At first glance, it appears obvious that the religious traditions of the world have scriptures. Virtually all of the major traditions, and many of the minor, have produced written documents, and the mere fact of their 'writtenness' invites comparison between one tradition and another. The logic behind F. Max Müller's massive editorial undertaking some one hundred years ago—the publication in English translation of the fifty volumes of the Sacred Books of the East—is a compelling one. And a similar logic runs through much of what we do today in the scholarly study of religion. When we do research, a major focus of our attention is upon the literary remains of the world's religious movements. When we teach, a fair portion of what we ask of our students is that they become familiar, in some measure, with the written documents of whatever tradition they may be studying. At one level, the association of religions with scriptures is so obvious as scarcely to merit comment.

At another level, however, this easy association calls for closer examination. We now know, for instance, in a way that was less obvious in Müller's day, that while the Avesta, the Lotus Sūtra, and some of the Upaniṣads may clamor for inclusion in any roster of “Sacred Books of the East,” there are important differences in the ways these documents have been regarded, and in the roles they have played in the Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions respectively. Such differences become even more pronounced, we now know, as one begins to consider the literature that, for one reason or another, was denied inclusion in Max Müller's canon. It is, of course, the detailed examination of particular documents in particular traditions that has been one of the chief glories of modern scholarship. The sheer massiveness of what we now know about individual scriptures, particularly those of the Judeo-Christian tradition, is overwhelming. And yet in the teeth of this erudition, there persists a suspicion that we have not been asking the most salient questions of our documents, that, for all of our methodological sophistication, we remain bound by certain preconceptions as to what scripture is, and how its study ought to proceed. It was Wilfred Cantwell Smith who raised these questions most pointedly for biblical scholarship over a decade ago. Subsequently, similar questions, and similarly novel solutions, have been posed by Gerald Larson for our understanding of the Bhagavad Gītā, and by Smith and William Graham for our understanding of the Qur'an. The first half of Graham's essay is an effort to cast these discussions—and, in fact, the whole of scholarship on scriptural matters—in a mold that will facilitate scholarly considerations of "scripture" as a generic phenomenon. As Graham is aware, the utility of such a concept will be determined gradually, as specialists from across the spectrum of religious studies examine the data in their respective fields in light of generic considerations. It is to this exploration that the present essay seeks to contribute, through reflection upon various features, "scriptural" and otherwise, of the Hindu religious tradition.

Having admitted an aspiration to explore the notion of scripture in India, however, one finds oneself immediately in that familiar position in comparative studies, where the terms in which the original question is asked turn out to be ill-suited for understanding the data at hand. Three considerations may indicate why it is necessary to conceptualize our venture here as a typology of the 'Word,' rather than one of scripture, in Hindu life.

The first pertains to the connotations of the English word "scripture." Although the Oxford English Dictionary reports that the specifically Jewish and Christian sense of scripture (and allied terms such as holy writ, canon, and bible) has been supplemented over the course of the past century or so by a generic use of the term, what has remained constant is the assumption that we have here to do primarily with a written phenomenon, with something that has been inscribed on a page. Indeed, one sus-
pects that the Latin scriptura, "writing," and scribere, "to write," are never far from awareness in much discussion of scriptural matters. And yet it is precisely the thrust of Graham's article, and of his ongoing work, as evidenced by his contribution to the present volume, to show how this expectation of writtenness may mask certain important features of how holy words have been operative in human history. They have been oral/aural realities at least as much as they have been written ones, and the way that they have found their way into human lives is not through the eye, but through the ear. To argue the contrary is but to admit that we are heirs of Gutenberg, for the very notion of silent, individualized reading is scarcely known prior to the advent of the printing press. Consequently, in an effort to appreciate the spoken and heard quality of scripture, we here embark upon a study of the Word in India, some embodiments of which have been reduced to writing, but most of which have retained the oral/aural quality as primary.

Our second consideration pertains to a distinctive feature of Indian culture. If one leaves aside the cryptic evidence from the Indus Valley, writing seems to have been known in the subcontinent from perhaps 600 B.C.E. This is at least half a millennium after the earliest strata of the Vedic corpus were composed, and there has never been a happy marriage between the holy words of India, composed, and transmitted orally, and the writing process. Particularly in contrast with, say, China, scribes in India have been of low social standing, and the very act of writing was held to be ritually polluting. A late Vedic text, the Aitareya Aranyaka (5.5.3), states that "a pupil should not recite the Veda after he has eaten meat, seen blood or a dead body, had intercourse or engaged in writing." The profoundly spoken character of India's holy words is a matter on which we shall reflect below, but for the moment it will suffice to note that we should not be misled by the fact that most of these words have eventually found their way onto the written or printed page. This is not their primary home, and J.F. Staal is not simply being mischievous in discerning a symbolic significance to the fact that Indian books "still tend to fall apart." If our first two considerations address the fact that scripture in India is not necessarily something written, then the third raises the possibility that the very notion of scripture as a reified, boundaried entity fails to do justice to the Hindu situation. As suggested earlier, such assertions as "the fixed and established books of God...form the core of world religions" are not, on the face of it, absurd. One can clearly observe what might be called a "process of crystallization of scripture," and the "coherence of tradition around scripture," in a great variety of settings.

In some, such as the Jewish or Christian, the crystallization process may be drawn out, while in others, such as the Muslim, it may be quite abrupt. Following our earlier argument, it is possible to conceive of the scripture thus crystallized as constituting a fundamentally oral/aural presence in the lives of the faithful, but we must go still further in refining our expectations, I think, if we are not to misconstrue the Hindu scene. India has, in fact, known verbal material that is greatly crystallized, that is, quite specific, boundaried, and even written. Such items as the principal Upanishads, or Tulsi Dās's Rāmāyaṇa, appear to be roughly comparable to Western notions of scripture in this regard. For reasons that will become clear in the sequel, however, I would propose that we understand such compact and circumscribable phenomena as a subset of how Hindus have dealt with holy verbal phenomena in general, that is, with what might be designated the Word, some of whose manifestations are dynamic, open-ended, and nonreversible, rather than boundaried and reified.

As a starting point, let me propose that the most useful unit, the atom or lowest common denominator, if you will, for discussing the Hindu situation is simply the verbal utterance of a particular individual at a particular point in time. He or she may, of course, be reading the words from a written document, or reciting a fixed pattern of words from memory, but he or she may also be telling a familiar story in an engaging new way. I would urge that all of these possibilities have a bearing on scriptural matters in India, and, in particular, I would urge that we not be obsessed with either the 'writtenness' or the verbal fixity of sacred utterances as we approach the Hindu situation.

The specific utility of this apparently oblique way of discussing 'scripture' in India will become apparent after reviewing the traditional ways of conceptualizing Hindu religious literature—ways that we have inherited both from our scholarly predecessors in the West and, in a different fashion, from Hindus living in various times and places—and then indicating some difficulties that arise when these concepts are brought face-to-face with the facts of religious history. Part II of this essay will therefore rehearse common views about the scriptural life in India. Part III will isolate and comment upon some unresolved difficulties and often unarticulated implications of our inherited views, Part IV will then broach a typology of holy verbal utterance in Hindu life. By approaching the matter in this way, we will not simply be testing a Western notion against Hindu data, but we may also, through fidelity to Hindu views, glimpse new dimensions to the phenomenon of scripture when it is generically conceived.
Virtually all discussions of the religious literature of India that see fit to take cognizance of Hindu categories also see fit to begin with a discussion of śruti and smṛti. We may take J.A.B. van Buitenen’s opening remarks on “The concept of a sacred book in Hinduism” as representative:

Orthodox Hindu authors commonly divide their sacred literature into two classes, Śruti and Smṛti: Śruti (literally “learning by hearing”) is the primary revelation, which stands revealed at the beginning of the creation. This revelation was “seen” by the primeval seers (nī) who set in motion an oral transmission that has continued from generation to generation until today. The seers were the founders of the lineages of Brahmins (Hindu priestly elite) through which the texts have been, and continue to be, transmitted. From this heritage the Brahmins derive their function as sacred specialists and teachers. Smṛti (literally “recollection”) is the collective term for all other sacred literature, principally in Sanskrit, which is considered to be secondary to Śruti, bringing out the hidden meanings of the revelation, restating it for a wider audience, providing more precise instructions concerning moral conduct, and complementing Śruti in matters of religion. While the distinction between Śruti and Smṛti is a useful one, in practice the Hindu acquires his knowledge of religion almost exclusively through Smṛti.

This awareness of two levels of sanctity in Hindu sacred literature has prompted some simply to declare that “to the expression ‘Holy Scripture’ there corresponds in the case of the Indians the expression ‘Śruti,’” but even in such cases it is recognized that śruti admits of various subdivisions. Of these, it is “the Vedic Sanhitas [that] occupy pride of place in Shruti literature,” and, of the Samhitas, it is the Rg Veda, dating perhaps from 1200 B.C.E., that is foremost in both antiquity and sanctity. The four Samhitas—Rg, Yajur, Sama, Atharva—are understood as corresponding to the four kinds of ritual specialist, and all four Samhitas are seen to have gathered other subdivisions of sacred literature around them during the subsequent millennium: the Brāhmaṇas or ritual discussions, the Aranyakas or forest books, the Upanishads or esoteric mystic teachings, and the Srauta, Gṛhya, and Dharma śrutis or manuals of ritual and ethics. It is possible to schematize this growth of śruti, known as the Vedic corpus, in terms of a chart that indicates how individual texts are associated with the particular categories and schools of the Vedic tradition.

There are several ways of indicating the relationship between this Vedic corpus, which appears to be reasonably well defined, and the much more heterogeneous smṛti literature. Louis Renou has offered the intriguing suggestion that “the division between Shruti and Smṛti also marks the frontier between orality and literacy,” which, if borne out by further research, has major implications for the idea of scripture in India. More fully developed at present is the idea broached earlier by van Buitenen, that śruti is of divine or transcendent origin, and that it has received subsequent elaboration and interpretation at human hands in the form of smṛti. Mackenzie Brown, in discussing the Purāṇas, puts it this way:

Truth was fully revealed (“heard”, as śruti) in the past... The Vedas are revealed truth, and even the perfect expression of that truth. But... they are reserved for the twice-born classes (upper three castes) and are not to be recited in public. Sūdras and women are prohibited from even hearing the Vedas. The Purāṇas, on the other hand, may be heard by all, especially in the kali yuga when Dharma is in universal decline. The Purāṇas are an “easier” form of truth, adapted to the conditions of class and world age... It is assumed that the Purāṇic revisions are made in complete harmony with the truth contained in śruti. The Purāṇas represent, then, an interpretation or clarification of the śruti, revealing the eternal, immutable truth in a comprehensible form to all mankind in his changing, historical situation. The process of revealing truth by its very nature is never ending. The truth, once revealed in śruti, must ever by newly interpreted or explained in smṛti.

In addition to the Purāṇas, smṛti seems clearly to include the Dharma Sāstras, the two epics, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, the Tantras, and assorted other items. The full scope of that assortment cannot be specified, however, for the concept of smṛti is necessarily open-ended. What validation as smṛti consists of is “acceptance among the same class in society who were the source of the knowledge of śruti, the Brahmin class.” Since the materials that have received such validation have varied enormously both through the centuries and by region, it is senseless even to attempt to circumscribe the material that Hindus have designated as smṛti.

Recently, however, it has proven popular, and illuminating, to schematize the growth of the Hindu tradition and its literature through a diagram arranged on chronological principles. In these two diagrams, it is śruti that occupies the left-hand third of the chart and that comes to an
another occasion, What can be done at present is to indicate in a preliminary way why the time is ripe for such a comprehensive inquiry into what might appear to be familiar matters. As a prolegomenon to such an inquiry, we may here focus upon three issues to which insufficient justice appears to have been done in our current ways of thinking about Hindu scripture.

1. The first issue pertains to what might be called the primacy of experience and the ontology of language. The central revision or clarification of our inherited views that it effects is its demonstration that, while it is tempting to say that historically śruti precedes smṛti (as, for instance, the Thomas J. Hopkins and David R. Kinsley charts indicate, the distinction of the two categories on grounds of relative chronology cannot be sustained.

To appreciate this point, let us return to the basic affirmation that śruti is that which has been "seen" by the primeval seers (ṛṣi).

The verbal root of śruti is the common verb śru, to hear, which suggests that the notion of 'holy hearing' may be an appropriate way to conceptualize the ṛṣi's experience. The root of ṛṣi is less certain—it may come from ṛṣi, "to see," or from ṛ ṛ, "to flow," and is perhaps related to arc or τε, "to praise"—but there is no quarrel over the fact that it refers to one who has had the most intimate apprehension of cosmic truth. The fact that the metaphors of hearing and seeing are applied to the ṛṣi in relation to this truth is significant. This identification of two senses as mediators of the ṛṣi's experience is no mixing of metaphor, but an effort to convey the holistic and supremely compelling nature of that experience. It engages one through, and yet transcends, the senses. It seizes one with a unique and irresistible immediacy. It is in such experiences that the human becomes contiguous, even identical, with the divine. In discussing a word often allied with ṛṣi, kavi, poet, J. Gonda notes that this "is one of those words which show that there was in principle no difference between mental and other qualities attributed to divine and human persons." Elsewhere, he observes:

The Indian aestheticians... were... of the opinion that the experiences of the poet, representing the hero of his work and that of the listener, reader, or, in general employer of the word are identical. ... This consciousness of the presence of truth, of the divine, the eternal or ultimate reality in a work of art which has been created by a truly inspired artist, together with the almost universal belief that words, especially duly formulated and rhythmically pro-
nounced words, are bearers of power, has given rise to the traditional Indian conviction that “formulas” are a decisive power: that whoever utters a mantra sets power in motion. . . . [Mantras] represent the essence of the “gods.” They are not made, but “seen” by those men who have had the privilege of direct contact with divinity or the supra-mundane.\(^\text{32}\)

Ultimate reality, on this view, may in fact be greater than whatever is predicated of it (neti, neti) but it is affirmed at least to have sound-form. By virtue of the extraordinary perspicacity and auditory acuteness of certain individuals in illo tempore, the rest of us are now able to participate in that ultimate reality. It is mantras that are the sacrament by means of which this participation is effected.

We must, however, go further, for Hindus have not restricted themselves to using the language of the senses to talk about this revelatory experience. The crucial concept here is pratibhā, which carries a basic meaning of “a flash of light, a revelation, usually found in . . . the sense of wisdom characterized by immediacy and freshness,”\(^\text{33}\) but it is also used in technical discussions of philosophy, yoga, and aesthetics to mean “that function of the mind which, while developing without any special cause, is able to lead one to real knowledge, to an insight into the transcendentals truth and reality."\(^\text{34}\) This notion has a bearing on a wide range of topics, but, for our purposes, one of its features is central: it is not limited to the great seers of the past.\(^\text{35}\) It is accessible in the present. In illo tempore is (or can be) now. Though the concluding remarks of the illustrious Gopinath Kaviraj have something of a Tantric ring to them, they capture the essential interrelationship of the divine, the human, and the verbal in Hindu life.

We have seen in the preceding pages that the development of the faculty of omniscience can not be affected unless the mind is purified and freed from the obscuring influence of the dispositions clinging to it from time immemorial. What is known as the “divine eye” is really the mind in its purified condition. It is apparent, therefore, that every man, in so far as he is gifted with a mind, is gifted with the possibility of omniscience. . . . [If we would ask how the impurities of the mind are to be cleared away,] the whole question turns upon the practical issues of mystic culture and we can do no more than briefly touch upon the matter in this place. . . . This help comes from the Guru, a spiritually awake person, in the form of an influx of spiritual energy from him. . . . Concurrently with the opening of this vision to the Yogin he begins to hear the eternal and unbroken sound of Nāla (i.e. Ośhāra), the sweet and all-obliterating Divine Harmony. . . . When this light and sound are fully realized, but before plunging into the Absolute, the Yogin is elevated into the highest plane of cosmic life. . . . Being himself saved, he now becomes, if he so desires it, the saviour of humanity. . . . He is the Ideal of Perfect Humanity which is Divinity itself in concrete shape and is the source of light and life and joy to the world, deep in darkness and sorrow. It is from him that the “Scriptures” proceed and the world receives guidance and inspiration.\(^\text{36}\)

If this kind of ultimately transforming experience continues to be a live option and produces “scriptures” throughout the course of Hindu history, an important qualification must nonetheless be added. As Kaviraj makes clear, it is the gurū-student relationship that is central to the spiritual perfection of the student. While scriptures may proceed from a perfected individual as by-products of his perfection, they are in no way a substitute for an aspiring yogī’s personal relationship with a gurū. To put it another way, the gurū-student relationship may well take a written document as its starting point, but so intimate and personal is that relationship, and so essential is it to the correct understanding of the written (or orally preserved) word, that there exists the widespread custom that if a teacher does not find a student worthy of inheriting his manuscripts, he will, in his old age, simply discard them by throwing them into a river—as one would ashes that had been cremated. Written documents, univivified by personal relationship, are lifeless.

A corollary of the qualification is that, if we would identify the vessels in which the gurū’s or gurū’s transforming experience is, as it were, ‘preserved,’ we ought not, for reasons already cited, look into written documents. We ought rather, perhaps, to look at other instances where Hindus speak of holistically engaging, sensual, and particularly visual, apprehension of the divine. While I cannot pursue this matter in detail here, the use of the word dīś, “to see,” or its derivatives in other contexts is surely not coincidental. Dāsāna, for instance, ‘seeing,’ is the standard word for ‘philosophy,’ and one of the reasons that Hindu philosophy is said to be pervasively salific is because it bears this heritage of ‘spiritual apprehension.’ The same word is also employed in what appears, to the outsider, to be quite a different context, to label “the single most common and significant element of Hindu worship,” namely, what happens “when Hindus go to the temple, (and) their eyes meet the powerful, eternal gaze of the eyes of [the image of] God.”\(^\text{37}\) One could argue, in fact, that “images are not only visual theologies, they are also visual scriptures.”\(^\text{38}\) If we spread our net wider, to include other than the sight sense,
we may note that rasa, taste, looms as a major concept in Indian aesthetics and in various theologies, particularly those of Krishna, to convey the nature of the divine-human encounter. Beyond this, the holy words that are śruti must be seen alongside other transforming, sacramental activities, such as philosophical argumentation, the worship of the divine image form, and the highly nuanced moods (bhavas) of Krishna devotees.

When the experiential foundations of śruti as an ongoing phenomenon in Hindu life is acknowledged in this fashion, then a number of otherwise puzzling (or, more often, ignored) aspects of the Hindu tradition may be viewed in a new light, with a new clarity. We may glance briefly at one of them.

The traditional Hindu view is that there are 108 Upaniṣads and, of these, a dozen or so are identified as “early,” that is, composed in the half-millennium or so after about 700 B.C.E. And yet in the word index of Vedic material that began appearing five decades ago, the Vādikapadānukrama-kṣaṇa, no fewer than 206 Upaniṣads are indexed and some of these “have been written occasionally even in modern times and certainly right up to the Middle Ages.” The relatively recent origin of these Upaniṣads, together with the fact that some of them are highly sectarian and that there even exists an “Allah Upaniṣad”—written in praise of Islam at the instance of Darah Shikoh in the seventeenth century—is exceedingly problematical for any view that takes only the early Upaniṣads as normative and that sees śruti as historically prior to smṛti. The tendency (under Brahmanical and/or Western influence) has been to dismiss these compositions precisely because of their lateness and their alleged “corrupt” character. The fact remains that some Hindus have called them “Upaniṣads.” This fact becomes far less problematical, and is actually highly illuminating, when seen in relationship to our contention that śruti must be seen as ongoing and experientially based feature of the Hindu religious tradition.

2. The second issue on which our inherited expectations for scripture in India appear less than fully adequate might be called the “sociology of language” and the “power of holy hearing.” While it is tempting to assume that scriptures, either read or heard, serve a didactic role in human lives, the central fact here is that, for many Hindus, the holiness of holy words is not a function of their intelligibility. On the contrary, sanctity often appears to be inversely related to comprehensibility. To appreciate this point, let us return to Brown’s observation that the significance of the Purāṇas is that they “may be heard by all.” Notice that he does not tie their significance to the fact that they could be understood by all, for they have scarcely been an open book. Nor, for that matter, have most of the items usually considered the scriptures of India. And the reason that these scriptures, even if universally heard, were never widely understood is because they were composed in Sanskrit. Over the past thirty years, the symbolic significance of the Sanskrit language and culture has generated a widespread discussion of ‘Sanskritization’ which is not necessary to review here. What we may simply note is that “the name of the language, one of the few not derived from a region or a people, states its own program: sanskṛta bhasa is the ritually perfected and intellectually cultivated language. To be able to speak and understand Sanskrit is a badge of religious and intellectual privilege, for it is the refined or “well-cooked” language, in contrast to the Prakrits, those uncouth grunts of hoi polloi. Sanskrit was therefore always an individual’s second language, unintelligible to speakers of the many local vernaculars, but always, for one who knew it, the language of preference. Simply hearing this cultured language bordered on being a numinous experience.

There is an additional dimension, however. It is not just that Sanskrit has an aura of elegance in the present. It also provides linkage to the primal time. Van Buitenen puts it this way:

Central to Indian thinking through the ages is a concept of knowledge which...is foreign to the modern West. Whereas for us, to put it briefly, knowledge is something to be discovered, for the Indian knowledge is to be recovered... One particular preconception, related to this concept of knowledge concerning the past and its relation to the present, is probably of central significance: that at its very origin the absolute truth stands revealed; that this truth—which is simultaneously a way of life—has been lost, but not irrecoverably; that somehow it is still available through ancient life lines that stretch back to the original revelation; and that the present can be restored only when this original past has been recovered... Sanskrit is felt to be one of the life-lines, and Sanskritization in its literal sense, the rendering into Sanskrit, is one of the prime methods of restating a tradition in relation to a sacred past.

All of this is not to say, of course, that Sanskrit has not been used—by those capable of using it—with every intent to communicate meaning. The case of Rāmānuja—the great theologian of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism who stands at the juncture of the two traditions of Tamil devotionalism and
Sanskrit ‘orthodoxy’—is a splendid instance of someone whose piety is deeply indebted to non-Sanskritic sources, but who writes in Sanskrit because of its prestige and symbolic significance, and who does so with great clarity and precision.

Such an instance, however, must not distract us from the basic point, namely, that the sanctity of Hindu scripture—most of which has been composed in Sanskrit—does not necessarily depend upon its intelligibility to one who hears or recites it. Nowhere has this been more clearly demonstrated than in the way the Rg Veda—apparently the centerpiece of the entire scriptural tradition—has functioned in Hindu life. Like all verbal compositions, the Rg Veda was produced in an historically particular context, of which the most vivid brief account is Charles R. Lanman’s: ‘To the student of the Veda it is a source of perhaps contemptuous surprise, and to the teacher a source of some little embarrassment, that this venerable document smells so strong of the cow-pen and the byre.’52 Be that as it may, these particularized features of the Rg Veda have been essentially irrelevant, have passed virtually unnoticed, throughout most of Hindu history because of what Renou calls the “characteristically Indian preoccupation with form rather than meaning.”53 What this has meant is that “at all times, recitation constituted the principal, if not the exclusive, object of Vedic teaching, the same as today... whilst the interpretation of the texts is treated as a poor relation.”54 Such recitation has been undertaken for a variety of ritual purposes, especially as an instrument or intermediary of devotion, and, in this context, matters of verbal signification pale in significance.55 This has elicited a suggestive comparative remark about the role of the reciter (srotiya, master of sruti): “the srotiya who recites without understanding should not be compared with a clergyman preaching from the pulpit, but rather with a medieval monk copying and illuminating manuscripts, and to some extent with all those who are connected with book production in modern society.”56 It may, of course, be that the Rg Veda and other Vedic materials have been particularly prone to this manner of treatment, because of their composition in the preclassical form of Sanskrit known as Vedic; it seems likely that their existence in an arcane, archaic language would have reinforced the prior disinclination to interpret on ritual grounds. However, the propensity to memorize and to recite holy words—perhaps as a manifestation of devotion (bhakti), perhaps with the aspiration of having one’s consciousness transformed by the mantras, as noted earlier—runs very, very deep in Hindu life. There is scarcely a festival in India that is not accompanied by the recitation of some classical text, most often in Sanskrit, in which case, as we have seen, it cannot be intelligible to more than a select few, or in an archaic and therefore, at best, rather opaque form of the vernacular.

Whatever else we may conclude about the scriptural life of India, justice must be done to fact that, at least some of the time, Hindus have affirmed that the holiness of the Word is intrinsic, and that one participates in it, not by understanding, but by hearing and reciting it.

3. The third issue on which it appears necessary to rethink some of our familiar patterns of thought might be called the “dialectic between sruti and smrīti,” or the “double desideratum of literally preserving and dynamically recreating the Word.” While it is tempting to assume that considerations of content, or genre, or label, or name may enable us to categorize a given text as either sruti or smrīti, closer examination reveals a subtle and highly suggestive movement between these two kinds of holy Word.

Let us begin with the observation that “scripture,” like “cousin,” “weed,” or “poison” seems necessarily to be a relational concept: it depends for its definition, not upon its intrinsic properties, but upon those properties in relation to people, who value it for better or worse.58 While the implications of this fact are only gradually coming to be explored, it seems likely that the existence of two central terms for Hindu scripture, sruti and smrīti, may be a reflection of two different kinds of relationship that can be had with holy verbal material in the Hindu tradition.59 We have already had grounds to question the sufficiency of understanding sruti as chronologically prior to smrīti and to observe that sruti, in the form of the so-called late Upaniṣads, has de facto functioned as an open-ended category in Hindu life. We must now go one step further, however, to observe that, in some cases, there has been an observable shift over time in the way a particular instance of the Word, a particular ‘text,’ if you must, has been regarded by individuals within the tradition.

Let us begin with the Bhagavad Gītā. The logic for understanding the Gītā as smrīti is strong, and the case for such an understanding is regularly made.60 The text is, after all, situated in the Mahābhārata, which is perhaps the premier instance of smrīti, and its didactic intent converges magnificently with the traditionally understood role of smrīti. Bharati is surely correct in lamenting the recent facile identification of the Gītā as “the Hindu Bible,”61 but matters are also more complex than he allows. In his last remarks on this text, to which he devoted so much attention throughout his career, van Buitenen concludes that the post-Gītā evidence (the views of various commentators and the author of the Vedaṇaśūtras) “attests to the near-sruti prestige of our text at a very early date.”62 There is additional evidence to strengthen such an interpretation. It is a fact, for instance, that the material that has traditionally been understood as sruti...
chanting of the mantras of which it is composed is a way of pleasing the goddess and tapping her powers. But the mantras have meaning of another sort, for together they constitute one of the principal scriptural delineations of the goddess. The text is to be understood as well as chanted, and consequently in the editions available in the Raipur bazaar the Sanskrit stanzas are given together with their Hindi translation.68

A similar dialectic may be discerned with regard to the Hindi Ramayana (Rāmacaritamānas) of Tulsī Dās. In origin a sixteenth century "re-creation" or "transcreation" of the Rāma story, which had been told many a time, in many a version, since Vālmīki’s original Sanskrit composition a millennium an a half earlier, Tulsī Dās’s Rāmāyana has been experienced as so powerful and so holy that it is now recited verbatim during Rāmālī even though, as noted earlier, its classical Hindi is scarcely transparent to modern Hindi speakers. Held in counterpart to this recitation, however, are the dialogues between the actors in the festival drama, which occur in modern Hindi and which both translate and elaborate upon the words of Tulsī Dās.69 As a final nuance in this dialectic, we should note the evidence recently presented in Hawley’s At Play with Krishna. The story of the cowherd Krishna has, of course, been retold in vital and compelling fashion on innumerable occasions, and a direct line runs from its first appearance in the Harihavāsā, through the Viṣṇu and Bhāgavata Purāṇas, into the modern vernaculars. On some occasions, such as in the Bhāgavata, or in Jayadeva’s Gītā Govinda, the story has crystallized into a form that might be deemed "canonical"—which in the Hindi case would thus mean "worthy of being recited verbatim." As the Krishna tradition lives in the dramas of contemporary Brindavan, however, there is no ‘canon,’ because there is no ‘text.’ There are, of course, familiar songs and plot structures, and lines are remembered from past performances, but “the plays are constantly being recomposed,” and the elements of independence and spontaneity are crucial to the vitality of the performances.60 India, it would appear, wants both the literal preservation and the dynamic recreation of the Word, and the movement between these two foci—whether or not they be called “śrutī” and “smṛtī,” respectively—is both subtle and continuous.61

IV

We turn now from a consideration of specific issues in the Hindu tradition to a typology that arises out of this consideration, and that aspires to alleviate some of the conceptual difficulties encountered in trying to talk about Hindu scripture. I offer the typology in two different forms, the
former, I think, quite defensible and clearly related to what has gone before, the latter more speculative.

The typology is designed to indicate the varied ways that Hindus have related to a range of verbal materials that have originated at different times and places. At the outset, I urged the reader to think of the basic unit for discussing the Hindu situation as the verbal utterance of a particular individual at a particular point in time, and it will now be apparent why we must proceed to such an extreme atomizing of the material. More abstract approaches, based on prevailing conceptualizations, get us into difficulties: the same verbal event—the same utterance—has been variously regarded at different times, and even such familiar categories as śruti and ‘Upāniṣad’ appear to break down when pushed hard enough. In order to keep from being misled by our existing terminology, I am proposing that we let the atomization process go as far as possible, to the level of individual verbal utterance. And then let us see the manner of relationships that Hindus have had with the utterances that are considered sacred. I refer collectively to such utterances as ‘the Word.’

There is a further reason why I have called this, not a typology of scripture, but a typology of the Word. We have seen that Hindus have emphasized the oral/aural over the written aspect of words. More than that, however, they have understood that which is mediated through pīs and gurus to be verbal—and-yet-more-than-verbal. To convey its nature, they have used a variety of metaphors not just of audition, but of sight. And if we allow the later uses of darśan(a) as clues, it smacks also of philosophical truth (veda, of course, means “knowledge”), and of reciprocal sight, the experience of knowing and being known. And if it be objected that this sounds more like a typology of revelation than one of scripture, then so be it. It has to be noted immediately, however, that while the Word (śruti, Veda, etc.) may be more like ‘revelation’ than ‘scripture,’ the closest analogy that we ordinary mortals have for its nature is that it is verbal, sound-form. Gonda explains its distinctiveness as follows:

The categories of language are, so to say, a diaphragm, an obstacle which comes between the reality and our consciousness. Whereas in ordinary usage this diaphragm makes its existence and influence felt, poetical language is devoid of these categories and therefore attains to reality before its solidification into discursive thought. Thus poetical language is related to other extraordinary forms of expression, for instance, on the religious plane with mantras.72

The Word, therefore, as I am using it here has a deliberate multivalence: it indicates a verbal and humanly articulated reality, but it also has meta-

physical overtones and more than a hint of the mysterium tremendum.

The first formulation of the typology suggests that Hindus have done five things with these holy verbal events. There is overlap, of course, and a few pure ‘types’ exist. Nonetheless, for the sake of convenience we may think of there being five ways that Hindus have engaged with the Word.

1. They have frozen it, captured it verbatim, treated it as sound eternal, the hum of the universe. While it is primarily the Vedic material, and particularly the Rg Veda, that belongs here, other material may be treated in this fashion, as we have seen. This is the way, its seems to me, Hindus have treated that which they regard as śruti. There are obviously many cases where non-śruti material has been committed to memory, but it would appear that the major thing Hindus are saying when they call certain verbal events “śruti” is that they are eternal, intrinsically powerful, and supremely authoritative. They are never outmoded. They are worthy of recitation, regardless of whether they are understood. Indeed, mantras do not “mean” anything in the conventional semantic or etymological senses. Rather, they mean everything.

And if we are bewildered by that affirmation, the Hindu response would be for each of us to find an appropriate guru, to receive from him (among other things) a mantra, to recite it faithfully, and eventually we will come to see the point. This is, in many ways, the most characteristically Hindu view of the Word, and of the various views in India, it appears to be the most radically disjunctive with Western notions of scripture.

2. Hindus have also treated certain stories as salvific and/or normative, and so they have told them over, and over, and over again. Particularly compelling versions of a story may hold people’s attention for centuries, and a really powerful version may come to be regarded as if it were śruti. Nonetheless, even in those cases, what is important is that the story be intelligible to those who hear it. And this may, of course, entail ‘transcreation’ out of Sanskrit into one of the vernaculars. This is what seems to have been happening through the centuries to the stories of Krishna Gopala and Rama, and, perhaps, more broadly in the rich corpus of Hindu mythology.

3. Hindus have composed commentaries as a way of making some embodiments of the Word intelligible in the present. Certain
kinds of the Word, such as the sūtra literature, invite or virtually demand commentaries because of their deliberate brevity. (It is said that the author of such a text would sell his grandson to save a syllable.) Other kinds demand commentaries because they are in Sanskrit and therefore require a vernacular commentary in order to make them intelligible: instances of this we have seen in the treatment accorded the Durgā-Saptasati and the Rāmāyaṇa of Tulsi Dās. The pattern of writing commentaries, however, is uneven, clustering around certain texts such as the sūtra and bhakti literature, and sometimes surprisingly absent, as in the case of most Purāṇas. One suspects that inquiry into the pattern of texts that have attached commentaries is a matter that would repay further investigation.

4. Some embodiments of the Word in India have generated imitations of themselves. The terms of imitation, however, that is, what it is that has been deemed worthy of emulating, have varied. Van Buitenen shows how, for the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, it is archaic language, Vedic Sanskrit, that is being reproduced.35 Parameswara Aiyar, alternatively, indicates the huge variety of texts that have called themselves “Citās” in spite of sometimes departing fantastically from the concerns of the Bhāgavat Gītā proper.36 If one were inclined to such terminology, one might say that this response to the Word is a kind of “imitative magic,” while our fifth type would be magic of the “sympathetic” variety.

5. Finally, some embodiments of the Word have lived on by receiving additions into themselves. Indeed, a large portion of what Hindus call “smṛti,” specifically the epics and Purāṇas, seems to welcome additions with open bindings. One might expect this—with its attendant problems for the task of critical editing—where the material is what has traditionally been called “smṛti,” for the very concept is that of an authoritative, but open-ended Word. Even in what has traditionally been called “śruti,” however, we have seen that there has been a de facto open-endedness. The urge to enfold the new into the old is but one way that Hindus have dealt with the Word, but it appears to cut across the full range of Hindu ‘scriptural’ material.37

The second formulation of the typology is a drastic simplification of the first, and it, in turn, will bring us to a final remark. Might it be possible, one may ask, to reduce this five-fold manner of dealing with the Word to two basic types? The former might be called “scripture,” and the latter “story.” Or following Karman’s distinction in sacred art, one might call the former “sacramental,” and the latter “didactic.”38 One is tempted, perhaps, to suggest a correspondence with the Greek discrimination of logos and mythos. Regardless of the appropriateness of terms drawn from other contexts, the basic distinction is this. Hindus have shown a propensity to treat certain instances of the Word as eternal and immutable, and they have engaged with some of them (the Rg Veda now for about three-and-a-half-millenia: this is type one in our first formulation of the typology. Hindus have treated other instances of the Word as dynamic, as spawning all manner of elaboration, some of it being verbal—and therefore including types two through five above—but much of it being found in festival life, image worship, philosophy, and aesthetics, that is, in darśan(a) and rasa. The test of whether such elaborations are authentic is the simple one of whether or not they receive the sanction of what we might call “Verbal specialists”: at times, this means the sanction of Brahmīns,39 but it can also refer to those whose spiritual credentials are experiential, the perfected yogis cited by Gopinath Kaviraj.40 If we were then to press the case that for Hindus, it is the former of these types that comes closest to ‘scripture’ as a generic phenomenon—because it is compact, boundaryed, and therefore capable of being ‘canonized’—then I have enabled myself to observe that, in a Hindu context, the Word has been operative in scripture, but that it is a larger than scriptural phenomenon.41 And that is an assertion for which I think I would find some theological support in other religious traditions.

In pressing such a case, however, I would then have to note that the distinctively Hindu way of engaging with this compact, boundaryed verbal material is to recite it, not necessarily to understand it. And that is likely to contrast strikingly with the scriptural situation elsewhere in the world.

In anticipation of further efforts to attain clarity on such matters, a final word must be said about the context in which the study of any particular scriptural tradition is undertaken. The thrust of our exploration in this essay has been into the concepts and nature of the Hindu religious tradition. It is well-known, however, that the very concept ‘Hindu’ is a late one, dating only from the arrival of the Muslims, to say nothing of the more general danger of reification in conceptualizing the religious life.42 We must be reminded of these facts because there is evidence that the development of the narrowly ‘Hindu’ phenomenon of scripture has often been intertwined with non-Hindu matters. Staal, for instance, argues that it was the Buddhists who first committed a sacred oral text to writing, in 35-32 B.C.E.43 While the Buddhist use of holy words is itself far from clear, it would be fruitful to explore Staal’s contention here in relation to Renou’s suggestion, cited
earlier, that the division between śruti and smṛti also marks the boundary between orality and editing. Similarly, while we know that Sayana, the great fourteenth century commentator of the Rg Veda, had his predecessors, it is a fact that he flourished after the Muslim entry into India, and one then wonders whether he might reflect the Islamic tradition that texts are for exegeting, as well as for reciting. Be that as it may, it is now clear that the great significance ascribed to the Rg Veda in modern India derives in large measure from the labors of an Oxford professor to accomplish the unprecedented task of publishing that text in its entirety. The professor was, of course, Max Müller.

Finally, there are indications that Western notions of critical editing and of an "original text" have represented a sometimes startling intrusion upon Hindu reality, with consequences that are complex and often ill-understood. All of this evidence would suggest that, while we are becoming more alert to the great variety of ways that verbal material has functioned religiously in human lives, both Hindu and other, a fully adequate understanding is not yet upon us.

NOTES

1. A much earlier draft of this essay was written for the National Endowment for the Humanities 1982 Summer Seminar on “Scripture as Form and Concept.” I am much indebted to the members of the Seminar, and particularly to the Director, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for their very helpful comments. This article first appeared in the Journal of the American Academy of Religion 52 (1984): 435–459, and I am grateful to the editors for permission to reprint it in the present volume.


6. Graham’s first twenty-three footnotes provide the basic bibliography for this phenomenology.


12. Ibid., p. 123.

13. In light of both the ease of misunderstanding here, and the importance of the notion of ‘oral tradition’ in past scriptural studies, it is worth emphasizing that when we speak of the orality/aurality of scripture, we are not indicating an oral supplement to a written tradition. Rather, we are calling attention to the vocal, spoken quality of holy words, which come to life, as it were, only in utterance and hearing. Our remarks below on the guru-student relationship are apposite here. The ongoing work of William A. Graham, as evidenced by his essay in the present volume, stands to illuminate greatly the oral/aural quality of scripture in a variety of historical contexts.


18. Lanczowski, Sacred Writings, p. 83.


22. See also Renou's equally suggestive remark pertaining to the substance, rather than the form, of these two kinds of literature: “The Smṛti introduces a direct formulation, which could be called a rational thought, consisting of erudite texts or (pre-) scientific texts; the Śruti, quite to the contrary is essentially symbolic, basing itself on an indirect and 'second' semantic” (*Destiny*, p. 16).


40. Though T. M. P. Mahadevan shares the common view that śruti is virtually synonymous with the Vedas—a view of śruti that I am here urging be enlarged—he provides an understanding of the śruti-smṛti relation that works well in the larger context: “Śruti is primary because it is a form of direct experience, whereas smṛti is secondary, since it is a recollection of that experience.” (Outlines of Hinduism (Bombay: Chetana Limited, 1961), p. 28.) Such a definition would then allow us to reinterpret van Buitenen’s remark, cited above, that the Hindu acquires his religious knowledge from smṛti as meaning: most Hindus do not have experiences of mystical consummation, but they base their religious lives on records of such experiences.


42. *Vaidika-pādīsūkrama-kavya* (Lahore (parts 1–5) and Hoshiarpur (parts 6–16); Visvesvarananda Vedic Research Institute, 1935–1965). The appearance of this word-index is itself a reflection of the novel approach to the Vedas that has emerged over the course of the past century; see our concluding remark on the role of Max Müller.

43. Lancelkowski, *Sacred Writings*, p. 88.


46. A similar argument, which I here omit in the interest of brevity, could be made with regard to the interpretation of the "supplements" or khaṇas to the Rg Veda, some of which are virtually modern: see C. G. Kashikar, “Preface” to *Rgveda-Sanhita, with the commentary of Sānd Barclay*. N. S. Sontakke and C. G. Kashikar, eds., (Poonah: Vaidika Sansādīna Mandala, 1946), vol. IV, esp. p. 907.


58. I am indebted to Wilfred Smith for this comparative way of putting matters.

59. For example, Smith, “True Meaning.”


63. V. S. Sukthankar, et al., *The Mahābhārata, For the first time critically edited*, (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–1959), 19 vols. The colphons’ use of the plural of *aparajita* is fascinating, but we cannot pursue the matter here. At a minimum, it substantiates our claim that the terms for various kinds of Hindu scripture stand in need of careful reexamination.


67. It may appear banal to say that words present ideas. However, as we strive for a phenomenology of scripture, it is important to realize that words do not necessarily serve this function, as the Hindu phenomenon of *mantra* demonstrates. Conversely, we need to be reminded that ideas can also be vividly conveyed through such nonverbal media as music and art.


71. The argument has been made by Harry Bury (“Saving Story and Sacred Book,” in J. M. Myers, et al., eds., *Search the Scriptures: New Testament Studies in Honor of Raymond T. Stamm* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969]), drawing on Hindu material, and by Peter Slater (*The Dynamics of Religion* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978]), on a broader scale, that stories may fruitfully be understood as living at the heart of the religious life, and of religious traditions. While appreciating that they have presented an important dimension of human religiousness, I find their analyses do not go to the heart of (at least Hindu) matters: as we have seen, India does indeed love to re-create traditional stories, but such an attitude is foreign to the model of recitation (the memorable creations of the past). The typology that I will broach below may be understood as endeavoring to retain the best of the Bury-Slater argument, while seeing it in relation to other crucial features of the Word in Hindu life.

72. Gonda, *Vision*, p. 67; see also p. 346.


75. It is worth emphasizing that the two epics of India, so often lumped together in discussions of the literature, might, according to this typology, best be understood as representing different ways that Hindus have dealt with the Word: the story of Rāma is comparatively brief and simple and, while any particular version may admit of being memorized (Type 1), it has primarily retained its vitality through being retold in a variety of ways, in a variety of languages (Type 2). The Mahābhārata, by contrast, is not a story, but a library or encyclopedia. (See Dimock, et. al., *Literatures of India*, p. 53 for a superb account of what would be involved in conceptualizing a Western equivalent). And it seems to have retained its vitality by incorporating diverse local traditions into itself (type 5), a process in which writing appears to have played a significant role (Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, pp. 464–465).

77. Dimmitt and van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology*, p. 4.

78. Kaviraj, *Aspects*, p. 44.


