

Hinduism in the News: The Shifting Role of Religion and the Media in Canadian Public Life

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ABSTRACT This article studies Canadian and international newspaper reports from September, 1995, of the Ganesha milk drinking miracle. It analyzes the chronology of the newspaper reports as the story develops from an account of a miracle in the “exotic” East to an account of a miracle also occurring in Canada. The evidence demonstrates an inability on the part of the Canadian news media to view religion as hard news with broad social and political implications. The comparison with international reports demonstrates that the story had a significant political dimension and was viewed as hard news in other parts of the world. The comparison questions the assumed boundaries between the public and private spheres in relation to religion and demonstrates that such boundaries are constructed through power relationships and the news media itself.

KEYWORDS Print culture/journalism; Newspapers; Religion; Public/private sphere

RÉSUMÉ Cette étude examine des articles canadiens et internationaux parus en septembre 1995 concernant le miracle de la consommation du lait de Ganesha. Elle analyse la chronologie des articles de journaux tenant compte du développement du miracle de l'Orient ‘exotique’ vers le développement de ce même miracle au Canada. La discussion l'analyse fait valoir l'incapacité de la part des médias canadiens de percevoir la religion comme étant au centre des actualités sérieuses ayant des conséquences sociales graves et des implications politiques. La comparaison des rapports internationaux montre que ce sujet a une dimension politique importante et est considéré d'actualité sérieuse. La comparaison remet en question les frontières définissant les sphères publiques et privées en matière de religion et démontre que de telles limites sont construites par l'entremise des relations de pouvoir et des médias eux - mêmes.

MOTS CLÉS Culture d'impression/journalisme; Journaux; Religion; Sphère publique; Sphère privée

Introduction

On Thursday, September 21, 1995, murtis (icons, ritually installed images) of the Hindu deity Ganesha (sometimes Ganesh or Ganapati) reportedly began to drink the milk offered to them by devotees in India.¹ According to media reports, devotees watched amazed while milk disappeared from spoons held to the tusk or trunk of the

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elephant-headed deity as though sucked through a straw. Ganesha is, arguably, the most loved of the Hindu gods. He is the remover of obstacles and most Hindus will not embark on a new venture without some sort of worship to him. Offerings of food and other goods are a standard part of worship (*puja*) to *murtis* within Hinduism, though the offering of milk touched to the *murti* with a spoon is not a standard part of most *pujas*, and certainly the disappearance of the milk is wholly unexpected and helps to define the event for Hindu devotees as a “miracle.”²

While it remains unclear where the miracle first occurred (Davis, 1998), reports of the event quickly circulated, with devotees arriving at temples in such numbers that traffic was stopped for hours in parts of Delhi and local stores quickly sold out of milk. News of the event then rapidly spread around the world through telephones, media reports, and the emerging Internet. By September 22, occurrences of the miracle were reported from London, New York, Toronto, Hong Kong, and wherever the Hindu diaspora could be found. The world’s media quickly picked up the story and overnight the event became a truly global phenomenon. The miracle ended in India the next day, as quickly as it started, and a similarly abrupt end was reported around the globe.

This article studies media reports of the Ganesha milk drinking “miracle” found primarily in newspapers from southern Ontario and in some international newspaper reports during the period between September 21 and 23, 1995. Through a comparative exploration of newspaper reports from southern Ontario and international sources, I argue that the Canadian coverage of the event exposes the difficulties and, I will suggest, flaws found in the coverage of religious phenomenon in Canadian media organizations—particularly when faced with the double challenge of reporting on an event being called a miracle that is based in a minority religious tradition in Canada. The comparison exposes some basic assumptions in Canadian sources about the role of religion in the public sphere and the role of newspapers in helping to generate various discourses in the public sphere about religion and particularly about minority religious traditions. These assumptions are, I think, questioned through the comparison between the Canadian and international reports.

I also analyze coverage of the event within a Canadian context as a moment of “multicultural realization”; a moment where the Canadian media establishment and the Canadian public become aware of shifts within Canadian society, in that stories of Hinduism are not simply accounts of “what happens over there” but are also reports of “what happens here.” As I will demonstrate, Canadian newspapers struggled with how to deal with a story of a global religious phenomenon that was initially presented as exotic, bizarre, and “other,” and morphed into something local, immediate, and within the Canadian public sphere.

Another aspect of my analysis of the event is the tensions it exposes around issues and ambiguities related to the public and private spheres in relation to depictions of religion in Canadian media. Central to some of the research on the current media age in relation to religion is the shifting line of notions of private and public (Beaman & Lefebvre, 2014; Hoover, 2002, 2006; Meyer & Moors, 2006). While religion has both public and private faces, much of Hinduism in Canada before this event did not have a significant presence in the discourse of the public sphere.

Arguably, most Canadians knew that there were a growing number of Hindus in Canada, but just what Hindus did remained a mystery to many. With the explosion of media coverage of the supposed miracle, however, Hinduism in Canada became more public and some basic assumptions of the Canadian press about the role of religion in the public and media spheres were exposed. Ultimately, I argue that the boundaries between the public and private are malleable and constructed through various power relationships, and that the print media of the 1990s played a central role in constructing such boundaries.

The comparison between Canadian reports and international reports of the event also illustrates an inability of the Canadian press to view an account of a miracle in a minority tradition as hard news. The story was automatically presented as soft news, or a matter of “private practice” divorced from broader political and social implications. In Indian and international coverage, however, the story was hard news. In such international and Indian coverage the story was much more than an account of a religious “miracle” occurring in the private realm of the faithful; it was also a political narrative centred on issues of Indian national identity and representation, and political struggles for control of the public sphere by Hindu nationalist groups. While the Canadian response shifted into a gentle presentation of a curiosity within a minority group that need not question a particular, and possibly erroneous, homogeneous view of life in the Canadian secular public sphere, the Indian and international context demonstrates that the Indian public sphere is a contested space where religion is not an isolated aspect of society without connection to global trends, political movements, and the broader public sphere. In short, I will argue that what Canadian newspapers missed about the significance of this event is as important as what they did cover.

The article begins with an exploration of the history of ideas of material religion and miracles in the West to help provide some context for how the ritual use of images and miracles connected to them were reported by Western sources. The article then provides some background into Hindu forms of worship involving *murtis*, as this aspect of ritual Hinduism is central to the events of the miracle itself. The article then explores the coverage of the Ganesha milk drinking “miracle” in Canadian newspapers with a focus on the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *Hamilton Spectator*. Finally, it discusses the representation of the story in international sources and compares those views with the Canadian sources.

Before entering into the evidence and argument in this case, I would like to briefly discuss my rationale behind selecting the geographical locations and newspapers used in this study. This article is part of a broader research project that seeks to examine the representations of Indic religions (primarily the Sikh and Hindu traditions) in Canadian and Indian newspapers from the 1980s to the present, with a primary focus on discourse and content analysis. In that larger study my focus on Canadian sources takes a regional approach, examining the differences between accounts found in French language papers primarily located in Québec, and English language papers from southern Ontario and British Columbia; the geographical regions that have traditionally seen the highest numbers of South Asian immigrants and have a relatively higher concentration of media reports on these communities both at the local and in-

ternational levels. My focus in this article is on just one of those regions, southern Ontario, where the majority of the Canadian newspaper reports on this event originated. For international and Indian media coverage, I have drawn on English language reports from journalists based in India writing for international media organizations. The international and Indian media spheres are much more complex than what the limited space in this article allows, but what I have represented here is something of a sample of common accounts of the event originating from India, and the concerns it raised in non-Canadian newspaper reports.

Material religion and miracles in the West

Contemporary notions of the intersection of the materiality of religion and miracles in Western culture are indebted to ideas that developed in Reformation and post-Enlightenment Europe. Before this era the view of miracles throughout the Christian world was mostly positive. In the New Testament and in patristic writings miracles were viewed either as confirmation that Jesus was the Messiah, or as works of conversion; they were a demonstration of sanctity (de Vries, 2001; Larmer, 1996; Thomas, 1971). A similar general acceptance of the material aspects of religious practice is also found in the pre-Reformation era. Even though there is a history of suspicion around “graven images” within the Judeo-Christian world, there was also a medieval view that saw the material world and the objects in it as potentially sacred and connected to miraculous events (Taylor, 2011).

There was a significant shift in perspectives on these ideas during the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Reformation thinkers criticized the Catholic Church by arguing that the Church and its material aspects, such as the Eucharist, relics, and pilgrimage sites, were not sacred. Protestant Reformers viewed the material supports of religious activity with suspicion, and those who supported the religious efficacy of material objects were often labelled as idolaters (Smith, 1963). The movement away from religious material culture corresponded with a movement toward texts and biblical interpretation. A literary bias developed during the Protestant Reformation in relation to the study of religion where the text became the locus of religion (King, 1999). Religion in Western Europe developed into a personal, private, and intellectual pursuit based in close readings of primary scriptures.

A similar shift in attitude toward miracles can also be detected in the work of Protestant Reformers. Martin Luther and John Calvin both thought the miracles found in the New Testament were real, and they understood the purpose of those miracles to be a demonstration that Jesus was the Messiah. Where they differed from Catholic sources was a belief that the age of miracles was over. If the point of miracles was to demonstrate the validity of the “Word,” then once the Christian canon was closed there was no more need for miracles. With this shift came a rejection of the claims of miracles of others. Calvin (quoted in Larmer, 1996), in countering attacks from Catholics who claimed his doctrines lacked the support of miraculous affirmation, argued that miracles and the use of images were little more than the “deceitful tricks” of “Satan” and “Magicians and enchanters” rather than the work of “true powers” (p. xiv). Both the materiality of religion and the appearance of miracles are viewed as irreligious by Calvin.

The connection between the falsity of miraculous claims and the falsity of material supports in religion was also shared by many of Calvin's contemporaries (Thomas, 1971).

The disenchantment of the material world would also have a significant impact on the perception of miracles in the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers emphasized the use of reason, empiricism, and science as the ultimate guides to "real" knowledge. The perception of miracles as supernatural, beyond the capacity of science and empiricism to explain, made them a suspect category for many Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment intellectuals. David Hume's 1748 article, "On Miracles," played a prominent role in shaping Western views of miracles. For Hume (1748, 1777), the definition of miracles is that they occur against the laws of nature and, as such, miracles cannot be argued for through rational means; there simply is no proof to support miracles.

Hume's arguments, however, are not without their religious and cultural biases and this has particular relevance to the current case. The third argument Hume (1748, 1777) presents against miracles is that accounts of them increase in what he deems to be less civilized nations. There is in Hume's examination of miracles a clear assumption of the superiority of his own faith, Protestant Christianity, against all other faiths. Indeed, having rejected accounts of miracles from other traditions as based in some sort of barbarous superstition, he argues that the Christian religion was "not only ... first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one" (p. 131). While Hume's personal views on religion are somewhat unclear, in "On Miracles" he seems to suggest that the miracles of Catholics, Muslims, and others are forms of irrational superstition, but those of Protestant Christians and those found in the Bible are to be accepted on faith. I would suggest that Hume inherits from the Protestant Reformation an idealization of belief, or faith, as the basis of religion, a faith grounded in the reading of the Bible. Religious practice for Hume is not an embodied enterprise, a thing one does; rather, it is a thing one believes and reasons about.

Hume's view of other nations and religions is typical of the attitudes displayed toward Hinduism and India in general by Western colonial and some postcolonial commentators, whether they are addressing the materiality of Indian traditions or miracles attributed to Asian icons. Rhetoric related to rituals, the religious use of images and icons, as well as the materiality of Hinduism all became colonial and missionary tools used to establish attitudes of "us" and "them," "civilized" and "uncivilized," and "good" and "bad" religion (Morgan, 2005). Colonial rulers viewed Hinduism in particular as irrational and exotic. Such views of Hinduism were designed "to construct an image of 'the Hindu' fit only to be subjugated and civilized (if not shunned altogether) – civilized, that is, in terms of Western norms of speech, belief, and behavior" (Lipner, 2001, p. 323). Far from these perspectives of Hinduism as bizarre and barbaric disappearing in the postcolonial era, one need only look to such movies as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, released 11 years before reports of the milk drinking miracle first appeared, to see the power of the enduring image of Hinduism as an exotic "other." In her study of news coverage of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the 1960s, Jane Naomi Iwamura (2012) also argues that an Orientalist attitude is found in American news reports where Indians are presented as backward, superstitious, and chaotic, while the West is presented as "modern." As I will suggest below, many of these attitudes help

to form some of the responses to the Ganesha milk drinking miracle and are ultimately questioned as the Canadian coverage undergoes various shifts.

These views on the religious use of images, miracles, and Hinduism are of relevance to Canadian newspaper reports of the milk drinking miracle because many of the cultural assumptions pertaining to what is perceived as “real” religious practice as opposed to fantastic superstition, or what is normative to Canadian society and what is “other,” are informed by such views and reflected in media reports. As has been argued by Lori Beaman (2014), one of the legacies of Canada’s history as a majority Christian nation is that Christianity dominates the Canadian public sphere. Hence, many of the attitudes toward the religious use of images and accounts of modern miracles from non-Christian sources are, as we shall see, treated with suspicion and at times derision by the secular press. Not only does the dominant religion in Canada impact the representation of non-Christian traditions, but the general view of religion or reporting on religion in the media also impacts how religion is represented. As Stewart Hoover (1998) argues, the relations between media and religion have long been contentious, with the news media often marginalizing the coverage of religions. He also argues that the way religion is represented in the media is reflective of the historical, political, and cultural perceptions of religion’s place in public life. Hence, the news media is reflective of the dominant cultural attitudes found within its society; under such circumstances minority religious traditions tend not to receive accurate or sustained media coverage. Doug Underwood (2012) also argues that the dominant cultural and philosophical positioning of print media has been to reflect an Enlightenment worldview that is skeptical of religion in the public sphere. Print media, he argues, views religion as incompatible with “objective” news reporting and a secular perspective. The result of this combination of forces—the often unacknowledged dominance of Christianity in the Canadian public sphere and the secular “hard news” bias of print media—has resulted in some coverage of mainstream religions, but minority religions only “become headline fodder” when they “are bizarre, controversial, or engaged in conflict” (Winston, 2012, p. 14).

Hindu views of images and worship

As Julius Lipner (2001) argues, Hinduism is multilayered and multifaceted, and it contains within it a variety of interpretations on the role and nature of *murtis*. It is not defined through a specific belief or set of rituals shared by all Hindus, but rather by a shared or overlapping religious orientation. Hence, to suggest that one can make a blanket statement about how Hindus perceive *murtis* simply fails to appreciate the diversity found within this tradition. To give some context, however, I will provide an example that may suffice to demonstrate at least one view of *murtis* found in the tradition.

How the divine manifests itself in a material form became an important topic of philosophical inquiry during the period between the seventh and twelfth centuries in India. Various schools of thought emerged that differed as to which deity they viewed as supreme, “but they share the theological premise that, to be supreme, God must be both transcendent and immanent” (Davis, 2008, p. 7). In medieval Shaiva Siddhanta, for instance, Shiva is thought to have two levels. The first is as Paramashiva, often called Sadashiva, the highest, limitless and transcendent form of the divine.

Positive knowledge of this aspect of Shiva and worship of it are impossible for humans. The second is understood as a partial approximation of Shiva, sometimes called Maheshvara, as a manifest being. According to Siddhantin texts, Maheshvara appears in 13 different forms as partial embodiments of Shiva's character. These partial manifestations of the divine are viewed as accessible to humans and worthy of worship (Davis, 2008). While there is a remarkable separation between humans and the divine within Shaiva Siddhantin thought, the role of daily ritual is to bridge that gap through the transformation of the worshipper and the *murti* via mantras and other ritual procedures so that Shiva may enter the image. Through this ritual process, "a form of Siva that can be meditated on and worshiped" is constructed (Davis, 2008, p. 134). While it is something of an oversimplification, one can view the process of Shaiva ritual employing an image as a process of making the transcendent immanent. A form of the god is understood to be in the image during worship and is honored as a manifest form of the divine. Such consecrated images are viewed as alive; they are fed, clothed, fanned, and entertained. Far from being perceived as superstitious and irrational, the installed image is a sign of Shiva's grace, and an indication of his desire to connect with human beings.

Early reports of the miracle: Slurping statues and the exotic East

The first sources used by Canadian newspapers came from several wire service stories written by Narayanan Madhavan for Reuters. One such story with the headline, "Idol Drinks Milk in Indian Miracle Scene," opens with the following: "A little Indian girl holds a spoonful of milk horizontally, with just a little tilt touching the lone tusk of the Hindu elephant god Ganesha. As some 30 people watch, the milk vanishes, slurped up by the white marble idol on Thursday" (Madhavan, 1995a). The story moves on to emphasize the location of this scene as "a roadside temple dedicated to Hindu god Shiva in Delhi's plush Diplomatic Enclave, under a sacred peepul tree inside a compound housing an electricity station" (Madhavan, 1995a). Madhavan notes that those who attempted to feed milk to the *murti* of Ganesha believed that "the god would fulfill their wishes." He then stresses the diverse make-up of those involved: "The Ganesha or Shiva bug did not bite just some simple folk. Corporate executives in shirtsleeves shed their inhibitions and shoes as they walked in to see a thing they said they did not want to believe" (Madhavan, 1995a).

Several elements of Madhavan's story deserve further scrutiny. The intended audience of the piece is likely non-Indian and certainly not Hindu. A predominantly Indian or Hindu audience does not need to be told that Ganesha is an elephant-headed Hindu god. Having stated that, the story lacks sufficient details that would allow a Western, non-Hindu reader to understand the context. As I have already demonstrated, the post-Enlightenment West would be predisposed to take a negative view of the nature of the miracle here and its material trappings. Arguably, most religious and non-religious Western readers would view this as an account of a bizarre, alien practice that would match an ill-informed notion of the superstitious and mystical East.

Central to our understanding of this report for the non-Hindu newspaper audience in Canada is the paradoxical nature of the public and private relationship between media and religion. As Hent de Vries (2001) notes, "[t]he public voice recently re-

claimed by religion is enabled, paradoxically, by media that operate mostly in the privacy of one's home" (p. 17). Hence, while the broad circulation of the milk drinking miracle in Canadian print news thrust this event into the public sphere, the interpretation and evaluation of the event for many non-Hindu Canadians occurs on an individual level without the mediation of the broader community, or, in this case, the input of the Hindu community as to how the event should or could be read. This curious interplay of the public and the private in the mediation of religion is particularly important for the case at hand because the absence of meaningful explanations of Hinduism in these newspaper reports simply works to accentuate the biases likely already present in the West.

The *Globe and Mail* took Madhavan's story and used much of it in their first report on the miracle on September 22. The *Globe's* edit maintains much of the Reuter's piece, but the title is changed from Madhavan's, "Idol Drinks Milk in Indian Miracle Scene" to, "Milk-slurping Statue Real to Many Indians" ("Milk-slurping Statue Real to Many Indians," 1995). The intent of the change is difficult to determine, but the references to "milk-slurping" and that it is "real to many Indians" illustrate, I think, certain assumptions found in Canadian news media when they first encountered this story. As noted earlier, the category of "miracle" becomes fit for criticism in the post-Enlightenment West, particularly if the claim of a miracle originates from outside of Christianity. The word miracle does appear in the *Globe* version, but not in the title. The deletion of the word miracle from the title either implies that "real" miracles do not happen in India, or that "milk-slurping statue" was thought of as more likely to grab readers' attention. The new wording leans toward a more animalistic or crude representation of the event. Given that the deity in question possesses an elephant's head, the choice of words is particularly suggestive and is something that many Hindus would find objectionable.

Finally, that this event is "real to many Indians" highlights the "otherness" of the event. It suggests, in combination with "milk-slurping," an image of a rather incredulous group of "many Indians" who would find this "real." Hence, while the editorial choices of the *Globe* in relation to the story as a whole are mostly unproblematic, the shift in the title seems designed to establish a certain view of Indians as both wholly "other" to their assumed Canadian readership and that Hindus are rather gullible.

The *Toronto Star* and the *Hamilton Spectator* also covered the story on September 22, 1995. The tone taken in both accounts differs from the *Globe and Mail* piece as well as the earlier Reuters story by Narayanan Madhavan. The *Spectator* printed two stories on the miracle, the first I cite in full:

Thousands and possibly millions from menial workers to corporate executives swarmed to throng temples as word spread that milk offered to "lingams" (phallic symbols) of Lord Shiva, or idols of Ganesha, the elephant-headed deity, disappeared. Milk is offered to Shiva by religious Hindus, and is traditionally linked to the snake, a mystical symbol of hidden energies. "I thought I saw some milk disappear through a copper snake near the idol. Or was I imagining? I certainly saw a lot of milk spread on the floor," said a woman in the area. Milk ran short as the religious

emptied stores and the state government rushed in extra supplies. Hindu nationalist state government said scientists would investigate. (“Milk Rumors Have Hindus Flocking to Temples,” 1995)

This story titled “Milk Rumors Have Hindus Flocking to Temples” is based on two other Reuters articles by Narayanan Madhavan (1995b; 1995c) titled, “Rumours of Milk-drinking Hindu Idols Sweep India” and “Miracle Reports on Hindu Gods Sweep India, Nepal.” The *Spectator* story is a much-edited version of Madhavan’s originals, but it continues some of the themes already established in the *Globe and Mail* report, as does it introduce some new themes. The comment about the *linga/lingam* as a phallic symbol and the brief reference to the mystical snake symbolism, for instance, tend to eroticize and exoticize the scene for a Western audience unfamiliar with everyday forms of Hinduism.

The reference to the *linga* as phallic is particularly problematic. While it is the case that some references to *lingas* carry a phallic connotation, the *linga* is a multivalent object of worship and has various interpretations within Hinduism. For many modern Hindus the statement that a *linga* represents a phallus without any qualification is often responded to with outrage. The Hindu America Foundation (HAF), a prominent American Hindu activist group, responded to a 2007 *Boston Herald* article about a pilgrimage in India to the Amarnath *linga* with the following statements taken from a letter to the editor:

The headline for a news report on the Amarnath sacred “lingam” in India (“Hindus Lament Divine Case of Erectile Dysfunction,” Tuesday, July 3, 2007) is an example of inappropriate humor at best and profaning of the sacred at worst. ... The Shiva Linga is not merely, as you report, “the symbolic phallus of Lord Shiva.” The Linga or Lingam is the simplest and most ancient symbol of Shiva, and is said to represent God beyond all forms and qualities. The Lingam is a sacred symbol of that “which is invisible yet omnipresent.” ... Instead of educating your readers on this sacred symbol, you have chosen to pander to the lowest common denominator by resorting to easy and puerile sexual imagery. (Deshpande, 2007)

While Madhavan’s report comes before the current era, which witnesses a much more active and reactionary mode of discourse from Hindus as to how their tradition is represented in the West, one might well argue that his account of the *linga* and other aspects of the scene he paints are designed to engage Western readers with the exotic “otherness” of Hindu *murtis* and ritual life.

Another, perhaps more important shift is present in the second *Spectator* piece to appear on September 22. The second story opens with a report of the miracle from the local Hamilton *mandir* (temple): “I am not a religious person. I never believed. I had to see it with my own eyes,” said 19-year-old Ricki Bhattai of Hamilton. ‘It is amazing,’ Priest of the temple, Haribhajan Sharma, said the phenomenon was a confirmation of faith” (“700 at Hamilton Hindu Temple to See ‘Miracle,’” 1995). The article then goes on to briefly discuss the “crowds” that “swamped temples across India” before repeating much of the first *Spectator* article cited above (“700 at Hamilton Hindu Temple to See ‘Miracle,’” 1995). While the additional material only amounts

to about three lines of text, the shift in perspective is, I think, central to much of the argument I hope to make. If the *Globe's* perspective could be crudely summarized with "it happens over there to those gullible Indians," the *Spectator's* perspective might be summarized with "it happens here to our not-so-gullible youth and it is a matter of faith." A similar shift is found in the *Toronto Star's* coverage of the story from September 22. After a brief account of what is happening in India and Nepal, the story moves to the miracle occurring at the Vishnu Mandir Temple in Richmond Hill ("Hindu Gods 'Drink' Sacred Milk Tributes," 1995). This shift from an inherently orientalized notion of "the strange and irrational happens in the mythic East" to "the strange is at home in the West" becomes an important shift in the approach newspapers take to the story.

The next day, however, in the *Toronto Star* one sees a curious reversal in the *Star's* approach to reporting on the event. In a story by Jim Wilkes (1995) with "Milk-lapping Hindu Statue Draws Crowds" as the headline, we see a movement toward a report that vacillates between seemingly poking fun at Hindus and covering the story as a local event. Certainly the headline is reminiscent of the *Globe and Mail* headline discussed above ("Milk-slurping Statue Real to Many Indians") and it has, I think, the same effect. The opening line, "It's Ganesh-mania!" (Wilkes, 1995) has something of a demeaning tone. The article is not wholly demeaning, but there is little attempt to explain the nature of Hindu worship. The piece also discusses the scientific community's response to the event: "Scientists say liquids like milk can appear to be absorbed into stone but, in fact, molecules in the rough surface create a 'capillary channel' that sucks in droplets, which are then spread in a thin layer. 'It is difficult to spot the thin layer, especially if the marble is white,' said physicist V. Das Bangia" (Wilkes, 1995). A trend that will continue as the story develops is the juxtaposition between a rational scientific explanation of the event and the explanation of the faithful that it is a miracle, a point that will be discussed more below.

The coverage of the event in the *Hamilton Spectator* and the *Globe and Mail* was more even-handed in their September 23 editions. They both follow a similar approach in their reports. While the stories note the international scope of the event, the majority of these pieces focus on reports of the miracle at local Toronto and Hamilton temples. With this increased focus on the local context comes a more careful representation of Hinduism, and some attempt to explain the meaning of the event and Hindu ritual to a non-Hindu audience—though much of this is done without meaningful detail.

The *Spectator*, for instance, attempts to give some voice to the Hindu community with the following:

Santosh Bhanwra, who volunteers at the temple, said it is a sign of blessings and goodwill for humanity. When the temple was built, intense prayers and rituals were followed to install the idols, she explained. 'We consider them to be alive,' said Mrs. Bhanwra. 'This is proof in front of our eyes that this deity has a life.' (Tayabali, 1995)

Mrs. Bhanwra's view of the *murtis* generally agrees with the explanation of Hindu *murtis* given earlier in this article, though few details are provided in the story to help guide the non-Hindu reader. The *Spectator* article also closes with a scientific explanation

related to capillary channels noted above and a quotation from Greg Anderson, a professor of geo-chemistry from the University of Toronto, who states: "I'd say this is absolutely ridiculous. ... There's no way the minerals in granite can absorb milk. If you can find a way for it to happen, let me know" (Tayabali, 1995).

The *Globe and Mail's* story on September 23 is also worthy of note because it illustrates the dramatic shift in their reporting from a story about far away exotic India to one about southern Ontario. In the *Globe* report from the Canadian Press the focus is on the reactions of Hindu devotees in Toronto, Oakville, and Hamilton. We are told, for instance, "Many trembled, their hands clasped in prayer, as they lined up to offer teaspoons of milk to the statue of Lord Ganesha. Some wept with joy. Most couldn't erase the smiles etched on their faces" ("Ontario Hindus Flock to Feed Stone Idols Milk," 1995). The *Globe* story then closes with the quotation from Greg Anderson cited above.

The accounts of the story from September 23 illustrate several key aspects of the shift in how the event is characterized that require further interrogation. While most of the reports acknowledge what is happening around the world, the real focus of these reports is on the local southern Ontario Hindu community. Arguably, this was the first time significant Canadian national and regional attention had been given to this community. The reports of the event seem to shift away from the exotic and strange, though each report is still tinged with an element of that. Now, the reports present the human side of devotees engaged in the direct participation of what is for them a miraculous event. Even more, the stories provide interviews with the local Hindu community. There seems to be an implicit realization that these devotees are not strangers in a far-off land, but are our neighbours and worthy of some degree of respect. References to *lingas* as phallic, or to statues lapping up milk are conspicuously absent from the reports on September 23.

I would also suggest that the rather gentle reporting in these stories published on September 23 suggest to the non-Hindu majority that the arrival of Hindu miracles in Canada is not a point of concern, but rather an interesting curiosity. The story begins as a soft news story of what happens in India and remains a soft news story of what happens in Canada. In such accounts, I would suggest, we find another manifestation of the paradoxical relationship the media generates between the public and private realms of religion. The entrance of Hinduism into the Canadian public sphere via these stories publicizes it widely and generates at least some common knowledge of Hinduism in southern Ontario, but the stories also simultaneously isolate the event into the traditional neoliberal view of religion as a matter of personal belief that ought to have no impact on other aspects of public life, such as politics. The space for this miracle is within the confines of the *mandir* (temple) and within the faith of individual believers. The reporting seems to assume that, paradoxically, while the event is reported in the public sphere, the only impact the event has on the Canadian public sphere is the tacit acknowledgement that there are multiple "publics" comprising the Canadian public (Warner, 2005). My critique of this approach by Canadian newspapers is that it ignores the political and contested nature of the event for people in India and, due to the global nature of the event, for Indians living in Canada and southern Ontario. The paradox I see in this mode of reporting is that it allows the Canadian Hindu mi-

nority a voice in the public sphere, but it also seems to imply that this public sphere remains largely unchanged because the events narrated are limited to the private realm of religion. Indeed, what this mode of reporting appears to deny, albeit subtly, is de Vries' (2001) observation that

[m]ulticultural societies make clear what should have been obvious all along: the public sphere is not a homogeneous, functional, or discursively transparent realm that succeeds in relegating religious motivation to the privacy of individual conscience or the intimacy of small communities. (p. 7)

While the public sphere becomes aware of the supposed Hindu miracle occurring in southern Ontario, the Canadian media does not allow this moment of awareness to suggest that this event has any meaning beyond the space of temples and the personal views of Hindus, a perspective that will be questioned once we turn to the reports found in the international media.

Before moving on to the broader international landscape, I should note the emergence of some contestation over meaning in the Canadian case with the appearance of skeptical scientific accounts of the miracle, all typically placed at the end of each story. Much of this insertion of a skeptical voice does seem to imply that reason and science will have the last word on the issue, and that the faith of these devotees need not be taken too seriously. In such accounts, while the public sphere can include the voices of the Hindu faithful, it ultimately remains a space where "Western" reason and science dominate. As Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (2006) note, when religion takes a prominent role in the public sphere it is taken as an indication of a backward religion or society; the prominent appearance of religion in the media and through the media into the public sphere challenges a narrative of secular modernity held dear by many print media outlets. The response of the Canadian print media establishment to this perceived threat to modernity is to maintain the story as soft news, as news without significant social and political ramifications, and to present the miracle as a human-interest story that is ultimately undermined by the rational objective modernity of science.

The international press

An examination of the international press reveals that the Canadian reporting ignored or minimized certain aspects of the story. In India there was a public debate between Hindu groups and scientific/rationalist Indian groups over the cause of the "miracle" that was largely presented through the print media. In an Agence France-Presse report by Chris Lefkow (1995), the conflict between these two groups opens the story:

Scientists and Hindu devotees squared off Friday to explain the phenomenon of "milk-drinking" idols that has gripped India and spilled over into Hindu communities abroad. "A divine event, a miracle," proclaimed the Hindu fundamentalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the World Hindu Council. "Mass hysteria," countered the Indian Rationalists' Association, advancing scientific explanations for the vanishing milk, such as "surface tension" and "capillarity."

This conflict over interpretation between rationalist/scientific groups and religious groups is raised in a number of international press stories on September 21 and 22. Central to such conflicts over the meaning or cause of the event are debates in India over whether the country is truly secular, or if it is really a religious state.

The “is India secular or religious?” theme is brought up in other reports that accuse the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist political party, of attempting to influence upcoming elections by rallying support around a Hindu “miracle” (“Does the God of Learning Drink Milk?” 1995; Graves, 1995a; Graves, 1995b; Graves, 1995c; Guruswamy, 1995; Holliday, 1995; “Indian Hindus Swept Up by Milk ‘Miracle,’” 1995). This political dimension of the milk miracle in India needs to be appreciated from the perspective of the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri masjid in 1992 and the rise of right wing Hindu nationalist movements from the 1980s to the present. During the 1980s the BJP, with the support of other Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), began to compete with the Congress Party for political power in India at the state and federal levels. Much of this political rise to power of the BJP was centred on their political use of the contested site of the Babri masjid in Ayodhya. The mosque was built in the sixteenth century, and Hindu groups, particularly the VHP, demanded that the mosque be demolished and a temple to the Hindu deity Rama be built on the site. According to Hindu groups, the Babri masjid was built on the site of a temple erected to commemorate the birthplace of Rama. On December 6, 1992, while a BJP government ruled at the state level, a crowd of Hindu *sevaks* (volunteers) destroyed the mosque as leaders of the BJP, VHP, and other Hindu groups looked on. This event set off attacks against Muslim groups in India resulting in catastrophic violence. The destruction of the mosque and the resulting violence brought India’s stance as a secular nation into question.³ For many, this event and those that followed, such as the outbreak of communal violence in Gujarat in 2002, heralded a crisis in Indian secularism (Needham & Rajan, 2007).

The contest over public space in India and the news media’s role in helping to generate an understanding of what that space will be—Hindu, secular, multicultural, and so on—have become central battle grounds in Indian politics. Given such a context, and that general elections were scheduled in India for the following year, it is not surprising that the miracle quickly took on a political context in India. From the very first day of reports in India on September 21, 1995, this political aspect was discussed in conjunction with scientific explanations for the apparent miracle. Krishnan Guruswamy’s (1995) Associated Press story from September 21 provides an example. After describing the scope of the event and various interviews with devotees and priests, Guruswamy shifts to a scientific and political reading of the event:

So widespread were reports of a miracle that the federal Department of Science and Technology was asked to investigate. Their scientists offered milk mixed with colored pigments to an idol ... it soon coated the idol. The scientists credited the “miracle” to surface tension, saying molecules of milk were pulled from the spoon by the texture of the statues. The federal minister for welfare, Sitaram Kesari, accused two right-wing groups of starting the rumors to capitalize on Hindu nationalism and win next

year's general elections. The two groups are allied with the Bharatiya Janata Party.

This combination of a scientific, or secular, reading of the "miracle" together with the potential political implications of the event became the focus of much of the Indian and international media; in such a context the story was hard news. The VHP responded to the event by claiming that it was "not an ordinary event but a divine one and a prophecy" and that "the next century would be a Hindu one" (Graves, 1995b). When the miracle stopped the next day, the VHP argued it was a sign that the scientific explanation was false: "If the scientists are saying it's capillary action, then why it is not happening today?" asked Onkar Bhawe, a leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad ... " (Graves, 1995c). Far from being a soft story that only impacted the lives of the faithful, the "miracle" was connected to a struggle for control over the political future of India by the Indian and international media.

Conclusion

What the Indian and international coverage of the political aspect of the milk drinking miracle demonstrates is that religion does not inherently exist in some private realm of the devotee, but is, or can be, tied to broader political and social contests for power and control over the public sphere. Newspapers mediated much of the access to that sphere in the mid-1990s. The Canadian print media acted as gatekeepers to the public sphere, determining which little-known "publics" (Warner, 2005) would gain access to the broader public sphere and under what conditions. In the case of the Canadian print media, access was permitted, but only for a soft news story that remained a soft news item even as it shifted from an account of the "exotic East" to a positive personal interest story—one that supported a particular and unthreatening view of Canadian multiculturalism from the perspective of the dominant cultural voices of Canadian society. This story gave Canadian Hindus space in the Canadian public sphere, but only through the secular lens of where religion is thought to belong, an area largely outside of broader political and social concerns. What the comparison with India, another secular state, demonstrates is that notions of the secular, the political, the religious, the public, and the private are not freestanding transcultural and transhistorical entities. Rather, they are social and cultural constructions that are generated through power relationships, and part of what this study demonstrates is how imbalances of power help construct the boundaries of private and public, and how events like the Ganesha miracle can question such boundaries.

In the Canadian context, the power imbalance was one between the dominant majority public sphere—with its post-Enlightenment secular perspective that is, perhaps ironically, infused with Christian normative values that were largely mirrored by the print media—and a minority religious public (see Warner, 2005) that held little sway in the dominant media and public spheres. In such an imbalance of power the voice of interpretation and the setting of the boundaries between private and public, or religious and political, are established by the dominant culture, and no word of a political reading of the miracle emerged into the Canadian news media and public spheres. The imbalance is inversed in the Indian context where the majority religious force, and some would say cultural force, is Hindu, and that majoritarian status allowed

it to contest for political and news media control of the public sphere with secularist groups. I am not suggesting that one of these nations' approaches to media, religion, and the public sphere is better than the other; in both national contexts the status of minority groups leaves much to be desired. Rather, with Beaman and Lefebvre (2014), I wish to stress that the boundaries between public and private in relation to religion are flexible, and that power relations help to construct those boundaries. Far from the print media being a neutral voice in such power negotiations, they play a central role in helping to confirm a status quo of "appropriate" boundaries between religion, politics, and the private and public that, I suggest, needs to be interrogated rather than taken for granted as "natural."

Notes

1. While the term *murti* is the appropriate technical word for a statue or object of worship in Hinduism, the term "idol" is used ubiquitously in the sources cited for the essay. Many Hindus use the term idol without much connotation of a pejorative meaning, but because the term does carry a pejorative connotation in the West I will employ *murti* unless citing directly from a source.
2. Offerings of fluids and food are a standard element of most *pujas*, but the deity is understood to consume the subtle as opposed to material element of the offering (Davis, 1998).
3. According to its constitution, India is a secular nation.

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