma is always portrayed as the elderly keeper of the Vedas. He also cites what he considers to be slander campaigns against Brahma from rival cults. The subject referenced the myth where Brahma's fifth face is torn off as a result of his incestuous desires as one such slander campaign. The subject concluded by stating that Brahma is still respected, but not as an object of worship.

Interview Six Summary

The subject was born into Hinduism, and while her father is not very religious, she reports that her mother primarily worships Shiva, and her grandmother worships Krishna. As the subject lived with her grandmother for a year, she practiced Krishna worship for a period, and studied the Bhagavad Gita, an important scripture for Krishna worship, when she was younger. The subject spent a portion of her youth in Dubai, and used her study of Hinduism as a way to connect with her roots. In India, she was exposed to much Ganesha worship. In the end, the subject expresses no preference for any of these gods. The subject noted that her family is not extremely strict in regards to their faith, and that they practice a modern, “western” Hinduism.

When asked how Brahma factors into her experience as a Hindu, the subject said that she has not encountered Brahma worship and that he does not factor into her rituals. The subject

remarked that as she practices a modernized form of Hinduism, she has not been exposed to Brahma. The subject expressed little familiarity with Brahma's character and mythology. When asked if she had any theories for Brahma's lack of worship, the subject stated that it may be that it is simply tradition to not worship Brahma, thus her lack of exposure to him. She stated that her generation "does not know many stories," and speculated that most Hindus probably are not familiar with the scriptures to a great degree, contributing to a lack of knowledge of Brahma.

When asked about Bailey's theory of Brahma's connection to ritualism, the subject doubted that it accurately explained why her family does not worship Brahma. The subject stated that she was not sure if most families put a great amount of thought into the god that they worshiped, and that it may simply be a matter of tradition, and not considerations about *moksha*. The subject also argued that one's conduct is more important than the god they worship in Hinduism.

The subject said she "definitely" believed that there was a historical reason for Brahma's unpopularity. She stated that within India's history of occupations and wars, perhaps there was a disaster that caused the tradition of Brahma worship to disappear. She cited incursions such as the British occupation as possible incidents that contributed to Brahma's decline. "I think Brahma, maybe, was just kind of lost," she said.

When asked if she saw Brahma as inferior or subservient to other members of the *Trimurti*, the subject said she understood Hinduism as possessing "an unspoken hierarchy," but that she did not think any god was innately inferior or superior to the others. The subject also stated that each god in the Hindu pantheon is meant to appeal to a different sort of person. All are expressions of one true god, and Brahma may have had his appealing characteristics "lost in translation."

Interview Seven Summary

When asked about her religious background, the subject stated she was born a Hindu, and that her family often goes to temples on religious holidays and festivals, but does not otherwise strictly follow any specific practices. The subject stated that, for her, Hinduism is “about how to unlock spiritual wisdom, and what your relationship to God is,” not any one specific aspect of God.

When asked about Brahma specifically, the subject stated that she was not familiar with any myths or stories about him, nor was she familiar with official doctrine regarding Brahma. She described his creative power as “like a life force.” The subject, when asked about the myth where Brahma was born of Vishnu’s navel, stated that this myth did not imply Vishnu was superior to Brahma, and that members of the *Trimurti* were equal.

When asked about ritualism and *pravṛttidharma*, the subject stated that besides major holidays, members of her family may only carry out a small ritual for a few minutes each day. The subject did not have any ideas as to why Brahma lacked popularity when compared to Vishnu and Shiva.

Interview Eight Summary

When asked about her background in Hinduism, the subject did not express any preference for any one tradition or deity. She remarked “I’m not into any divisions, you know? All gods are for me.”

The subject, when asked about Brahma, stated that Brahma’s worship was never comparable to Vishnu or Shiva at any time in history. She stated that Brahma worship may have existed “on the side,” however. The subject could not recall ever coming across a tradition

devoted to Brahma, as opposed to what she described as thirty different practices associated with Vishnu.

When asked if Brahma's role as creator may relate to his lack of worship, the subject stated that this might be the case and that she considered this theory as a possibility. As "the future of the creation" is linked to Vishnu and Shiva, there would be a reason to pray to them, as opposed to Brahma. She stated, "Probably that's the way, theologically, that the Hindu cosmology is designed."

When asked about Bailey's theory of *pravṛttidharma*, the subject stated that Brahma, theologically, is linked only to creation, for "that's where the *pravṛtti* is." Shiva and Vishnu, on the other hand, are obligated to help humans when they encounter difficulty. The subject stated that in the Hindu cosmogony, the roles of deities are divided, and that "if everybody does everything all the time, there is a confusion within the creation," and thus, Brahma is not in a position to perform the same actions as Vishnu or Shiva. The subject stated that Brahma's role inherently put him in "the background" of the universe, which would not give him much *bhakti* worship. The subject described Bailey's theory as "within the cosmogonic idea... the theological concept of Hinduism."

When asked if stories that portray Brahma as subservient to other gods contributed to Brahma's lack of popularity, the subject expressed doubt. She said Brahma's theological position is a more likely cause for his lack of worship. The subject also denied the view that Brahma is a fault for worldly problems like *samsara*, as the condition is inherent to the cosmos and without it, the universe would not function. The subject claimed that those who view Brahma negatively are focusing on Brahma as an individual, without looking at his role as a part of the whole of the cosmos. She said that "If we see the larger picture . . . the context is this cyclical nature . . . and

the division of work between different gods.”

The subject noted that while no individuals worship Brahma as a personal *bhakti* deity, Brahma is still honored, and that recitations of the Vedas are addressed to Brahma. She also referenced his multiple depictions in most temples as a sign of the respect most Hindus afford him.

Chapter V

Discussion and Conclusions

Discussion

Before any attempt is made to analyze the contents of the interviews, both individually and in tandem with each other, it must be said that Hinduism is an extremely ancient religion with an extremely vast following. As a result, the body of Hindu thought is incredibly diverse, and even if every interview resulted in the same responses, the conclusions drawn from them still could not be generalized to all of Hinduism. No thesis could possibly capture the religion with all its nuances in its entirety, much less one of this paper's scope. These eight interviews, however, still contain valuable testimony, and may suggest further avenues of research for the study of Hinduism.

Respect for Brahma

The testimony of every subject interviewed indicates that Brahma's lack of a *bhakti* movement is not based upon a dislike of Brahma's character. In fact, Brahma seems to be perceived as noble among most subjects. In interviews one and three, both subjects describe Brahma as a meritorious soul who has been given the position of creator by the ultimate God, implying his worthy nature. All three subjects from the first three interviews use terms that indicate their own respect for Brahma. In interview one, Brahma is called a "great devotee of the Lord," spiritually "much more elevated" than the common soul, and even "enlightened"; in the second interview, Brahma is referred to as a "very realized person"; from the third interview, Brahma is called "very advanced." These three interviews also all agree that Brahma was

directly encouraged to create the universe by God, as its “engineer” or “carpenter.” This charge would not be given to one unworthy of respect.

It is important to note that as all three subjects of the first three interviews are members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, their views are informed by the organization to which they belong. While they do view Brahma as worthy of respect, he is merely the current soul who is deserving of the position of Creator. As specifically noted in the first interview, anyone can work until they are deserving of the position of Brahma, and replace its current occupant when his time is over. The third subject describes Brahma as “no different than you or I,” which suggests while he is worthy of respect, he is not worthy of worship as anyone can fill his role given enough effort.

It is not merely the members of ISKCON who find Brahma worthy of respect; this sentiment is shared by all other participants. The subject of the fourth interview acknowledges that Brahma’s lack of worship may be confused for dislike by those who are not familiar with Hinduism, but this view is incorrect. Brahma, he assures us, is not seen as lesser than Vishnu or Shiva, and is for the most part good. Even when one of Brahma’s heads misbehaves, the others are there to correct it. This notion is echoed in the eighth interview, where the subject states that Brahma still receives worship in every temple, just never as the primary deity. She further states that anyone who views Brahma in a negative light has not seen Hinduism in its entirety, and that once one grasps the complete Hindu cosmology, they will see that he is merely performing his role, and is viewed as “noble” by most for doing so. In interview five, Brahma is described as “well respected,” and the subjects of interviews six and seven see Brahma as equally worthy of reverence as Vishnu or Shiva.

Brahma's Cosmological Position as a Deterrent to Worship

If the content of these interviews can be trusted, Brahma is seen in a very positive light by the Hindu community. If this is the case, however, what is the cause for his lack of any appreciable *bhakti* movement? Both interview subjects and scholars agree that Brahma does not occupy a cosmological position that grants him the right to any worship, suggesting Brahma's role is a key cause for his unpopularity. Brahma's service to Vishnu/Krishna espoused by the members of ISKCON provides one explanation for why Brahma's position does not attract worship. It is traditionally taught in ISKCON that Brahma is lesser than Vishnu. Though Brahma is noble and wise, in the eyes of the first three participants, Vishnu is the true lord of the universe. As the subject of the first interview stated, Vishnu is the "primary creator" and Brahma is the "secondary creator." The second subject states that all power is derived from Krishna/Vishnu, and in the third interview, it was stated that multiple Brahmas exist for the multitude of universes in the whole of creation, meaning Brahma is not special when compared with the one true God. If one is taught, as members of ISKCON are, that the *Trimurti* are not equal to each other, then there would be no reason to worship Brahma at all. While it makes sense that Brahma worship would be low among those taught he is less than Vishnu or Shiva, even among those Hindus who see the *Trimurti* as composed of equals there is a distinct lack of *bhakti* devoted to Brahma. It may be that Brahma's cosmological position as the creator is what prevents his worship from spreading.

Outside of the members of ISKCON, the prevailing opinion among subjects is that Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are equal in stature. As a result, it must be some aspect of Brahma's character that makes him less attractive for worship; one of these aspects seems to be his position as creator. Most subjects agree that no member of the *Trimurti* has dominion over the others,

with the subject of interview six stating that all three are equal despite an unspoken divine hierarchy, and the subjects of interviews seven and four stating Brahma is equal to Vishnu and Shiva without any such qualifications. Subject eight touches on a possible reason for Brahma's unpopularity when she states that Brahma, owing to his role as creator, is oriented toward the past. His job is done and he has nothing else to offer. Thus, Vishnu, who is concerned with preserving the world; and Shiva, who will eventually complete the world by destroying it, still have active roles, and can aid humanity in exchange for devotion. In interview five, the same theme is heard, with the subject stating Vishnu receives worship as his job as the preserver is still relevant, whereas Brahma has already completed his work as creator. Why pray to a god whose job is done? This point notably echoes Mishra's explanation of Brahma's lack of *bhakti* following, lending credence to her theory.⁹⁸ When creation is complete, the god of creation becomes irrelevant.

Due to Brahma's position as creator, his work has already been completed. As a result, he receives no *bhakti* worship from Hindus, only secondary praise. This may be a result of a perception that Brahma, unlike Vishnu or Shiva, cannot lead one to *moksha*, the liberation from reincarnation that is the goal of Hinduism. The subject of interview eight stated that, as the creator, Brahma's role "is to be in the background," and thus, he cannot give *moksha*. This sentiment is shared by the subject of interview five, who believes that Brahma was not constructed as a character related to *moksha*. The third interview's subject, being a member of ISKCON, agrees that Brahma cannot grant *moksha*, but has a different reasoning. As a servant of Vishnu, Brahma cannot grant *moksha*; this is a right reserved for the supreme god, in this case, Vishnu. In all, most subjects seem to agree that there is some aspect of Brahma's role in the

⁹⁸ Mishra, *Worship*, 13.

universe that limits his worship. It may be his subservience to Vishnu, or his role as the creator that condemns him to go unworshipped. Whatever the case, the construction of Brahma's character in the cosmological sense seems to be a key reason for his unpopularity.

The Validity of Bailey's Theory of *Pravṛttidharma*

If Brahma's role in the cosmos prevents him from gaining followers, it may be because Brahma, owing to his role as creator, is too closely tied to *pravṛtti* values as Bailey speculates. If Brahma is too bound up in the values of this world, he cannot provide the spiritual liberation that Hindus so desire. Bailey argues that two value systems underlie Hinduism: *pravṛttidharma* includes the worldly everyday values of caste-based society whereas *nivṛttidharma* involves renunciation of the material world and contemplation of the divine. Bailey argues that Brahma is essentially concerned with *pravṛtti* values due to his worldly nature. Brahma desires creation, unlike a *nivṛtti* ascetic who would be free of desire.⁹⁹ Brahma engages in action through creation.¹⁰⁰ Brahma, instead of transcending the world he has created, has participated in creation and become deluded by it.¹⁰¹ Brahma is also overly concerned with worldly ideals, for he fails to grant demons immortality.¹⁰² Each of these traits indicates that Brahma is too bound up in the world to offer the transcendence that Hinduism is concerned with, unlike Vishnu or Shiva. Bailey proposes that it may be for this reason that Brahma finds himself without worship, but modern Hindus seem to have conflicting views on whether or not this is the case.

While nowhere near unanimous, certain respondents' answers lend credence to Bailey's

⁹⁹ Bailey, *Mythology*, 94.

¹⁰⁰ Bailey, *Mythology*, 88.

¹⁰¹ Bailey, *Mythology*, 47.

¹⁰² Bailey, *Mythology*, 141.

theory of Brahma's unpopularity. Subject five was receptive to the theory to a degree, stating that the theory was true but "only because... Just theologically he was never meant to give liberation." The subject elaborated that correct conduct and fulfillment of one's duty is enough to give one *moksha*, and that *pravṛtti* ritualism is irrelevant to whether or not one reaches *moksha*. The subject described Bailey's theory as "character assessment," but noted that it would be possible for the theory to be further elaborated upon, implying that he saw merit in it to some extent. The eighth subject also saw a potential explanation for Brahma's lack of worship in Bailey's work. She stated that Brahma is in fact tied to *pravṛtti*, as the force of *pravṛtti* dwells within creation, which Brahma is responsible for. Vishnu and Shiva, on the other hand, are obligated to help humans with spiritual matters, potentially as they lack the tie to the material world that Brahma, the creator, has. Taken together, these statements imply that Brahma, tethered to the ephemeral world, cannot give liberation to the spirit and that the rituals he represents are unnecessary to attain said liberation. If this is the case, however, why is it that Shiva or Vishnu may aid a soul in attaining *moksha* when good conduct is all that matters? This question, along with other notions brought up by other respondents, cast doubt on Bailey's theories.

While certain Hindus see potential in Bailey's explanation, others are not so certain that he offers a valid view of the issue. When asked if Brahma was too closely associated with *pravṛtti* values, the first subject stated that Brahma is not, and that he is in fact one of God's greatest followers. The subject stated that Brahma was imparted a realization from God and that he performed penance and meditated until enlightenment sprouted "from within his heart." Far from tying Brahma to *pravṛtti* ritualism, the subject described Brahma with terms closely linked to *nivṛtti* renunciation, such as "meditation" or "enlightened." The third subject acknowledged

that Brahma lacks the capacity to lead humans to *moksha*, but attributed this not to Brahma's link to *pravṛtti*, but to his subservience to Vishnu. Subject six also doubted that Brahma's ties to ritualism could explain his unpopularity, and claimed that most Hindu families likely worship their *bhakti* god out of tradition, rather than for their ties to *nivṛttidharma* and *moksha*. While all three respondents agree that Brahma's *pravṛtti* ties are not to blame for his lack of worship, it is hard to otherwise synthesize them. Subject six's answer seems to hint at an explanation for the answers of subjects one and three, however: both belong to the Hare Krishna sect of Hinduism, and thus, have been brought into a tradition where Brahma is depicted as incapable of granting *moksha*, and subservient to a higher god. Tradition and historical inertia seem to play a noticeable component in Brahma's unpopularity, which suggests a historical cause for his lack of followers.

Tentative Historical Case for Brahma's Unpopularity

It seems the case that modern Hindus bare no ill will towards Brahma. Though some see him as subservient to another higher god, he is not disliked by any means. Why, then, is he not worshiped? Combined with evidence that Brahma once possessed a notable cult in India, certain interviews attribute a historical reason for Vishnu's and Shiva's large followings and Brahma's nonexistent one. If the research of Bailey and Mishra is accurate, Brahma likely possessed a following at some point in history. Bailey and Mishra place Brahma's location of worship in western India, centered around Pushkar in Rajasthan, based on writings in the Mahabharata, Padma Purana, and Kurma Purana, as well as archeological evidence. Temporally, they trace his worship in these places over a great period: around 400 B.C. to sometime between 1300 and

1500 A.D. Though scholars such as Doniger insist that Brahma never possessed a great cult,¹⁰³ certain respondents are inclined to agree with Bailey and Mishra that Brahma once had followers. The subject of interview five cites the wide praise for Brahma in the scriptures of Hinduism's Puranic age, saying that Brahma "is exalted in many verses and stuff like that, he is even given the term Prajapati, which means 'the All-Father'. . . Brahma was highly respected and many sages claimed descent from Brahma," implying Brahma once possessed a following large enough to create such scriptures. Subject six speculated that it is possible Brahma was once worshiped until some disaster wiped out his following. These responses offer little proof on their own, but are lent credence by the findings of Bailey and Mishra. Even subject eight, who expressed doubt that Brahma was ever widely followed, conceded that small pockets of Brahma worship may have existed in the past. Taken together, this implies the existence of an extinct Brahma cult, but the question of what happened to it naturally arises. A clue may be found in the myths told by the respondents.

Brahma may have had a cult in the past, yet it has disappeared as of the modern day. While there is no way to tell for certain what caused the cult's decline, the presence of various myths explaining Brahma's lack of worship indicates an active attempt on the part of Hindus to justify or rationalize whatever event caused the cult to decline. Such myths are referenced multiple times by different subjects. In the first interview, the subject brings up Brahma's birth from the lotus which grew from Vishnu's navel, implying he is subservient and thus, less worthy of worship. The fourth subject mentions a myth where one of Brahma's heads was torn off by Shiva for speaking evil words, and Brahma was cursed never to be worshiped again. The subject of interview five references three myths which explain Brahma's lack of a following: the story of

¹⁰³ Doniger, *Hinduism*, 23.

Brahma's birth from Vishnu's navel, which portrays him as Vishnu's inferior and symbolic son; the story of Brahma's inhospitality to a sage who visited him, resulting in him being cursed and denied worship; and the story where Shiva assumes the form of a pillar of fire, curing Brahma when he lied about having scaled the pillar. While such myths indicate that Hindus are attempting to explain the paradox of one of their religion's most important gods having no following, this type of myth may in and of itself represent a cause for Brahma's lack of worship.

Combined with speculation from certain subjects, the presence of myths in the Hindu tradition which depict Brahma in a negative light may represent an attempt by rival cults to stifle his worship. Both Mishra and Bailey recount myths that depict Brahma as lustful and incestuous, pursuing his own daughter as a result of her beauty. Bailey also notes a myth where Brahma was punished by Shiva for lusting after other gods' wives. These myths, and others like them, might be the result of worshipers of other gods slandering Brahma. This is not unthinkable, as Mishra and Doniger present evidence that rival cults attempted to absorb Brahma's positive traits into their own doctrine and make their own gods seem superior as a result. Mishra describes how Vishnu has appropriated the title of Narayana, as well as certain avatars, from Brahma. Furthermore, she shows evidence that the Mahabharata has been edited in certain sections, turning it from praise of Brahma into praise of Vishnu. Doniger, closely analyzing the lotus-birth myth, illustrates that in its telling, the myth has turned Brahma into Vishnu's son, and that Vishnu has assumed the role of true creator. Doniger also describes how Shiva has been made into a Lord of Creatures like Brahma, and that he has also absorbed Brahma's role as creator.

These myths, in attacking Brahma's character, suggest that certain groups were interested in curbing Brahma's worship. This theory is supported by testimony from the respondents. In interview five, the subject states that Brahma's subservience to Vishnu in the

lotus myth “wasn’t the case earlier,” and that “if the creator comes from something else why should we worship him now? And Brahma’s cult lost eventually,” implying a deliberate attempt from the cult of Vishnu to make Brahma look inferior. The subject further stated that there are “slander campaigns against Brahma. . . propagated by worldly cults,” referencing the removal of Brahma’s evil face and his incestuous lust. The subject of the sixth interview also suggests that historical conflict might be the cause of Brahma’s unpopularity, and that traditions depicting Brahma’s noble qualities may have died out after some struggle. It is important to note, however, that not every Hindu views such “slander campaigns” as the cause for Brahma’s unpopularity. The subject of interview eight stated that she did not think that myths depicting Brahma in a negative light could be blamed for his lack of worship, and that instead, his character is simply not conducive to worship. Even so, the unflattering portrayal of Brahma in modern Hinduism, combined with evidence of other cults attempting to appropriate Brahma’s role as Creator, suggests that some effort has been made to stymie Brahma’s popularity among Hindus. In order to know whether or not this is indeed the case, when and how this campaign was carried out, and how successful it was, evidence that is not currently available must come to light. It is possible that such evidence will never be found, and that the Brahma cult’s story may be lost to the fog of history, if it had a story to begin with.

Conclusion

Hinduism, as the world’s oldest religion and one of its largest, holds many mysteries. Chief among these is why Brahma, one of the three most important gods, goes without a following. The true answer to this question likely involves an unquantifiable number of contributing factors, most of which are no doubt forgotten. While it may be impossible to

determine for certain the correct solution to the issue, the interviews collected for this project at the very least suggest possible causes.

Whether it be lying, speaking evil words, or even pursuing his own daughter with lustful intent, there are plenty of examples of Brahma's bad behavior throughout the Hindu tradition. The respondents suggest that these myths do not factor into their opinion of Brahma, however, and that he is still a very well-respected god among modern-day Hindus. Even members of ISKCON, who perceive Brahma to be inferior to Vishnu, see him as a great soul and servant of God. Subjects seemed to express doubt that myths of Brahma's misconduct could play a role in his unpopularity, save for subject five, who claimed these myths were part of a slander campaign created by rival cults. Even if there is a period of history where such myths resulted in a decline of Brahma worship, in the modern age, these myths seem to play a small role in the public perception of Brahma.

Brahma, as the god of creation, may occupy a position in Hinduism uncondusive to worship, explaining his lack of a following. Respondents one through three, as members of ISKCON, see Brahma as subservient to Vishnu. If Brahma is merely a servant, there is no reason to worship him, as he is not the true god, and thus cannot lead one to *moksha*. Subjects five and eight, however, suggest that Brahma is cosmologically irrelevant, having already performed his work of creation. While Vishnu is relevant in modern society as the god of preservation, and Shiva's role as cosmic destroyer is yet to come, Brahma's act of creation has already been carried out. Subjects five and eight also agree that Brahma does not occupy a cosmological position that entitles him to grant *moksha* to his followers, meaning those who pursue spiritual liberation would have no reason to follow him. Brahma cannot fulfill the needs of modern Hindus and has little more to give humanity, offering no incentive for worship.

Greg Bailey hypothesizes that Brahma is too closely tied to the worldly ritual values of *pravṛttidharma* to be popular. Brahma, as the creator of the world, is bound up in its *dharma*, and is thus dominated by worldly impulses. Brahma's lustful desires and his refusal to give certain boons to demons cement his position as a worldly deity. If Brahma is too closely tied to the world of *pravṛtti*, then there is no way he can grant Hindus *nivṛtti*-based transcendence. Though this argument makes theoretical sense, it seems controversial among Hindus themselves. Subjects five and eight seem to think that Brahma, bound up in creation, is in no position to grant humans *moksha*, and that his role is to work in the background. This position is not universally shared, however, as the first subject described Brahma with *nivṛtti* terms such as enlightened, implying Brahma can fill both roles. Subject six expressed doubt that considerations of *moksha*, *nivṛttidharma*, and *pravṛttidharma* enter into most Hindus' minds when performing *bhakti* worship, and claims most worship a *bhakti* god out of tradition. Bailey's position is controversial, but received enough support to merit further study,

Evidence collected by scholars such as Mishra and Bailey suggests Brahma possessed a cult at some point in history, possibly in western India from a period spanning 400 B.C. to 1500 A.D. They support these findings with archeological evidence of temples and artwork, as well as scriptures such as the Mahabharata or various Puranas, that either suggest praise of Brahma or were subject to edits either to remove or add such praise. The idea of an extinct Brahma cult is supported by some subjects, while rejected by others. Subject five believes that Brahma's cult was overtaken by Vishnu and Shiva's cults, while subject eight states Brahma was never widely worshiped, and that if he did receive any worship, it would have been limited in scope. Subject five, citing myths that portray Brahma in a negative light, suggests a slander campaign against Brahma that may be the cause of his modern unpopularity. This notion is supported by textual

revisions to certain scriptures like the Mahabharata, which Mishra argues originally praised Brahma before being edited into a work on the glory of Vishnu. Barring some revolutionary finding in the field of Indian history, the validity of these speculations cannot be proven, no matter how plausible they seem.

The evolution of culture is a complex and varied phenomenon. No one can ever count all of the variables that combine to bring any one historical event about, much less so when these factors are obscured behind the curtain of time. Whether or not a definitive explanation for Brahma's unpopularity in the modern age will be found is yet unknown. While none of the factors studied can be proven to be the cause of Brahma's unpopularity, they suggest new avenues of study for future researchers to pursue. Brahma's position in modern Hinduism is a stark reminder of the fundamental truth of culture and human society— it is constantly evolving and changing, and old ways of life are abandoned for modern ones which serve the people better. There is no guarantee that our way of life will be remembered by our descendants. In the far-off future, our ways may be as obscure as the faith of Brahma is today.

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