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The Swaminarayan Movement and Religious Subjectivity

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The Idea of Gujarat
History, Ethnography and Text

Edited by
Edward Simpson
and
Aparna Kapadia

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THE IDEA OF GUJARAT

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The recent upturn of nationalist politics and violence has prompted many scholars to turn their gaze towards Gujarat, exposing certain assumptions about Gujaratis and the future of India's democracy (see Needham and Sunder Rajan 2007; Nandy 2007; Varadarajan 2002; Varshney 2002). This chapter examines some of these assumptions, which often reveal more about the analysts' own political views than they do about life in Gujarat. My analysis focuses on the religious subjectivities of devotees of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, abbreviated here to 'Swaminarayan Sanstha' or simply 'BAPS'. This movement has attracted large numbers of Gujarati followers, both in India and overseas, and is often thought to be in alignment with Hindu nationalists and their political backers. The movement is criticised by some academics for essentialising Hinduism, promoting anti-progressive and anti-feminist teachings, and for playing an active role in the politics of Hindu nationalism (McKean 1996; Mukta 2000; Shukla 1997). These criticisms often preclude empirical research, and represent an epistemic blockage to our understanding of what Harald Tambs-Lyche elsewhere in this volume refers to as the 'silent majority' in Gujarat.

I am interested here in two sets of discourses that appear to have few, if any, points of agreement. One is the discourse generated by those academics who argue that the Swaminarayan Sanstha offers a troubling or even dangerous form of reified Hinduism; the other, is the discourse of the Sanstha itself, i.e., its texts and teachings, practices, and modes of self-presentation. I am not particularly concerned here with the truth claims of either discourse, but rather with exploring the epistemic motivations that inform the positions of the scholars on the one hand, and the Sanstha and its followers on the other. Within the discursive productions of the scholars and the Sanstha, the categories I examine in particular are those of 'religion' and 'secularism'. By examining the assumptions embedded within the discourse of scholars, it is possible to show how a certain intellectual consensus on the nature of the Sanstha has been reached. Correspondingly, the purpose of looking more closely at how Swaminarayan devotees understand their religious subjectivity is to
grant recognition to discursive contexts and practices that are not illuminated by universalising liberal assumptions.

Through ethnography, I explore the concepts and ideals that inform the Swaminarayan devotees’ lives and practices. I also ask what accounts for the ‘epistemological superiority’ of the liberal critic (Scott 1999: 9). In my view, both Sanstha and critic are participating in acts of essentialism. The critic looks at the movement from a teleology that sees it as an inadequate forbearer of liberalism, thereby claiming intellectual and moral high-ground; the Sanstha essentialises, not out of a desire to hierarchise other ways of life, but to emphasise its particular ways of being. The attitudes of the academic critics of BAPS are embedded in Western liberal intellectual discourse, one that has its historical roots in the discursive formations of ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’. In contrast, the religious subjectivities of the devotees of BAPS are grounded in other discourses, that privilege the cultivation of an embodied submission. Or, to put this more strongly, Swaminarayan ways of being are not dependent on Western notions of individualism, autonomy and private religious subjectivity; rather, they rest on authorising discourses that support different goals to those of liberal discourse. This, in turn, demands a different relationship of the person to society. I wish to stress, however, that the relationship of Swaminarayan devotees to society is not simply prescriptive or immune to the influences of external economic and political realities. For example, the movement has become popular among the Hindus in the South Asian diaspora perhaps, in part, due to the success of its careful self-presentation through exhibitions, festivals and publications that engage with the expectations of non-Hindus from ‘religion’ and ‘Hinduism’. In the process, the movement has, to some extent, self-consciously shaped itself in response to its changing circumstances.

Religious people often appear in the literature as a form of ‘dumb humanity’ (Hirschkind 2006: 206). My aim in this chapter is to challenge the assumptions that underpin this form of representation and move towards an analytical space wherein moral and ethical sensibilities are taken seriously. Most often, this is the space accorded to ‘religion’. Owing to the epistemologies it supports, religion is not automatically the most useful category for understanding the Swaminarayan Sanstha; yet, there are certain common notions of ‘religion’ that both the Sanstha and its critics appear to accept as givens. The Swaminarayan Sanstha is thus caught in a dilemma, one where its tenets and activities look very much like a ‘religion’, and yet where its critics see ‘Swaminarayan Hinduism’ as problematic, potentially dangerous, and somehow less legitimate than other religions. To understand Swaminarayan ways of being is to acknowledge that the assumptions of agency and individualism, and secularism and modernity, in their connections to the discourse on ‘religion’, mask the discourses internal to Swaminarayan devotionalism and thereby the ontological mechanisms that guide and inspire Swaminarayan followers.
This chapter is divided into three sections: the first examines several liberal critiques of the Swaminarayan movement; the second sets out an ethnographically-grounded perspective on BAPS' activities; the final section suggests a framework for understanding Swaminarayan subjectivities.

BACKGROUND

BAPS was founded in 1907. The founder of BAPS broke away from an older Swaminarayan sampradaya (tradition) which was established in 1801 by Sahajanand Swami (1781-1830). There are several Swaminarayan sects in the sampradaya in addition to the two original Swaminarayan gadi (seats) created by Sahajanand Swami. Of these, BAPS is perhaps the most well-known Swaminarayan community, particularly in the places of the South Asian diaspora. This is due, in part, to its transnational presence as well as its various public projects. These include organising festivals on auspicious occasions, sponsoring humanitarian projects, and constructing temples and temple complexes. While many temples are neither elaborate nor large, BAPS has attracted much attention for constructing traditional carved stone temples in London and North America. BAPS is similarly known for its large temple and monument complexes, known as 'Swaminarayan Akshardham', that have been constructed in Gandhinagar and New Delhi. Both Akshardham sites are connected to specific wishes (sankalp) expressed by one guru in the guru lineage of BAPS (guru parampara). These sites are thus of immense devotional significance for the devotees of BAPS as well as locations for the organisation to present its teachings and share its perspective of the historical contexts and cultural achievements of Hinduism (see Kim 2007).

Today, BAPS estimates one million followers worldwide, with approximately 40,000 devotees in America and 30,000 in Britain. Administratively, BAPS has a hierarchical management structure consisting of both lay and non-lay personnel. At the apex of this hierarchy is the living guru, Guru Pramukh Swami. Under him is a male order of santo, or ascetics, numbering over 800. These ascetics are based in temples and are important channels for maintaining the consistency of devotional teachings through weekly lessons, meetings with youth, and other temple or region-specific events. The lay management consists of a network of male and female householders. Most serve on a voluntary basis and perform significant roles in supporting Swaminarayan teachings, activities and prescriptions for behaviour.

The bhakti or devotional tradition of the Swaminarayan has similarities to the Vaishnava bhakti communities in Gujarat and elsewhere in India. These similarities include the importance of a guru and the guru's teachings, use of vernacular languages, de-emphasis of caste distinctions, recognition of varying degrees of textual and ritual mastery, and a heightened appreciation of devotional practices and postures. In core Swaminarayan texts, Sahajanand Swami explicitly and implicitly acknowledges the ritual contribution of the Pushtimarg sampradaya, a dominant and influential
Vaishnava community in western India. BAPS is distinguished from other Gujarati Hindu communities by several prescriptions present in the original Swaminarayan community which are still maintained in the BAPS community of today. These include the separation of women and men in temple spaces and activities and limitations on the interaction of the always-male guru and ascetics with females.

THE LIBERAL CRITIQUE

Among the most entrenched convictions of liberal discourse is the equation of modernity with rationalism and secularism. The modern and secular state is assumed to promote certain core principles, notably freedom and moral autonomy, and to protect a private realm for religion. These qualities stand in contrast to the non-modern and non-secular state where, it is assumed, freedom, individual sovereignty, and public space are rented by undemocratic and authoritarian institutions resulting in irrational, emotional and intolerant forms of governance and sociability (Asad 1999, 2003; Warner 2002). The discourse of secularism is one that clearly imagines a proper form of state, civic life and citizenship where the ‘volatility of cultural multiplicities’ can be controlled, and where violence and juridical measures exist to support the state’s ultimately exclusionary principles (Asad 2003:16). Liberal discourse, in its conceptualisation of modern public space, does not necessarily expect the ‘relocation’ of religion away from secular spaces (Asad 1999: 185). However, liberal thought wrestles with the existence of non-secular or non-liberal formations that appear to disrupt the secular imaginary; furthermore, it exercises authority to control the terms of its interaction with non-liberal entities. Religious movements, if they are interested in engaging in the ‘modern’ public sphere, must therefore adjust to the terms of political participation a priori established by secular ideology (ibid.: 181).

The secularist discourse sustains a set of oppositional binaries, such as modernity versus tradition, the West versus the non-West, liberal versus non-liberal, tolerance versus intolerance, and progressive versus non-progressive, which have permeated much of historical, political and anthropological analyses of religious communities. These tropes of modernity have affected the ways in which the Swaminarayan Sanstha is viewed and analysed. In this section, through the writings of Sandhya Shukla and Lise McKean, I will briefly examine the analytical and epistemic consequences of liberal discourse. This is followed by a more extended critique of Martha Nussbaum’s recent work on communal violence in Gujarat.

CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS AND RELIGION-MAKING

In 1985 and 1991, in London and New Jersey (US) respectively, BAPS produced and oversaw a month-long cultural event known as the ‘Cultural Festival of India’ (CFI). Sandhya Shukla looked closely at the New Jersey CFI, including the outdoor sculptures; musical and dance performances, handicraft and reconstructed village ‘booths’, and
exhibition halls (see Shukla 1997, 2003). Shukla argued that the ‘presentation of India’ was ‘meticulous and studied’ (Shukla 1997: 308) with ‘obsessive attention’ to details (ibid.: 299). She noted that beneath the real and rhetorical efforts to ‘welcome’ guests, the BAPS volunteers revealed a startling lack of knowledge about ‘the larger strategies and effects of [the festival’s] production’ (ibid.: 308). What is clear to Shukla, but absent from the devotees she encounters, is that BAPS is engaged in creating an essentialised and reified portrait of Hinduism and Indian culture in order to foster a ‘new kind of diasporic nationalism’ (ibid.: 309, 2003). Shukla concludes that the creators of CFI lacked awareness of the discourses of race, immigration and nationalism, and yet it was an intentional effort by them to assuage their anxieties as recent immigrants via the avenue of ethnic identity production. The result is a ‘suspension of critical analysis’ (Shukla 1997: 313).

Shukla’s reaction to CFI is insightful in its suggestion that Indian immigrants to the US often choose not to identify their group through the category of race but through that of ethnicity. This tendency, she argues, allows immigrants to focus on the reification of culture. Shukla does not consider, however, that BAPS devotees, during the time of the CFI, were relatively recent immigrants to the US, and that their motivations for showcasing the ‘richness’ of Indian civilisation and Hinduism may have been inspired by more than issues of immigrant dislocation or a conscious intent to deceive festival-goers into accepting a singular vision of India. Shukla’s limited visits to the CFI (three in total, she reports) did not allow for absorbing what motivated the hundreds of BAPS devotees to volunteer at the festival. Beyond the imperatives of ethnicity and group identity construction that are indeed relevant to recent immigrants, Shukla does not consider the reasons why American followers of BAPS chose to mount the CFI. It is this missing dimension, one explicitly tied to the devotees’ understanding of their Swaminarayan bhakti and the corresponding discourses that this tradition supports, which is so notable in her analysis.

The absence of effort to explore the relationship between Swaminarayan discourses and the devotees’ behaviour can be traced to the epistemic biases of liberal discourse. The overall tone of Shukla’s characterisation of the devotees of BAPS suggests that theirs is a problematic vision of the ideal life, one that allows for being controlled by the ‘sadhus (male ascetics)’ and mimics both British imperial practices (‘obsession with details and procedure’) (ibid.: 308) and neo-conservative American politics (as reflected in Swaminarayan moral teachings) (ibid.: 302). Shukla succeeds in caricaturing Swaminarayan devotees as somewhat manipulative thinkers at worst, or unthinking at best. She sees their efforts to welcome visitors and to impart a seemingly universal conception of India as adhering to ‘secular paradigms’ (ibid.: 299); but, she interprets their naïve universalising of Hinduism as the ‘propagation of religiosity’ (ibid.: 300). The devotees of BAPS thus appear to be savvy negotiators of the secular and religious, able to borrow the strategies of the powerful to assuage their needs as immigrants. But, simultaneously, the devotees appear unable to choose...
the implicit higher path of not succumbing to the teachings of a specific religion. Something, in other words, is troubling about BAPS and its followers. They are clearly capable of organisational feats, but, as Shukla’s research intimates, at what cost and to which ends?

GURUS AND CAPITALISING IMPERATIVES

For Lise McKean, Hindu nationalist organisations share a consistency in their rhetorical strategies, modes of operation and means of attracting supporters. Such organisations, while ostensibly engaging in charitable work, appealing for unity and promoting spiritual upliftment and universal love are, according to McKean, leveraging social and ‘spiritual’ capital to achieve political and economic power. It is the Hindu organisations led by the gurus that McKean views to be especially capable of translating ‘spirituality’ into enhanced material realities, both for the guru and his followers. McKean looks at groups, such as BAPS, that do not overtly fit the stereotype of hate-mongers, but whose soft-core rhetorical framings, she argues, nevertheless convey, ‘a toned-down version of militant Hindu nationalism’ (McKealn 1996: 227).

In 1987, McKean attended the centenary events of Swami Sivananda Saraswati and the Divine Life Society and during this time, she observed the guru, ascetics and devotees of BAPS participating in the ‘Grand Finale’. Describing BAPS as a powerful and prominent Hindu organisation, McKean observes that the presence of the guru of the BAPS on the Divine Life Society centenary stage signals the prestigious position of BAPS, one that would also reflect well on its host. She argues that the decision of BAPS and other Hindu groups to celebrate each other’s events and offer speeches that repetitively emphasise Hindu identity and togetherness results in the ideological reinforcement of certain truths. For the audience, McKean intimates that the repeated messages of universal Hindu identity and unity, ‘operates ideologically to make specific ideas intensely familiar and (to) gloss them with the patina of inevitable truth’ (ibid.: 227).

McKean unambiguously describes guru-led Hindu organisations as those where ‘followers flock to’ because they believe the leaders ‘possess the power to transform material reality’. Her interpretations are motivated by a keen intent to unmask the operational mechanisms of gurus. She sees gurus and their organisations as using the language of adhyatmikta, or as she translates, ‘spirituality’, for political and economic advancement while simultaneously denying or appearing to ignore their profit and power-seeking desires (ibid.: 12). McKean contextualises the ‘capitalised’ model of guru movements by situating them in the light of the political exigencies of liberalising India. Spirituality, she argues, fills in the gaps left by an Indian state more focused on global capitalism and less able to reduce the growing distance between the classes. Guru movements, in espousing ideas of control, discipline and charity, would thus serve to comfort and contain a variety of classes while also serving the needs
of the State. Hence, gurus, for McKean, are useful to the state: in commodifying spirituality, they receive material benefits while simultaneously supplying the state with the language and means to enhance its own agendas.

McKean sees Hindu groups and their spiritual programmes as inseparable from Hindu nationalist groups that promote a universalising and inclusive message of cultural and national integration while simultaneously legitimising a 'hierarchical structure of power and authority' (ibid.: 272–3). Gurus and their organisation, no matter how seemingly respectable or reputable, contribute to 'circuits of power and domination in India' (ibid.: 312). Thus, McKean suggests that the 'silence' she observed among Hindu organisations regarding their economic and political activities, and this in spite of 'the garrulous repetitiveness of speakers discoursing on spirituality', obscures the transactional bias of guru organisations towards their own self-interests (ibid.: 268). In her ethnography, McKean does not address or problematise the category 'spirituality' or what it might mean. It appears that the spiritual is anything which the observer determines is set apart from other arenas of culture. McKean, informed by this Western framing of the spiritual as separate from the material thereby interprets any conjunction of 'spiritual' with 'material' as suspicious. In establishing a dichotomy between the spiritual and more profane realms in the Hindu groups she observes, McKean sees these groups and their activities as overly instrumental and calculating in motivation. Charitable works, for example, are seen as part of a larger economic and political agenda whereby groups or castes in power can maintain their position. And, in other situations, in alignment with state power, the moral authority of a group is positioned as higher than that of others and therefore violence may be necessary for its enforcement.

Though grounded in impressive ethnography, McKean's tracing of the political economy of guru organisations reduces gurus and their followers to instruments of, and conscious participants in, webs of power. Religious discourse itself is essentialised to a one-dimensional 'spirituality' that is further collapsed into a strategy of capital, one that depends on the discourse of secularism. In the Indian context, McKean argues that 'secularism' is not separable from the Hindu nationalist framing of secularism. This latter is the notion that secularism is synonymous with a certain kind of universalising Hinduism where charity and social upliftment as well as the tolerance of difference are routinely expressed. The reality, of course, belies this Hindu secularist image and instead reveals the continued entrenchment of class and caste hierarchies as well as the advancement of state authority and elite power. In this context, BAPS, in common with other guru movements, is perceived by McKean to be a community where membership affords wealth, prestige and power in return for the enrichment of the guru and his organisation and the further consolidation of BAPS prominence. The devotees of BAPS can thus be inferred to be persons acting in self-interest for the purpose of status and economic advancement. In McKean's reading of BAPS, its devotional moorings and emphasis on achieving particular ontological objectives hold no purchase.
Finally, for a clear example of the secular liberal perspective and its epistemological ramifications, I turn to a recent book, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future*, by an American scholar of law, Martha Nussbaum (2007). In this book, Nussbaum analyses the relationship between Gujarat, its diaspora, and the communal violence in Gujarat during 2002. In a chapter that looks closely at BAPS, Nussbaum narrates a visit to the Swaminarayan temple located outside of Chicago, where she is met by a temple volunteer. She writes, 'with the beatific smile and the intense earnestness that one associates with members of authoritarian cults, he lectures us about the sect's beliefs' (Nussbaum 2007: 303). The guide points out that the temple is illuminated with fibre optic cables. Nussbaum remarks:

> Was the climate of religious hatred in Gujarat made in the USA? Many people think that the Hindu Indian American community has played a significant role in funding the spread of hatred in India in general, in Gujarat in particular.... And how does my guide's strange combination of ideological docility with technological sophistication contribute to this situation? (Nussbaum 2007: 303)

Nussbaum also comments on the guide's face and what clues this might provide for connecting the dots between a Swaminarayan devotee, his psychological and intellectual capacities, and his attitudes towards authority:

> Our guide's rigid, unmotivated smile troubled us, suggesting a kind of cultic obedience that Americans typically associate with authority and the abnegation of critical independence (ibid.: 326).

Nussbaum concludes her discussion on the Sanstha by noting:

> The sect's practices of isolating [and implicitly denigrating] women are certainly unhelpful in the context of both the US and the Indian democracies, and its emphasis on absolute obedience to the words of Pramukh Swami surely reinforces the devaluation of critical and independent thinking that is all too prominent in Gujarat (ibid.: 326).

Implicitly, Nussbaum conveys a portrait of what a democratic, plural and secular state would look like and what the citizen of such a place would not look like. 'Unmotivated' expressions (notwithstanding the difficulty of discerning when expressions are motivated or unmotivated) are correlated with diminished cognitive function; to be both technologically sophisticated and committed to a religious tradition is not possible in one who has submitted to a non-rational way of being; observing certain disciplinary rules (such as gender separation) is synonymous with the absence of 'critical and independent thinking'. Nussbaum's assessment of the Swaminarayan Sanstha is a striking example of politicised secular liberal discourse, which upholds certain ideals of personhood, sociability and religious subjectivity while excluding or rendering other ways of subjectification as troubling and therefore in need of correction. From Nussbaum's secular liberal perspective, religion and technology do
not sit comfortably together. Instead of being interested in why this should be the case, she is simply dismissive.\textsuperscript{12}

Nussbaum does not acknowledge that the Swaminarayan Sanstha encourages independent and critical thinking through formal education alongside its traditional religious instruction.\textsuperscript{13} In her view, the existence of disciplinary rules that allow for moral autonomy and ethical ways of being in-the-world which are not dependant on external structures such as the state or law, but are reliant instead on internal structures specific to the religious discourse, are signifiers of an anti-progressive movement. In short, those modalities of agency which are not oriented towards the endpoint objective of becoming an autonomous and self-authorising self are excluded from the secular liberal perspective. The authorising discourse of secular liberalism, in other words, is quick to excise certain kinds of religious subjectivity which do not fit its assumptions of freedom, individualism and autonomy or its expectations, not always explicit, of reassurance, knowability and individual responsibility (see Chakrabarty 2002).

Cultivating Subjectivity

Many outside observers are disturbed by what seem to be anachronisms or contradictions within the Swaminarayan community. Critical discussion is common on the wealth of the movement, the practice of gender segregation, the strong focus on temple-building, and the perceived hegemony of the Gujarati middle class within the movement. In this section, I discuss the movement from its own point of view. The need for this intervention is not merely ethnographic, but to establish the basis for understanding the discursive foundation of Swaminarayan devotion. From this point only can we then make the move to see how the seeming incommensurable stances of secular liberalism and Hindu devotionalism, individual autonomy and bodily submission, responsibility and deference, can be part of the same dialogical space, with both sides dehistoricised and irreducible.

Perhaps the most common rational and material reasons offered by outside observers to explain the success of the BAPS movement is that Gujaratis feel that they can benefit socially and economically from the Sanstha's Sanskritising practices, its support of upwardly mobile attitudes, and the opportunity to network and expand one's connections in a business-caste community. However, the empirical reality is that the majority of followers in India are overwhelmingly from the lower classes and, increasingly, lower castes.\textsuperscript{14} Other explanations are commonly offered, especially to account for the transnational presence and growth in membership of BAPS: these are the emotional and material needs of immigrants to seek places for belonging as minorities, the desire to find solace for their ruptured lives, and the need to reaffirm their nostalgia in a collective way. While these explanations resonate with many immigrants and not just devotees in the Swaminarayan diaspora, they obscure the ideals of personhood and agency supported by the devotional logic.
of Swaminarayan bhakti. From the perspective of devotees, the most common reasons for joining BAPS are the inspiration of its religious leadership, the vibrancy of the devotional community, and the meaningfulness of its teachings. To become Swaminarayan, in other words, is to recognize that there are other ways in which to cultivate an ideal of being which cannot be reduced to merely rational and material explanations.

In the following sections, I explore three elements of Swaminarayan bhakti in order to show how devotional subjectivity is shaped. First, it is necessary to grasp the broad outline of the Swaminarayan subject and the relationship of this subject to Swaminarayan bhakti teachings and structures of authority. It will be seen that this Swaminarayan self is a thinking and sensible agent whose actions are consciously directed towards the cultivation of an ideal devotee (ekantika bhakta). Secondly, I will examine the importance of the temple (maMdir) in establishing and sustaining certain desired dispositions and sensibilities; it will be argued that these dispositions or postures are the precondition for followers to then form themselves into the ideal devotee. Thirdly, I will examine the practice of stri-purush maryada, or the separation of men and women. I will argue that this division is a matter of discipline through which individuals transform into Swaminarayan subjects.

**SUBJECT AND AGENT**

The ultimate objective for the Swaminarayan devotee, or satsangi, (and therefore the basis for Swaminarayan epistemology) is to achieve a state known as brahmarupa (or aksharupa). In this state, the devotee’s jiva (soul) achieves a position in the eternal abode known as Akshardham and it can, according to Swaminarayan teachings, eternally serve God as an akshar mukta, or eternally released jiva. In achieving this goal, the jiva, conceived of as an eternal self, is understood to become a disembodied soul (also atma), freed from the encumbrances of the body. In order to attain the status of akshar mukta, the satsangi must recognize that the jiva is an eternal and separate entity distinct from the sensible self (atmanishtha); this makes possible the identification of jiva with the qualities of aksharbrahman, an eternal entity whose manifested form is that of guru. In becoming like (but never merging with) aksharbrahman, the jiva acquires the knowledge of its own sentience, thereby securing its release from samsara (cycle of rebirth), attaining the state of brahmarupa, and achieving moksha, or liberation from rebirth.

In the context of daily life, the ideal satsangi (ekantika bhakta) is one who can spontaneously maintain a continuous devotional stance towards God and guru, the latter of whom is known as aksharbrahman and who is understood to embody the living presence and power of God on earth (antaryami shakti). Thus, while living in-the-world, ideal satsangis are able to control their sentient and somatic self such that external stimuli as well as internal desires do not interfere with their desired devotional aims.
In Swaminarayan bhakti, ‘God and guru’ are the two highest existential entities and are always with form (sakar), eternal and separate, and are also referred to variously as ‘Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatit Guru’, ‘Lord Swaminarayan and the Ideal Guru’, ‘Parabrahman and Aksharbrahman’ and ‘God and Satpurush’. For the devotee, it is the guru in a living form who provides both the example and means for acquiring the desired existential endpoint, that is to acquire atmanishtha and to achieve the state of brahmarupa. Achieving this goal depends on a sequence of transformations beginning with the devotee’s desire to monitor the sensory body for its tendency to become attached to worldly desires, relationships and institutions and thereby obscure the necessary knowledge that jiva is only temporarily resident in the somatic self.

It is the guru who, as manifest form or living presence (pragat swarup) of God, guides seekers (mumukshu) in their quest to cultivate themselves into ideal devotees. As supported by Swaminarayan bhakti tenets, the guru is the perfect servant (sevaka) of God as evidenced by his continuous devotion towards God. This is the posture that the devotee hopes to achieve, specifically a continuous devotional orientation towards God and guru. Yet, realising this goal is not possible without the necessary re-fashioning of the sensory self, which is seen to be attached to desires and needs provoked by living in-the-world. The challenge is to live in-the-world while simultaneously positioning the somatic self to achieve atmanishtha, the necessary condition for becoming an ideal devotee. This translates to the reorientation of the sensory body to practices and postures that will assist the devotee’s interpretation of received sensations, perceptions, and feelings. These feelings, or what might be conceived of as somatic experiences, then become the basis for mental consolidation, which if regularly recollected or meditated upon, would support the subsequent cultivation of the self into the bhakti ideal.

In the Vachanamrut, the central text of the Swaminarayan movement, there is an outline of the ontological progression the mumukshu experiences as he or she moves from initial contact with God to the desired ideal state of having an unbroken devotional stance towards God, one where the devotee’s somatic body no longer requires conscious efforts to direct every action to pleasing and serving God. This trajectory contains four stages and recognises that the mumukshu, in order to be able to offer eternal devotion to God, must attain control over the mind, senses, and object of the senses (antahkarana, indriyas, panchvishays). The first phase is shravana, or sensing, perceiving, or experiencing, via the senses, the talk (or presence) of God. The second phase is manana, the mental consolidation of the talk. The third phase is nididhyasana, where there is repeated meditation of the talk. And, the fourth phase, sakshatkar, is a collective realisation of the three previous phases where there is a sensory re-organisation resulting in the spontaneous emergence, within the devotee, of that talk that has been “shravana-ed”, “manna-ed”, and “nididhyasan-ed”. To achieve sakshatkar is to exist in a continuous and automatic state of devotion towards pleasing God.
For the devotional seeker embarking on ontological transformation, the guru provides the template for ideal behaviour and the living example of sakshatkar. As guide and example, the guru makes visible the possibility of achieving a re-fashioning of the self where the devotee, composed of the eternal self and mind-senses-object of the senses, becomes the existential ground for transformation. From the initial sensory reception of the aural percept or being of God, to the emergence later of embedded and embodied knowledge, the individuals who find Swaminarayan bhakti appealing are those who have taken individual decisions with respect to how they wish to cultivate their selves as sevaks of God and guru. This agency is not motivated by an autonomous self-accommodation; nor is it an act of resistance to the external structures of governance or law. Rather, the agency of the Swaminarayan devotee is a product of the actions of an individual with a sense of responsibility turning internally in order to cultivate self-directed goals that are specifically tied to Swaminarayan teachings. The Swaminarayan seeker or devotee is thus not engaged in reacting against or towards the endpoint of humanistic conceptions of freedom, one that depends on seeking and desiring the existential grounds for free will and a concomitant removal of authority over the self. The secular liberal ideal of the autonomous self, in contrast, does desire the conditions that would allow for the exercise of free will. These conditions, such as the juridical measures that support ‘rights’, uphold a certain conception of society. The notion of the autonomous self in liberal thought is thus one that is always moving towards an ideal state of freedom. And, paradoxically, the desire of the autonomous self to attain a state of freedom from external authority requires institutional controls in order for the possibility of freedom to exist.

The devotee’s ontological goals and corresponding conceptions of the self are fuelled by a decidedly different discourse, one that seeks authority and is not motivated by the relation of one’s self to another or of one’s relative freedom or capacity of will over another self.18 Rather, the satsang (fellowship or community of satsangis) conception of the agentive self is one that does not engender ‘othering’ so much as it directs the sentient seeker to grasp and grapple with the sense of ‘other’ within oneself and thereby, ideally, initiate its liberation.

**CONSTRUCTING TEMPLES AND SUBJECTIVITIES**

Temple (mandir) building takes on a new significance when one considers the practical, emotional, and metaphysical needs of devotees who willingly and self-consciously choose to cultivate themselves according to Swaminarayan bhakti ideals. Since devotees seek and require opportunities by which to hone their worldly conceptions of self-body into an ideal bhakta, practices and institutional mechanisms are necessary to assist and sustain this highly contingent process. Temple-building, renovation and improvement provide arenas where individuals can perform devotional voluntary work (seva) on behalf of the Sanstha in order to achieve their devotional goals. And,
following the completion and inauguration of a temple, devotees can participate in many ways in its community, thereby increasing the possibility of finding the avenue most appealing and suitable for each aspirant. Most temple activities are separated into male and female divisions and, within the temple community, males and females interact with age-grade groupings in various ways. Notwithstanding these divisions, all devotees and visitors have the opportunity, in the temple, to listen to teachings, participate in discussions and debates, and take on leadership roles. Particularly in the diaspora community, the temple also provides a location in which to share the pleasures of eating familiar foods and speaking the Gujarati language.

Perhaps most importantly, the temple exposes devotees to the ideal postures and behaviour associated with and exemplified by the life of their guru. They can choose to experience the temple in ways that will maximise, from their perspective, their capacity to embody the necessary knowledge for self-transformation. The temple makes possible the collection of sensations and memories, which become embodied and can then be recalled for the self-cultivation of the mind-body-senses. Whereas in the past, feeling fatigue or frustration with some activity might be the cause for abandoning it, devotees relate to seva in the temple and satsang events in a different manner. Following the example of the living guru, Pramukh Swami, who is noticeably always preoccupied with seva to Bhagwan (God) and who, therefore, is seen as sustaining a continuous devotional posture towards Bhagwan, devotees strive to emulate this ideal stance. The consequent fatigue, physical and economic strain, and the challenges posed by working with other devotees in the maintenance of the temple leave imprints on the mind-body-senses of devotees. These sensations become bodily reminders of the obstacles which impede the somatic self from transcending its own bodily needs. Since devotees desire to overcome the disruptive tendencies of the mind, body and senses, the temple becomes a necessary disciplinary tool for addressing exactly these areas in need of control. Sensations, feelings and bodily needs are viewed as given aspects of the physical self. However, they are also seen as the medium through which the devotee can move towards an ideal state of being, one guided and framed by the discourse of Swaminarayan bhakti. As devotees frequently and emotionally acknowledge, Pramukh Swami has made possible a wonderful gift for the benefit of all present and future devotees. By providing the inspiration for temple construction and other activities, Guru Pramukh Swami represents the ideal model of the perfect devotee; and his example encourages individual acts of mimesis in the quest to become closer to God. Devotees therefore willingly submit to the authority of their guru; both submission and authority are informed by notions of bhakti and not the liberal conception of the autonomous self which desires freedom from any constraints.

**DISCIPLINE AND GENDER**

Within the temple and at many temple-sponsored events, it is expected that devotees will observe the discipline of female-male separation (stri-purush maryada). In
practice, this accounts for the literal structuring of space in the temple. While the lines of demarcation are often as symbolic as they are physical, in many temples there are separate entrances, offices and dining areas for men and women. This separation also extends to the structure of lay leadership where most leadership positions have parallel male and female roles.

Gender separation pertains to the relationship between females, males, the living guru or male ascetics. Since only men can interact with the all-male religious hierarchy, women must go through lay or householder male intermediaries in order to express their concerns and questions. This gendered behaviour has been seen by some critics as repressive, but it is seldom questioned within the movement. It is, however, important to point out that there are no specific prescriptions for women to remain distant from the guru or ascetics but, rather, it is the santo who are proscribed from contact with women. It was explained to me many times, by both women and men, that women are able to display their respect for the guru and ascetics by avoiding physical propinquity to them. On occasion, of course, women are frustrated by the limitations or miscommunication of their intermediaries. It does not seem to me, however, that women's dissatisfaction is due to the lack of access they have to the guru but with the imperfections in the society of men that mediate their access.

Within the devotional framework of Swaminarayan bhakti, gender separation is understood to be a powerful and effective disciplinary strategy, one that supports women and men in the attainment of their ontological objectives. It allows for the orientation of the mind-body-senses away from 'natural' desires and attachments that are understood to interfere with self-cultivation. Since this transforming project is one that most often co-exists in the same social spaces with many other ways of being, gender separation eliminates one dimension of worldly life that is perceived to interfere with the desired devotional posture and ontological objectives. Outside of the temple, there is no expectation that gender separation be observed. However, many devotees acknowledge that the discipline of male-female separation developed in the temple is useful for negotiating certain domains of life in-the-world. The need to monitor the mind-body-senses is synonymous with the desire to become an ideal devotee; outside of the temple, this is of course a voluntary orientation. Thus, for some devotees, gender separation also applies to the domestic sphere of the home. For others, the discipline of separation has heightened their awareness for each devotee's individual degree of devotional commitment. The point here is that gender separation is a strategy for ontological transformation and not a means for crafting visions of an ideal society and the relation of persons to this society.

Women devotees, particularly overseas, are often asked to explain why they participate in a community that segregates the sexes and proscribes their guru and ascetics from interacting with them. From the many women I have met, there is striking unanimity that gender separation has strengthened women's commitment and devotion. Women point to their numbers and note, without irony, that unlike
the fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers in their lives, their devotional relationship to Pramukh Swami is strong even without the advantage of close personal contact with him. They too point out the number of women who have readily given permission for their only sons to become ascetics. They also note with satisfaction that the example of self-transformation in their lives has compelled other women and men to join the Sanstha. Swaminarayan women assert that the structural separation of women from guru and ascetics has prompted the realisation, sometimes after many years, of the conscious effort needed to overcome bodily desires and emotions, including envy, frustration and longing. Hence, as numerous young women have pointed out to me, 'unlike men, we don't need to sit up close to Bapa (Pramukh Swami) to experience antaryami shakti (all-pervasive power of God) ... we have him with us all the time, in our hearts'.

From within the Swaminarayan framework, gender separation makes possible a receptive mind-body, which can then be imprinted with the necessary concepts required to form the Swaminarayan subject. Not unlike the veil in the Cairene Islamic revivalist world described by Saba Mahmood (2005), Swaminarayan women's willingness to observe gender segregation is not a reminder of their subordination to men, nor a reflection of their submissiveness to a patriarchal, and discriminatory religion. Gender segregation is a visible, concrete and tangible means of reminding the sensory self of its devotional aims, aims which are not tethered to ideas of autonomy, freedom, and individual rights or teleological processes of history, secularism and modernity. In other words, female devotees recognise that men have privileges that are not available to them such as feeling the guru's hand on one's head or the opportunity to discuss, in person, the deeper philosophical aspects of Swaminarayan bhakti with learned ascetics. Younger women devotees have occasionally and privately confessed feelings of periodic sadness at not having these intimacies with their guru. However, women who are committed devotees understand that in accepting certain structural and relational limitations, they acquire the capacity to condition their selves to receive higher order desire, the total submersion of the sensory self and the concomitant continuous devotional stance towards God and guru. The point here is that Swaminarayan women are involved in a spiritual project that is not anchored to the expectations and assumptions of modernity or secularism, feminism or progressivism, or any number of other binaries derived from the epistemic world of liberal secularism. Devotees of BAPS have, in other words, another discursive formation to which their ideals of being and being in-the-world are anchored.

Religious Subjectivity

To be Swaminarayan is to undertake an ethical and moral project that is likely to last at least one lifetime and requires tremendous time and energy. Dedicated devotees are thus never in a state of rest for the sensory body's requirement for being monitored and guided is a ceaseless one. These devotees are the ones who accept any opportunity for seva and utilise their individual abilities and resources to support the
Sanstha’s projects in order to maximise their own ontological transformations. To assume that Swaminarayan devotees are unthinking and uncritical is to judge that there are religious subjectivities that do not fit some preconceived framework for what constitutes thinking behaviour. Furthermore, devotees, due to their willingness to accept restraints on their personhood, i.e., in their desire to embody certain limitations of self and agency, are problematically deemed to be irrational and unprogressive.

The secular liberal conception of religious subjectivity, in its capacity to discern uncritical, unthinking and unmotivated qualities in Swaminarayan devotees, illuminates the exclusionary dimensions of this discursive formation. In contrast to the liberal project of self-mastery through freedom, Swaminarayan devotees have chosen a lifestyle which openly welcomes the submission of the self, or more specifically, the mind-body-senses, in order to satisfy devotional objectives. The Swaminarayan subject does not see herself as choosing the ‘lack of agency’ in order to be subordinated to men or to have her will suppressed. Instead, her voluntary decision to become a devotee is inspired by her desire to achieve a certain ideal underwritten by another kind of authority. This view of Swaminarayan subjectivity suggests, borrowing from Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002), that there is a gap between totalising and universal discourses and those which appear to be fragmentary and incommensurable. Swaminarayan religious subjectivity, in other words, has to be understood as one that is not in opposition to modernity or to non-modernity but is instead a way to inhabit both the past and present through the discourses of Swaminarayan bhakti. This devotional discourse is not dependent on a specific conceptualisation of society or a totalising vision of the future; neither does it depend on discourses beyond its own to sustain its ontological assumptions and aims. Swaminarayan bhakti is thus able to exist and flourish in various historical and cultural environments as well as accommodate other potentially competing discourses, most notably those of religion and secularism. The irony here is that the secular episteme, fuelled by a sense of movement towards a specific kind of future where public spaces and sovereign domains are not influenced or affected by ‘religion’, is, in fact, an episteme that is comprehensible only through the lens of the category ‘religion’ (see Pecora 2006 for parallels). Secularism, as an ideology and a sociological reality, is an authoritative discourse that cannot exist outside of the existence of ‘religion’. Following Asad, it must be asked:

Why are secularists alarmed at the thought that religion should be allowed to invade the domain of our personal choices when the process of speaking and listening freely implies precisely that our thoughts and actions should be opened up to change by our interlocutors? (Asad 1999: 181)

It appears thus that liberal secular ideology, in order to sustain itself in its multiple forms, must necessarily control the parameters of acceptable discourses, discursive formations, and modes of subjectivity. Paradoxically, secularism clearly, has its heretical forms.
The problem here is that Swaminarayan religious subjectivity, though historically independent of the epistemological edifice that supports religion, is nevertheless not immune to the discourse on religion. For example, outside of India, where its devotees are mostly members of ethnic or social minorities, BAPS has made adjustments to its self-presentation, the text of some of its publications, and to the nature of public events it promotes. These adjustments locate Swaminarayan bhakti within the discourse on religion and provide a vocabulary and grammar whereby, at the minimum, devotees can describe and connect their tradition to more familiar expectations about what constitutes ‘religion’. It is these efforts that have, in part, prompted some critics of BAPS to reductively index the activities of BAPS to naïve formulations of Hindu identity, calculated networking strategies, and the promotion of Hindu nationalism.” While publications, activities and events of BAPS can indeed be analysed and criticised for their universalising assumptions, neither the organisation of BAPS nor its devotees are judgemental of those who are not attracted to their positions.

This raises the question as to how we as scholars and citizens acknowledge the ‘irreducible plurality in our experiences of historicity’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 108). Can we, as Abeysekara (2008) suggests, go beyond merely problematising secularism and un-inherit that history which has made the secular episteme the political goal towards which all should aspire? For Abeysekara, the effort to recognise our inheritance and to think beyond it is dependent on opening up intellectual and epistemic spaces for other kinds of ethical and political possibilities. It is not that secularism or the category religion in which it is intertwined would disappear; rather, the privilege accorded to secularism and its conceptions of personhood, public spaces and the political would be un-inherited. The action of ‘uninheriting’ would produce a way of living within secularism that acknowledges and unMASKS the epistemologies it demands. For Abeysekara, the reward for ‘mourning secular futures’ is not the saccharine image of post-colonial states morphing into multi-cultural and secular democracies, but the recognition of an ‘irreducible otherness’ where difference is not reducible to binaries, such as those drawn between religion and secularism, restraint and freedom, the private and the public or past and present.

In this rethinking of secularism, where does the Swaminarayan Sanstha fit? Is it trying to become a ‘religion’? If yes, is it therefore knowable as a ‘religion’ in secular spaces? The answer is not a simple one. The antecedent to BAPS was a localised regional devotional tradition informed by devotional and colonial discourses of the early nineteenth century. The trans-national BAPS of today is a very different kind of community, well-situated within various Western societies and clearly able to engage with the requirements and expectations of being a Hindu minority community within a majority community. While the traditional teachings remain at its core, its growth and success in attracting new members suggests its capacity to accommodate new discursive forms and epistemic expectations. In my view, this implies that within BAPS there is a capacity to sense something of the ‘irreducible’ in the ‘other’ and to
acknowledge this irreducibility in a way that allows the Swaminarayan Sanstha to pursue its own ontological goals.

CONCLUSION

The questions which animate the discussion of this chapter are not simply matters of intellectual hermeneutics. Gujarat is unambiguously mired in various crises, especially where sovereignty, law and civic life overlap. In Gujarat, the state's response to crisis has often been couched in religious idioms, while the national government has responded in the language of secularism and modern progress. This difference only demonstrates the ways in which religion and secularism are not two ends of a spectrum or two separate discourses, or even two separate concepts. Asad and others have noted that secularism is predicated on a delimited conception of religion, one that at the very least must 'have accepted the assumptions of liberal moral and political discourse' (Asad 1999: 180; also Scott and Hirschkind 2006). Ironically, then, the successful secular state is one that has managed to control, violently or otherwise, the religions under its sovereign protection. To go back to Nussbaum’s characterisation of the Swaminarayan Sanstha, we can see how the secular liberal project constrains the observer's ability to achieve some understanding of certain subjects. Religious subjectivities are acceptable insofar as they are not perceived to be disruptive to liberal conceptions of the autonomous self. And though religious persons are motivated by their own ontological objectives that can be just as limiting of their ability to understand those outside of their community, to be dismissive of religious subjectivity on the grounds of its perceived moral and philosophical limitations is to submit to an unexamined teleology, one with its own historical and intellectual location. When Nussbaum suggests, at the end of her book, that Indians who desire a more viable democracy ought to cultivate an otherness that is 'intriguing, colorful, fun, sexy—and not just scary' (Nussbaum 2007: 334), she is trying to do more than inject levity into a genuinely challenging political and social moment. She is intimating that Indians, or more particularly, Gujaratis, ought to embrace a more advanced and modern form of democracy, where fears and wounds are not assuaged with violence. Nussbaum ignores both the ways in which democratic leaders and institutions have supported violence in order to sustain their visions of society and the ways in which socially conservative religious communities avoid and condemn violence while nurturing their own conceptions of moral living.

Asad argues that the secular project is ultimately a discursive formation and ideology that requires religions, on which it depends for its raison d'être, to be deferential to its control and to respect its mechanisms, juridical and non-juridical, for occupying the same spaces. The state and its various institutions will thus need to, as Asad suggests, be continuously involved in defining and re-defining the contours of religion for the reproduction of secular life within and beyond the nation-state which
continually affects the clarity of that space (Asad 1999: 192). Against this mapping of religion with secularism, notions of religious subjectivity, and the preoccupations of states, the Swaminarayan Sanstha has managed to sustain its central devotional tenets from its early colonial to post-colonial formations, and has successfully taken them overseas too.

As a Hindu community with non-liberal ideals of personhood and religious subjectivity, the Sanstha is readily assumed to support the agenda of Hindu nationalism in Gujarat and elsewhere. This is an unexamined assumption and forecloses the possibility of looking critically at the Sanstha and its ethical programmes; it also immobilises efforts to rethink post-colonial India in terms other than those of Western liberalism. Why, as Chakrabarty queries (2000), has the state in India persisted in accepting a universal conception of political modernity in favour of other indigenous possibilities? The study of the Swaminarayan Sanstha suggests one alternative way in which indigenous categories can guide people to live ethical lives.

As for the criticism that the Sanstha is complicit with the political and power structures of Gujarat, and has not leveraged its resources to assist minority communities, it must be noted that the Sanstha has mostly maintained, from its perspective, a resolutely apolitical position. This ‘apolitical’ political stance has, in certain tense situations, enabled BAPS, to respond in ways that point to the possibility of a certain kind of ‘otherness’ within secular liberal states that is both an endorsement of ‘religion’ intervening in public space and a disavowal of the secular conception of that very space. Here I have in mind the response of the Swaminarayan Sanstha’s leadership to the attacks on Akshardham in Gandhinagar. In September 2002, two armed men entered the complex and killed around 30 people before they themselves were killed by security forces. The media framed the attack in the language of ‘unknown terrorists’, a turn of phrase many Gujaratis understand to mean ‘Muslims’. Unlike the aftermath of the blaze in the railway carriage at Godhra some months earlier, no public violence followed the Akshardham attack. Rather than inciting revenge, Pramukh Swami asked for peace; he also deliberately withheld the fact that a Swaminarayan ascetic had been killed during the attack. Hence this news was not co-opted by the political machinery of the state. In this instance, the Sanstha made a decision which was, perhaps, at odds with the interests of various nationalist lobbies within the state.

While its critics may disagree, BAPS has positioned itself in a hegemonic political reality that it neither endorses nor overtly challenges but that it must, in limited ways, accommodate. For example, BAPS has accommodated, particularly outside of India, some aspects of what dominant Western society expects to see in a ‘religion’. In India, and Gujarat in particular, BAPS has accommodated the state in order to acquire land and permits to build temples and other facilities. These accommodations, either beyond or within India are, of course, not unique to BAPS. Organisations in democratic societies must cooperate with the state in order to operate their own programmes. Of note here is how the required interactions of BAPS with the state
are interpreted as evidence of a narrow interest group with pro-Hindu nationalist sympathies. The same charges are not necessarily made for other groups who make or seek similar state accommodations.

How might we then re-imagine a Gujarat where the juxtapositions between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, Hindu and Muslim are not played out with tragic consequences? How might the politicisation of religion by the state be dammed and space made for ‘other normative and theoretical thoughts enshrined in other existing life practices and their archives’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 20)? The Swaminarayan Sanstha has demonstrated its ability to thrive and sustain a highly particular and non-liberal way of life amidst the exclusionary, hierarchical, sometimes violent, and yet theoretically open and plural ways of democratic secular society. In contemporary Gujarat, where the modernist project has not always resulted in reasonable ways of living, the Swaminarayan framework has provided an alternative way of living for many people. For devotees, to be Swaminarayan is to recognise the plurality of ways of being without assessing the progressiveness or backwardness of other ontologies; it is, as well, to accept the potentialities for being that lie beyond the Swaminarayan path. This argument is neither to suggest that Swaminarayan bhakti is the only option for contemporary Gujarat, nor is it to overlook other existing institutions and ideologies; rather, it is a call to consider epistemologies where the body is both sensorium and the basis for ontological and social transformations.

My purpose in this chapter has been to critically consider how our interlocutors, however distant they appear, may provide possibilities for a new understanding of modernity, public life and living in-the-world; it has also been an attempt to look, from within, at one aspect of social life originating in Gujarat.

NOTES

I am grateful to Edward Simpson, Aparna Kapadia and Rachel Dwyer for commenting on this material. For matters specific to BAPS Swaminarayan teachings and practices, I sincerely thank the devotees, household leaders, and male ascetics who responded to my many questions, the latter through a male intermediary. And not least, I thank Françoise Mallison for sharing her material.

1. Bochasan is a village in central Gujarat where the founder, Shastriji Maharaj, built the first temple to reflect the relationship of Akshar to Purushottam. As early as the 1950s, the acronym ‘BAPS’ fell into use; it is either pronounced as one syllable, rhyming with ‘caps’, or each upper-case letter is pronounced separately.

2. Some direct influences on my argument come from recent contributions to the anthropology of religion, notably Hirschkind (2006), Lester (2005), Mahmood (2005), and Reddy (2006).

3. These vernacular ideas of religion include centralised leadership, core texts, and a standardised system of transmitting rituals and practices.

4. BAPS is not unique in being perceived by outsiders and academics as something less legitimate or representative of ‘religion’. For a critical appraisal of how Mormons
are viewed by outsiders and what this suggests about anthropology's conception of Christianity see Cannell (2005).

5. In pointing to the relationship between secularism and modernity, and its discursive capacity to obscure other ontologies, this is not to imply that modernity and secularism are identical processes or states of being in all historical and cultural contexts. There are many kinds of modernities and secularisms.

6. During his lifetime, Sahajanand Swami made provisions for the continuation of the Swaminarayan sampradaya through hereditary succession. He divided the territory of the Indian subcontinent into two administrative sections (from Dwarka to Calcutta) creating a northern and southern division. His two nephews inherited the administrative responsibilities for the north and south gadis (seats). These gadis still exist (see Williams 1984).

7. The use of 'traditional' to describe the carved stone temples is to signal the differences between the carved and non-carved temples. The former have been constructed according to Sanskrit textual manuals known as the shilpashastras, and the latter are buildings not originally constructed as temples that have been converted into such following the ritual installation of murtis (images).

8. In Gandhinagar, the Akshardham complex is inspired by Guru Pramukh Swami's desire to honor both Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his own guru and predecessor, Guru Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj, on the latter's birth centenary. Yogiji Maharaj had, in 1970, expressed a wish to see a mandir constructed on a particular section of uninhabited land in Gandhinagar. Regarding the Akshardham Delhi complex, this is Guru Pramukh Swami's recognition of his Guru's 1968 wish to have a BAPS temple on the banks of the Yamuna.

9. This can be seen in the injunctions in the Shikshapatri to follow 'Vitthalnathji' (son of Vallabha) in matters of temple observances such as rituals before the images and the selection of Hindu festivals to be observed. There are also other sources that have possibly influenced the style and content of Swaminarayan texts. Schreiner has studied the Bhagvat Purana as well as the Satsangijivanam, a Swaminarayan text written by a senior sant (sing. for male ascetic) who lived during the time of Sahajanand Swami. Schreiner notes that certain content, grammatical choices, imagery, and metaphors in the Satsangijivanam indicate its author's close familiarity with the Bhagvat Purana (see Schreiner 1999; Purohit 2007), who has argued that there is textual evidence to support the influence of early Ismaili ginaa (Ismaili Muslim devotional poems) on Swaminarayan writings, particularly the Shikshapatri.

10. It should, however, be noted that gender separation and restrictions on ascetics' interaction with women are not exclusive to BAPS. In the original Swaminarayan sampradaya, these rules are still observed. Elsewhere in Gujarat, for example, gender separation can be observed at the Ranchhodrai temple in Dakor and the Santram temple in Nadiad. Furthermore, the mode of vegetarianism and abstemiousness prescribed by BAPS is relatively common throughout western India.

11. For other critical perspectives on BAPS, see Mukta (2000), Simpson (2008c), and Sugirtharajah (2003). As critics of BAPS, the scholars here named do not share a singular perspective or common conception of secular liberalism. While the secular liberal perspective supports certain epistemologies, how these are deployed by scholars in the interpretation of BAPS practices and activities varies widely.
12. This, one might consider, is more Nussbaum’s problem than that of devotees for whom technology is relevant insofar as it supports their devotional objectives. For devotees, hence, there is no startling contradiction in acquiring or learning the latest technologies and subscribing to a Hindu devotional tradition.

13. For a very different perspective, see Kantor-Swerdlow (1997), whose findings, based on nearly two years of fieldwork, underscore BAPS’ emphasis on academic and critical thinking.

14. BAPS sees its membership as inclusive of a wider range of castes than that assumed by its critics. While its diaspora membership is more visibly located in the middle to upper classes, this is a self-selecting artifact of immigration rather than a mirror of the overall BAPS membership. In Gujarat, according to BAPS, the caste composition of its followers reflects the caste composition of the population at a more general level.

15. There are five eternal existential entities in BAPS teachings: jiva, ishwar, maya, Brahmin, Parabrahman. This distinguishes Swaminarayan bhakti from earlier Vaishnava teachings of Ramánujacharya who specified three eternal entities, acit, cit and ishwar.

16. The progression of mumukshu experience described here is one of several ways outlined in the Vachanamrut for acquiring the knowledge to achieve the state of brahmarupa.

17. I am grateful for the comments of Swaminarayan ascetics, as relayed through a male intermediary, for clarification on this last phase: of sakshatkar (see also Vachanamrut: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2001), Sarangpur 3.

18. For another example of the process of voluntarily seeking bodily transformation not for reasons of resistance or agentic reaction to external institutions such as law (which makes possible the language of rights and freedom), but for reasons aligned with an established tradition and its ontological goals see Mahmood (2005).

19. In a culture that values sons for rituals, kinship, and social prestige, women in BAPS recognise that permitting one’s son(s) to become an ascetic is permitting him to sever ties with his worldly family. This is perceived by many, but not all, men and women as a tremendous and worthy sacrifice.

20. See the discussion above of Shukla, ‘Building diaspora and nation’, and McKean, Divine enterprises. Also see Mukta, ‘Public face of Hindu nationalism’.
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