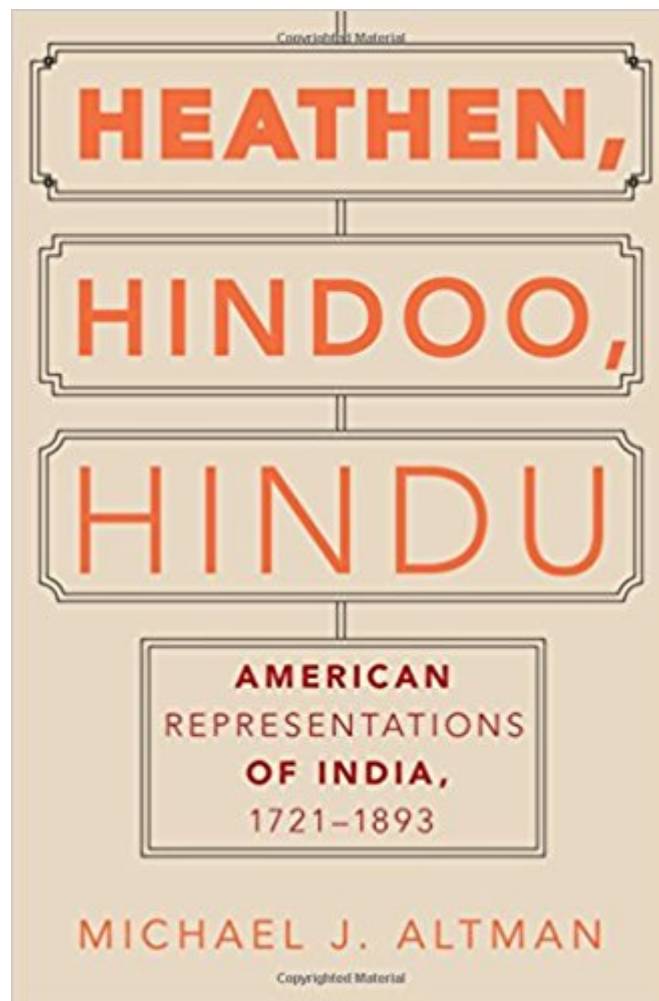


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# Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representations Of India, 1721-1893



## Synopsis

Today, there are more than two million Hindus in America. But before the twentieth century, Hinduism was unknown in the United States. But while Americans did not write about "Hinduism," they speculated at length about "heathenism," "the religion of the Hindoos," and "Brahmanism." In *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu*, Michael J. Altman argues that this is not a mere semantic distinction—a case of more politically correct terminology being accepted over time—but a way that Americans worked out their own identities. American representations of India said more about Americans than about Hindus. Cotton Mather, Hannah Adams, and Joseph Priestley engaged the larger European Enlightenment project of classifying and comparing religion in India. Evangelical missionaries used images of "Hindoo heathenism" to raise support at home. Unitarian Protestants found a kindred spirit in the writings of Bengali reformer Rammohun Roy. Popular magazines and common school books used the image of dark, heathen, despotic India to buttress Protestant, white, democratic American identity. Transcendentalists and Theosophists imagined the contemplative and esoteric religion of India as an alternative to materialist American Protestantism. Hindu delegates and American speakers at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions engaged in a protracted debate about the definition of religion in industrializing America. *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu* is a groundbreaking analysis of American representations of religion in India before the turn of the twentieth century. Altman reorients American religious history and the history of Asian religions in America, showing how Americans of all sorts imagined India for their own purposes. The questions that animated descriptions of heathens, Hindoos, and Hindus in the past, he argues, still animate American debates today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In this illuminating history, Michael Altman gathers the fragmentary representations that Americans used to construct their initial understandings of India and Hindu religious traditions. Long before the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, Americans were encountering South Asian religious practices, objects, and texts in missionary reports, encyclopedic compendia, museum collections, travel accounts, and school textbooks. Immersed in that multiplicity, Altman deftly shows how and why 'Hinduism' became conceivable."--Leigh Eric Schmidt, Edward C. Mallinckrodt Distinguished University Professor, Washington University in St. Louis

"Michael Altman's *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu* revolutionizes how we think about the history of Hinduism in American culture. Avoiding the usual anachronisms, essentialisms, and orientalisms, Altman analyzes an ever-shifting discourse fashioned from fragments and bearing many labels. He carefully documents the genealogies of those terms and shows to what ends they were put, from how they shaped American conceptions of religion itself to how Americans imagined their own religious identities."--Andrea R. Jain, author of *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*

"This book fills a gaping hole in the historicization of 18th and 19th century 'Hinduism' in United States by revealing in meticulous detail how white Protestant racism, imperialism, and imaginings of exotic India helped construct its antecedent categories of 'heathen' and 'Hindoo.' Altman's adroit theoretical analysis shifts the discourse to consider how representations of exotic others inform debates within American Protestantism and the formation of American Protestant nationalism - not to mention the category of religion."

--Amanda Lucia, author of *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace*

Michael J. Altman is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. He holds a Ph.D. in American Religious Cultures from Emory University.

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