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# Western Hindus and 'Global Hinduism': Discourses on Conversion to 'Hindu Religions', Acceptance of Converts, and Social Engagement

**Abstract**

The paper deals with the problem of (the often supposedly impossible) conversion to "Hinduism". I start with an outline of what I call the 'no conversion possible' paradigm, and briefly point to the lack of reflection on acceptance of converts in most theories of religious conversion. Then, two examples are presented: Firstly, I consider conversion to ISKCON and the discourse on the Hare Krishna movement's Hinduness. Secondly, I give a brief outline of the global *sanatana dharma* movement as inaugurated by Satguru Siva Subramuniyaswami, a converted American Hindu based in Hawai'i. In the conclusion, I reflect on (civic) social capital and engagement in global networks as a means to gain acceptance as converts to Hinduism. I argue in line with Stepick, Rey and Mahler (2009) that the religious movements' civic engagement (in these cases engagement in favour of the Indian diasporic communities and of Hindus in India) provides a means for the individual, non-Indian converts to acquire the social capital that is necessary for gaining acceptance as 'Hindus' in certain contexts.

*Keywords:* conversion, Hinduism, ISKCON, globalisation, Subramuniyaswami

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## 1.Introduction

This paper deals with matters of conversion to 'Hinduism', acceptance of converts and the mutual relations of 'ethnic Hindus' and converts as exemplified by various activities of engagement of convert organisations for Hindus both in India and the diaspora. I start from a short analysis of the assumption that conversion to Hinduism is not possible, an assumption that is nearly ubiquitous in both academic and non-academic discourses on Hinduism. This assumption will be contrasted to the fact that a number of so-called new religious movements of Indian origin (here: ISKCON) have tended to convert Western people to what they (have come to) consider to be a strand of Hinduism. By asking about discourses and conditions of acceptance of such converts by 'ethnic Hindus', I make reference to interactions between ISKCON and the growing Hindu diasporas in western countries. Furthermore, I shall point to attempts at (re)uniting all these strands in a global *sanatana dharma* movement inaugurated, for example, by converted Shaivas from Hawai'i.

After a short outline of my usage of terminology (Hinduism, Hindu religions, conversion, social capital), I start with an outline of what I call the 'no conversion possible' paradigm. I shall also briefly point to the lack of reflection on acceptance of converts in most theories of religious conversion. Then, I will present two examples: Firstly, I will consider conversion to ISKCON and the discourse on the Hare Krishna movement's Hinduness. Secondly, I shall give a brief outline of the global *sanatana dharma* movement as inaugurated by Satguru Siva Subramuniyaswami, a converted American Hindu based

on Kauai, a neighbouring island of Hawai'i. In the conclusion, I shall reflect on (civic) social capital and engagement in global networks as means to gain acceptance as converts to Hinduism. I will argue in line with Alex Stepick, Terry Rey and Sarah Mahler (2009) that the religious movements' civic engagement (in this case in favour of the Indian diasporic communities and of people in India) provides a means for the individual, non-Indian converts to acquire the social capital that is necessary for gaining acceptance (as 'Hindus' among 'ethnic' or 'born Hindus').

At the outset, I should briefly deal with my usage of the terms 'Hinduism' (as a singular word) and 'Hindu religions' (in plural). It is mainly based on Kim Knott's (2000) and Gavin Flood's (1996) twofold understanding of 'Hinduism' as laid out in their respective introductory books. Flood (1996:8) says that with the word 'Hindu' he refers 'not only to the contemporary world religion, but, with the necessary qualifications, to the traditions which have led to its present formation'. In a similar manner, Knott (2000:152) defines 'Hinduism' as both 'a dynamic phenomenon of the contemporary world that develops out of the common imagination of many individuals and groups, Hindus and non-Hindus' and as 'the sum of its parts – its traditions, myths, institutions, rituals and ideas – its many Hinduisms'. In order to keep the two notions separated, I shall speak of 'Hindu religions' when referring to the above-mentioned variety of traditions, religions, etc., and of 'Hinduism' when alluding to 'the contemporary world religion' that has been coming into existence mainly as a discursive entity since the 19th century, but has since become more and more of a social reality as well. I assume that with the latest thrust of globalisation since the late 20th century (Osterhammel & Petersson, 2007), 'Hinduism' in this sense has also gained new momentum in the form of what I call 'global Hinduism'.

From here, we can now move to 'conversion' which is here most generally understood as the conscious step of an individual or a group from one 'religion' to another, implying, of course, a strong notion of religion as somehow delineable in the view of the converts and of the observer. Further implications of this notion will be dealt with in a later section of this paper. In view of the notions of Hinduism and Hindu religions as outlined above, conversion then is possible both to one of the many Hindu religions (e.g. Gaudiya Vaishnavism or even a *sampradaya* of the same) and to Hinduism understood as a world religion. In the two examples to follow, both notions are present and being referred to by the converts in different contexts.

In addition to questions regarding the individual decision to convert to 'Hinduism' or a Hindu religion, and the steps taken in this direction, I shall highlight the question of who accepts the claims of the converts to consider themselves now part of their new religion, and how such acceptance is gained. I will argue that, to answer this question, the notions of social capital and civic social capital can be rendered fruitful tools. For the general notion of social capital, I refer to Pierre Bourdieu's (1992:63) definition of it as 'the totality of actual and potential resources connected with owning a permanent network of more or less institutionalized relations of acquaintance and acceptance'. Furthermore, I agree with Bourdieu (1992:61) that these resources can only be regarded as capital as long as they are 'appropriated and used as weapon and stake' in social conflicts. Debates about acceptance of converts can be regarded as such conflicts in which converts and their religious institutions use social capital that has often been appropriated by means of engagement for and with 'ethnic Hindus'. Here, Alex Stepick, Terry Rey and Sarah J. Mahler's (2009) notion of civic social capital comes into play. It concentrates, firstly, on social capital as owned by groups and institutions rather than individuals only.[1] The authors focus on immigrant religious organisations as mediators between an assumed wider social body (American civic society as a whole) and their individual members, as they "enable or deter social relationships with the broader civic society". (Stepick, Rey & Mahler 2009:14). Civic engagement in society, they further claim, is an important means for religious institutions to acquire and widen social capital that is in turn profitable for the individual members.

Starting from these preliminary definitions, I will analyse in the passages to come how the Hare Krishna movement's and the Himalayan Academy's engagement for Hindus in India and the global Hindu diaspora extends their (civic) social capital, which in turn helps their individual members who are mostly converts to the respective Hindu religion, and (contextually) to 'Hinduism' as a world religion, to be accepted as 'Hindus'.

## 2. The 'no conversion possible' paradigm

Introductions to Hinduism tend to start from two explicit, basic assumptions. The first of these is that there is no such thing as 'Hinduism'. This is why a number of scholars instead speak of Hindu religions (Stietencron 2000) or Hindu religious traditions. However, it must be acknowledged that there have been important attempts at defining the identity of 'Hinduism' both by scholars and – more relevantly – by a huge number of Hindu religious movements (see e. g. Zavos 2001 for the late 19th and early 20th centuries). The second assumption is that a Hindu can only be one who is born as such, whereas conversion to 'Hinduism' or 'Hindu religions' is not possible, the only exceptions being whole groups (mostly 'tribes') that were incorporated into the body of 'Hinduism' in the course of the 'hinduisation' or 'sanskritisation' of the Indian subcontinent and later in the course of the *shuddhi* ceremonies conducted by the Arya Samaj and Sanatana Dhamra Movements from the 1880s through the 1920s (Zavos 2001:117-120). The reason most frequently given for this impossibility is the existence of the so-called 'caste system'. Thus, for example, Indologist Thomas Oberlies writes in his introduction to Hinduism that one usually belongs to Hindu religions by birth. The caste system, he says, is an integral part of Hinduism by which it is legitimised and stabilised

at the same time. 'And one can only belong to that system by birth' (Oberlies 2008:9). An interesting attempt to distinguish between Hinduism as a religion to be individually opted for and the caste system as a matter of birth was made in 1924 in respect to conversion to 'Hinduism/*sanatana dharma'* in the Hindu Dharma Mahasabha's reaction to the Arya Samaj's petition (1923) to accept converts[2]: It was contended that 'any non-Hindu was welcome to enter the fold of Hinduism, though he could not be taken into any caste' (quoted in Zavos 2001:119).

Other examples for the repetition of the 'no conversion possible' paradigm in German academic writing about Hinduism include Glasenapp (2001:17-19), Michaels (1998:29-32), Schneider (1989:1), Schreiner (1999:10), and von Stietencron (2000:99-100). A further indicator is the fact that the Hindu new religious movements and the history of 'Hinduism' after 1947 are only dealt with in passing in most introductory books. Even Paul Hacker's (1983) famous thesis of Hindu inclusivism can be read as a reflection on the same topic: Conversion to Hinduism, he says, does not and cannot take place, but originally non-Hindu religions that developed in or immigrated to India have regularly been incorporated into the spectrum of Hinduism, 'inclusivism' thus being a central character of 'Hinduism'.

As a consequence of the paradigm, 'ethnic Hindus' are usually considered as the only authentic Hindus. This is also to say that claims to authenticity by converted Hindus are considered as basically unfounded. Even more, their representations of 'Hinduism' or '*sanatana dharma*' are often not considered worth studying for reasons of lacking authenticity. This, I underline, omits an important strand of the contemporary global discourse about Hinduism. Following the idea that conversion to Hinduism is not possible, then, even the historically verifiable conversions or 'purifications' (*shuddhi*) of Christian or Muslim communities to 'Hinduism' by the Arya Samaj and Hindu nationalists in the 19th and 20th centuries were interpreted in accordance with the respective object-level discourses as re-conversions of former Hindu communities that had lost their Hindu 'home' by converting to Christianity or Islam, but had never lost their 'true Hindu identity' which they had gained by virtue of having Hindu ancestors, be it several generations ago. This amounts to a strengthening of 'Hindu' as an ethnically or even racially constituted category to which the notion of conversion is inapplicable.

Only few scholars have as yet paid attention to the fact that there are a number of Hindu movements that consist mainly or to a considerable extent of non-Indian members. Kim Knott (2000:135-137) lists ten such movements, among which are ISKCON, the Sai Baba Movement and Iyengar Yoga, and she rightly points to the highly controversial question as to whether or not the 'converts' can be considered 'Hindus'.[3] Answers to this question will, of course, have a certain impact on the politics of individual and collective identities. Therefore, most answers will tend towards a clear – and politically motivated – Yes or No. Before returning to these issues, I shall briefly point to what I conceive as a serious lacuna in theory-building about conversion, at least when it comes to Hindu religions.

The phenomenon of religious conversion has become a focus of religious studies in the last 50 years, triggered not least by the emergence and spread of so-called new religious movements. But the topic also gained relevance through global migration processes. More recently, the growing number of western converts to Islam and their alleged tendency towards Islamic radicalism has become a new field of interest. Studies on conversion usually take the term to denote a process of an individual changing his or her religion. The steps toward the actual entrance into the new faith include a time of doubts and hesitations with the 'old' religion, a crucial encounter with the new religion and a ritualised procedure of conversion as expressions of a sudden (Travisano 1970) or a procedural, radical change (Zinnbauer/Pargament 1998). Research has mainly concentrated on four areas of research:

1. A quest for the causes of conversion (e.g. Lofland & Stark 1965, Zinnbauer & Pargament 1998).
2. Attempts to differentiate conversion from other forms of religious change (e.g. Heirich 1977, Travisano 1970).
3. Qualitative studies on palpable conversion processes mostly by analysing biographical narratives of converts (e.g. Wohlrab-Sahr 1999).
4. Functions of conversion for individuals and collectives (e.g. in Wohlrab-Sahr 1999:358f).

The focus of research is usually on the individual decision for a new or a different religion. This strand of research, doubtlessly, brings forth valuable insights into these processes. However, little attention is paid to the question of acceptance of this step by officials and members of the 'new' religion. This becomes especially interesting when it comes to the discourses about Hindu religions and Hinduism.[4] Focusing on the discourse on the authenticity of converted Hindus may help to gain new insights into processes of conversion and shed light on discourses of acceptance. In some of the so-called 'world religions'[5], these discourses are restricted to a simple rule stating what has to be done to become a member of the community of believers or to set oneself on the path to salvation. For Islam, for Buddhist and for Christian religions, for example, such rules or ritual procedures can easily be identified. For Hindu religions in general, neither such a rule nor an institution with the task of accepting converts can be identified. However, in some new religious movements with a Hindu background, there are procedures of conversion. While in ISKCON, so-called *First Initiation* serves as the threshold into the community, Subramuniyaswami, the American Shaiva whose group is now based in Hawai'i, has described a name-giving ceremony as a ritual step into Hinduism in his book *How to Become a Hindu*. Both approaches will be described in the next two sections with a focus on the claim of 'Hinduness' made or created by those movements and on the discourses about their acceptance as Hindus.

## 3. Vaishnavism, Hinduism and conversion issues in ISKCON[6]

One of the most active new religious movements of Indian origin in the west is the Hare Krishna movement or International Society for Krishna Consciousness, ISKCON (cf. among a number of studies, Knott 1988, Squarcini & Fizzotti 2004, Rochford 2007, Neubert 2010a). However, it has always been disputed whether or not ISKCON is a Hindu movement and whether or not the western Hare Krishnas are to be considered Hindus at all. First of all, it seems that Prabhupada himself and the early members of the Governing Body Commission (GBC) sometimes clearly dismissed any ideas of ISKCON being a Hindu movement as unfounded. Krishna Consciousness, they would often claim, is a thousands of years old Vedic tradition, and thus much older than Hinduism. Together with the argument that 'Hindu' was a term invented by foreigners, these statements point to Prabhupada's and his disciples' acquaintance with Western academic conceptions of Hinduism, for many of whom Vedic religion was an ancestor of classical Hinduism. The deconstruction of the term as foreign to 'Hindus' themselves has been a basic premise to nearly all works about Hinduism from the very beginning. A third argument used by Prabhupada and his followers was that Krishna-consciousness is a universal system standing above all religions. However, this strict negation of being Hindu has developed into a more open attitude in the last two decades. E. Burke Rochford, a long-term observer of ISKCON, has even referred to this process as the 'hinduisation of ISKCON's religious culture' (Rochford 2007:194-200). At least three reasons can be named for these processes:

1. From the very beginnings, Indian migrants have taken part in the temple ceremonies performed by ISKCON (cf. Zaidmann 2000). Most of them think of themselves as 'Hindus' and consider the ISKCON temples as temples of their own religion.
2. The texts considered sacred by ISKCON are classified as Hindu texts by academics from Indology and the Study of Religions. Furthermore, scholars have treated ISKCON as a Hindu movement from the very beginning. ISKCON itself sought proximity to the academy in the course of the so-called cult controversies (cf. Neubert 2010a). A large number of members became scholars in those fields themselves. Thus, they had to follow the respective scholarly standards.
3. In the last years, ISKCON members have taken part in many events of interreligious dialogue, often as representatives of Hindu religions, as was the case in a meeting of one member with Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to the United States. Similarly, the movement is supported by a number of Hindu umbrella organisations, in whose formation ISKCON members have often played an important role.

From these developments, we can for the moment safely conclude that initiated ISKCON members with a western background in a number of specific contexts that include communication with other religious movements, courts, anti-cultists, or scholars of religion, actively present themselves as Hindus and want to be accepted as such. In what ways, however, do the converts strive for acceptance as Hindus? Judging from statements about ISKCON by 'ethnic Hindus' as well as their behaviour towards and interactions with ISKCON members and temples both in India and in the 'west', such acceptance has been gained at least in a number of specific contexts. The positive attitude of a large number of diaspora Hindus towards the western ISKCON temples from the late 1960s onward certainly points to a far-reaching acceptance of the temples at least as a kind of temporary place of Hindu worship while outside India (cf. Zaidman 2000). When the diaspora developed into stable communities that started running their own temples, a segment of Indian Hindus did not stop visiting ISKCON temples at least from time to time. A considerable number of diaspora Hindus even joined the movement or its life-membership programme. The latter had been founded in the mid-1970s to serve the needs of exactly those Indians who were and are not willing to receive initiation but interested in supporting the movement. Most of the money for the large and pompous ISKCON temples in India (e. g. the Bangalore temple and its branches in other Indian cities) did and does indeed come from non-resident Indian members of ISKCON. With their donations, they explicitly support ISKCON's attempts to reinstate what they perceive to be 'original Vedic culture' in 'its ancient homeland', where it had supposedly rotted and been forgotten in the course of time. However, Nurit Zaidman has already shown that such engagement of 'ethnic Hindus' from the diaspora communities tends to be directed merely toward the movement's activities in India or toward activities for the benefit of diaspora members. Active support for the temple inhabitants and other Western devotees is still rare (Zaidman 2000:215). Similar findings were stated for the Swiss context, where Hindu migrants entertain only weak networks with western converts to neo-Hindu movements (Eulberg 2008:14). However, there are ties between Tamil Vaishnavas and ISKCON, instituted in the *Swiss Tamil Krishna Society* that is connected with the movement's temple in Zurich. In other countries, the ties seem to be stronger. In the UK, for example, ISKCON's centre Bhaktivedanta Manor has become a meeting point not only for Hare Krishnas, but also for other Hindus living in the region. This became evident, when ISKCON's campaign to save the Manor in the 1990s was supported by a wide range of Hindu movements. Furthermore, ISKCON has in some regions taken the lead in 'Hindu' participation in all kinds of 'interreligious dialogue'. Thus, the movement has become one motor in processes of what may be called a global unification of 'Hinduism' (cf., e. g., Knott 2010:103, Neubert 2010b).

In India itself, the movement grows rapidly, as demonstrated by a number of temple building projects and the growing number of life members, initiated devotees and visitors to the ISKCON temples in the pilgrimage centres such as Vrindavan and Mayapur. The fact that most of the money for the

new temples comes from donations made by Hindu life members living or having lived in the west seems to suggest that the connections between Hindu migrants and ISKCON in the west are stronger than can be empirically measured in terms of active religious participation. Similarly, ISKCON's *Food For Life* program is sponsored mainly by NRI supporters of the movement. Again, the movement's civic engagement in India and for Indian people is highly valued, whereas there is considerably less support for its infrastructure and western initiates in the United States or Europe.

## 4. Satguru Siva Subramuniyaswami and global Hinduism

My second example will be shorter. It concerns the American-born Shaiva Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (see *Hinduism Today* 2002). Born in 1927, he converted to Hinduism in Sri Lanka under the spiritual guidance of Yogaswami. Later, he founded the Himalayan Academy with the Shiva temple on Kauai, a neighbouring island of Hawai'i. From there, he started editing a journal named *The New Shivite World* which was later renamed *Hinduism Today* and is now a successful magazine all over the world, especially among members of the diverse Hindu diasporic groups and communities. According to the current editor-in-chief, Paramacharya Palaniswami, the magazine is published with an edition of 14,000 to 20,000 copies a month, sent to 61 countries. In addition, there are a monthly 8,000 to 10,000 downloads of the free PDF version as well as a few thousand views of the YouTube video summaries (personal email communication, 6 September 2010). Thus, the journal serves as a communicative link between various Hindu communities and individuals, and it actively and consciously helps develop a 'global Hindu consciousness'. The latter is consciously and actively demonstrated in the magazine's editions. One example is the memorial volume for Subramuniyaswami which appeared in 2002 (*Hinduism Today* 2002), a year after his death. Here, people from various traditional backgrounds and from communities all over the world paid tribute to the *Satguru*, and there were articles on a variety of topics relating to 'global Hinduism' on which he was influential: the renewal of Yoga, the establishment of 'global fellowship', Hindu Mission, 'Interfaith Matters', the Tamil diaspora, etc. Another example to be analysed elsewhere (Neubert forthcoming) is the yearly award of the title 'Hindu of the Year'. Since 1990, this title has been awarded to scholars and religious leaders from a wide variety of traditions and schools, including Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the Sai Baba movement, Shaivism, the Divine Life Society, and the Ramakrishna Mission, to mention but a few.

The editors of Hinduism Today, with their new leader, the Satguru's successor Bodhinath Veylanswami, refer to their explicit global mission that is printed in each edition of the magazine and can be found on the journal's website (*www.hinduismtoday.org*), namely

1. To foster Hindu solidarity as a unity in diversity among all sects and lineages;
2. To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism;
3. To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism;
4. To protect, preserve and promote the sacred Vedas and the Hindu religion;
5. To nurture and monitor the ongoing spiritual Hindu renaissance;
6. To publish a resource for Hindu leaders and educators who promote *Sanatana Dharma*.

All members of the editorial board are part of the Himalayan Academy, and all of them were converted to Hinduism by the Satguru according to the name-giving rite he prescribed. He had authored a book entitled *How to Become a Hindu* (originally: *Saivaite Names*) in 1989.[7] Already in 1990, an article in *Hinduism Today* took up the issue of accepting western converts to 'Hinduism' and claimed that 'There Are No "Alien Hindus"' (Maa 1990). The author stated that 'Hinduism is becoming a moving force around the world. […] By acknowledging the validity of our religious teachings and their practical applications in life, people are really working for world peace and enlightenment. Shall we discriminate against them because hey [sic] are practicing what we preach?' (Maa 1990). In his book, Subramuniyaswami had laid out the ritual of *nama-karana* or name giving as the step of ritual conversion to Hinduism. He started from the assumption that Hinduism is a religion, and, as he writes, 'There are two ways to enter a religion. The first is to be born into the religion. The second way is through adoption or conversion, and today this process is formalized and made complete through the name-giving sacrament' (Subramuniyaswami 2000:115). It is interesting to note the diverse parallels to Christian forms of baptism, ISKCON's first initiation and rites of acceptance as a guru's disciple in a number of Hindu movements. Asked about the issue of acceptance, Satguru answered: 'Hindus are happy to include any sincere man or woman in their worship services' (Subramuniyaswami 2000:116). Thereby, he includes himself and his group of disciples very obviously as Hindus. Acceptance he and his group do find mainly through their activities around *Hinduism Today*, which is interpreted as service to Hindu communities all over the world. Besides, the Himalayan Academy runs a number of social service projects that raise money especially for the needy in India and for Hindus abroad needing support. The donations are bundled in the Hindu Heritage Endowment (http://www.hheonline.org) that lists 65 separate endowments, among them the Hindu of the Year Fund supporting the respective award. Furthermore, the magazine's success and a successful strategy of inclusion of various Hindu religious traditions have helped them be accepted as Hindus.

## 5. Concluding reflections: engagement, social capital and acceptance of converts

Of course, one would have to delve more deeply into the matter to draw valuable conclusions. I want at last and at least to come to the second, central topic of this article, namely that of social capital. It seems that it is especially the networks of the two movements under consideration with other Hindu groups and a specific kind of engagement for them and for people in India – understood in accordance with Hindu nationalist movements as a 'Hindu nation' (see Zavos 2001) – that provides chances for the individual converts, and the movements to which they belong, to be accepted as Hindus. ISKCON temples provided and still provide space for (mostly North Indian) Hindus to conduct their religious activities, the movement itself built successful temples in India and it runs a highly regarded charity programme in India. Furthermore, ISKCON has come to present itself (and to be accepted) as speaker for Hindus in general in a number of national contexts, including in the UK, Russia, United States[8], and other countries where the movement is active. In India, no such claims have been made yet, although ISKCON is quickly growing there, both in members and in public recognition as a religious movement (see Neubert 2010a:110f). Note in this respect the fact that in 1997, the President of India, Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma, inaugurated the new ISKCON temple in Bangalore. The Himalayan Academy runs a number of charity organisations for Hindus worldwide, as well.[9] Furthermore, their magazine *Hinduism Today* is widely read among Hindus in India and in the worldwide diaspora. Thereby, the movement provides an important means for worldwide networking, which is widely acknowledged. These civic activities seem to be crucial for the movements in the process of gaining acceptance as 'Hindu' movements, as they link them with existing Hindu networks. Thus, they gain social capital that is beneficial not only to the groups but also to their individual members.

According to Stepick, Rey and Mahler (2009), such engagement serves to broaden the social capital held by religious institutions. In the cases of ISKCON and the Himalayan Academy, the target group of civic engagement are Hindus both in the diaspora and in India. Close ties with these groups are also beneficial for the individual members of the movements for whom it thus becomes easier to gain acceptance as converted Hindus. For these processes of acceptance, the preliminary findings in this paper show that religious organisations and their activities do influence the social capital of the individual members. The social relationships based in the religious organisation and developed through its engagement for 'Hindus' in India and for the 'global Hindu community' certainly affects individuals' relationship with the broader civic world' (ibid.), whereby we could here delimit the latter to 'the broader Hindu world'.

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## Notes

1 I do not, however, agree with them in the perception of Bourdieu's notion as referring only to individuals. Rather, Bourdieu refers to actors in social fields, and this can be groups or institutions as well as individuals.

2 It is not quite clear whether Swami Shraddhananda's petition to the Mahasabha was intended to include Europeans as potential converts as well, or whether it was restricted to the reconversions in the course of the *shuddhi* rituals. For a short summary, see Zavos 2001:119).

3 Some of these movements (such as the Sai Baba movement) even refuse to use the term 'Hindu' in reference to their own religion. Nevertheless, they are usually treated as Hindu religions by scholars and by other Hindu religions. Thus, for example, Sathya Sai Baba was awarded the title of 'Hindu of the Year 1996' by the Himalayan Academy.

4 It must, of course, be noted that such discussions do exist in reference to conversion to 'Judaism'.

5 See Tomoko Masuzawa's (2005) excellent study on the history of this concept and the problems that it creates. This study is highly relevant to the analysis of conversion, as it seems that speaking of conversion from one 'world religion' to another one is only possible in the context of an affirmative 'world religions' discourse.

6 On the following, see Neubert 2010a, esp. Chapters 3 and 8.

7 The book is available online as a complete text. See http://www.himalayanacademy.com/resources/books/hbh/hbh_table_of_contents.html, my last access 23 August 2010.

8 In the U.S., ISKCON has only recently begun to present itself more actively as a representative of Hindus. An obvious example can be seen in the ISKCON News headline "ISKCON Scholar Greets Pope On Behalf Of US Hindus"' in 2008 that stated that an ISKCON member and religious studies scholar met Pope Benedict XVI 'on behalf of the Hindu American community' (http://news.iskcon.org/node/991/2008-04-18/iskcon_scholar_greets_pope_behalf_of_us_hindus, accessed on 10 August 2010).

9 See the list of endowments at http://www.hheonline.org/cgi-bin/hheFundDescriptions.cgi (accessed 23 August 2010).