



13. Religion in Society and Society in Religion

The concept of religion is more or less always "bound", or "tied" to – as *per definition, ipso facto or sui generis* - religious *beliefs* and *religiosity*.

Judaism, Islamism, Catholicism, Protestantism, are all, as I mentioned, looked upon as monotheistic religions, whose interpreters - as I also have mentioned above – bear a striking resemblance with each other, like the very God they, as it were, represent.

Whereas e.g. Hinduism "always" has been looked upon as a polytheistic religion with Gods of the most *different* and even *bizarre* looks.

After thoughts like these I have often wondered why we never see Hinduism as a religion *per se*. We seem to be confused, astringents and ridiculed by films (listen e.g. to Peter Seller's accent – the famous, or rather *infamous* "birdie nam nam"), or maybe, more seriously; rather conglomerated, by maybe thousands, if not lakhs, of different kinds of Gods in Bollywood films. Or, for that matter, the TV-serial on Mahabharata (so good and so

exciting – I was in Mumbai when it started in India, and I actually followed the 1st episode in a crowd of people outside a TV-shop).

And that *despite* the fact that we actually *know*, or at least *should* know, that Hinduism knows only one God that – so many others of us – e.g. Gandhiji – called and call *It*. The Hindu God is neither man nor woman. Neither a child nor an adult. Neither a human person as we know it, nor an animal of any other sort. *It* is everything.

And nothing.

It is.

The God of Hinduism is *It*. Everywhere and nowhere. The Hindu God is impossible to understand, impossible to know but possible to feel and experience. And that's the very core of it! This is particularly obvious in the Vedanta¹ philosophy. And by the constant seeking for *truth*¹ in Hinduism. So what about all the other “Gods” that we learn in school? Well, I argue that all of them are *incarnations* of *It*. See e.g. Ganesha; the so called Elephant God (my favourite, by the way¹, next to Kali¹); see Krishna, Vishnu, Saraswati, Hanuman, Lakshmi, Ram, Adarma...and you will be convinced *without any doubt* that this is a polytheistic religion.

And yet:

It is monotheistic!

I don't have any intention even to *try* to prove this or that since it is *not* provable (in terms of verifying and/or falsifying) and maybe not even interesting, in terms of what we ordinarily call scientific knowledge and approach, like e.g. Positivism, Marxism, Functionalism, Critical theory, Critical realism¹, Sociology of Religion, or major, more religiously painted theories, and/or pure speculations – I just want to – again – argue about our ethnocentric look on the world! God is *It* and *It* is God. *And what we don't understand we consider as some kind of deviant behaviour, mysticism and hence unbelievable.*¹

All these “Gods” are actually nothing¹ but symbolic *figures, images, and manifestations* if you like, in terms of showing us all how we *should* live with “the other”. The stories of their lives are actually quite *equal* to the stories of e.g. all our Scandinavian writers from the Nordic countries e.g. Finland, Sweden, Norway, and particularly Iceland – the island of the sages. They are also equally real and true – provided of course that you take the cultural differences for granted; let you be inspired by the exciting, dramatic and sensuous stories in the MahaBible; the somewhat poetic histories in the MahaQur'an; the inspiring mythology and breathtakingly exciting stories of MahaBharat; and so on, and so forth...This

meaning could, by the way, start with any of the other religions! Compare, e.g. *Ezekiel 13* in the Bible with the Bharat *Kama Sutra* and you will understand what I mean.

Children read the stories of how love, heroism, courage, kindness, hatred, relations between people, between men and women, between countries, about nationalism and patriotism and war, about reverence for life, about deviant behaviour, about revenge, about humanism and so on and so forth. And in this mythic, mystical, but yet so bloody real, world, we come to *know* each other (apart from the fact that these are parts of parts of our oral history) – maybe not so *good*, maybe not in the “*right*” way, but we *do* get to know each other more and more.

Methinks.

But there are of course other aspects: The ruling classes (and the ruling gender as well as the ruling ethnic majority), the upper classes, may and may not (and actually do, and do not...) through these stories keep their hold over the under classes *simultaneously* as people get comforted in their misery, and explanations to all their so many questions, at least where religion is the ruling ideology.¹ Also note that it may also result otherwise; i.e. in opposition. *Also* note that – especially in rural India - the nature still is “holy”, and can “put wheels” on many ox carts”.

And for good reasons!

Let me tell you a story told to me by a head of a Panchayat in Maharashtra¹:

In the middle of the village there was a big tree that some villagers started to look at with a certain interest. It was, e.g. too much in the way (for the growing traffic – *capitalism* if you like, *modernization* if you like, *westernization* if you like, *globalization* if you like, *imperialism* whether you like it or not!) they thought, and it *could* give a lot of firewood and material for ox carts. The Panchayat gathered and discussed the issue, and decided that first of all they should talk to the spirit of the tree – which the special shaman of the entire village did. And after the shaman in this very special village had talked with the special spirit of this special tree, the Panchar gathered the Panchayat which then voted the tree to remain in its place – and one of the most persuasive arguments was that chopping down that tree would take away the only shadowy place the villagers had for meetings just like it did right now!

Democracy, Spiritualism and Materialism working together!

And if that isn't environment, *and* solidarity, *and* doing and *science* – nothing is! And, mind you, talking to the spirits of all living things – e.g. a tree – is a natural thing for

all “natural” religions – which is exactly what inspires many people all over the world – not only Hinduism in rural India:

Everything has a life, everything has a right to live, everything in the world means something important – all you have to do is to find it.

*So take your time!*¹

It is also striking that all now existing world religions have, and have had, about the same basic assumptions and almost spooky relations internally as well as externally. Let me start by quoting my “own original religious scripture” – well, I am not totally sure whether I am *quoting* or not. Just now I had a *new* version of the Swedish Bible in front of me, so to be a bit sure, or maybe a bit more insecure, instead I went to our all embracing IT. It should be there, shouldn't it?

Everything?

And let me tell you that it took me *more* than 45 minutes to find a comprehensive and historically fair (as far as I can see) “correct” page with *The Ten Commandments*¹ – all the others I looked at were offers of different kinds of different kinds of offerings to buy different kinds of “biblical stuff”, different kinds of interpretations on a commercial basis, different kinds of clothes and/or hair models, etcetera.

Amazing, isn't it? *The Bible being introduced as photos of North American actors?*

Anyway: Let's see what our so different religions actually try to say! And as I said I will start with introducing The Ten Commandments. Not because I believe in them more than I believe in anything else, but because I was grown up surrounded by them: They were literally “banged” into my head by authoritarian priests, all of whom we believed in and revered. And my social context desperately tried to convince me not to believe in the men in black (!). I will e.g. never forget when my grandfather on my mother's side (my grandfather on my father's side once told me that he was quite impressed by anarchism since he once met one of them – wearing a big black hat and a scarlet red shawl) uttered in my absence, or rather hidden presence: “Hopefully the little one is not going into priesthood!”

And furthermore, I got a very strange introduction into Christianity when I during my Confirmation asked my minister whether he was totally convinced that God is a man; and his answer was a slap in my face.

And *incidentally* my answer to that was a perfect hit on his solar plexus...And that was the story of my confirmation! A frustrated young man and an unconscious priest!

Anyway! Let me ask us, what is the first thought, impression, expression, we think about when we here “religion”? And let me try to do a kind of summary before I put this question to some of our sociological classic heroes – basically Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.

Religion...

✚ ...Consists of – the very first thing we tend to think about – a full set of our most *basic and existential issues/questions*. Questions concerning our belief systems encompassing e.g.: “Does God exist? What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of death? What happens when I die? Do I die or is there a life after death?” Etcetera. And it’s interesting to see that our big universal religions have all the answers to all these kinds of questions, and, also interestingly enough, these answers are very much alike. “Yes, God exists. The meaning of life is to serve and please God. And yes, there *is* a life after death, it may look a bit different in our different religions, but the similarities *do* dominate.” Let me give you but a few examples: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Genesis 1). Now, this is one part of the biblical history of creation. However, in Genesis 2 we instead find: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul...And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it...And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found a help meet for him. And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man...” I find it quite interesting that different stories of creation in The Bible as well as in The Quran (see below) give us different images of men and women. It seems to me that the first story gives us an image/impression that man and woman (or rather male and female) were actually created as equals, and that the second one more or less states that a “woman” is a less perfect version of the “man”. Note that God created man out of dust and “breathed into his nostrils...” thus

indicating to us that Adam is directly out of God whereas Eve is directly – flesh and



blood – out of Adam.

And in The Quran we can read: “Has there not been over Man a long period of Time, when he was nothing - (not even) mentioned? Verily We created Man from a drop of mingled sperm, in order to try him: So We gave him (the gifts), of Hearing and Sight. We showed him the Way: whether he be grateful or ungrateful (rests on his will).”

And furthermore: “their Lord hath accepted of them, and answered them: Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: Ye are members, one of another: Those who have left their homes, or been driven out there from, or suffered harm in My Cause, or fought or been slain,- verily, I will blot out from them their iniquities, and admit them into Gardens with rivers flowing beneath;- A reward from the presence of Allah, and from His presence is the best of rewards." Anyway, when turning to ancient Hinduism we also find stories of creation. And just as the other two stories this is also about creating everything out of nothing (even though I do find these stories much more fascinating and enchanting): “**The earth was bare. Brahma set to work. He created grass, flowers, trees and plants of all kinds. To these he gave feeling. Next he created the animals and the insects to live on the land. He made birds to fly in the air and many fish to swim in the sea. To all these creatures, he gave the senses of touch and smell. He gave them power to see, hear and move.**” “...Then was neither non-existence nor existence: There was no realm of air, no sky beyond it. What covered it, and where? And what gave shelter? Was there, an unfathomed depth of water? Death was not then, nor was there anything immortal: no sign was there, the Day's and Night's divider. That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever. Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness this All was indiscriminate chaos. All that existed then was void and formless: by the great power of Warmth was born that One. Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning, Desire, the primal seed and germ of Spirit. Sages who searched with

their heart's thought discovered the kinship of existence with non-existence.

Transversely [across the universe] was their [dividing line](#) extended: what was above it then and what below it? There were begetters; there were mighty forces, free action here and energy up yonder. [Who](#) verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation? The Gods are [later](#) than this world's production. Who knows then whence it first came into being?"

“He the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it, whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows it [not](#).” (Ralph T.H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rg Veda*).

Or like this: “naiveha kimcanagra asit mrtyuna vedam avrtam asit, asanayaya, asamaya hi mrtyuh; tan mano' kuruta, atmanvi syam iti. So'rcann acarat, tasyarcata. apo' jayanta arcate vai me kam abhud iti; tad evarkasya arkatvam; kam ha va asmai bhavati, ya evam etad arkasya arkatvam Veda.” Originally, there was nothing. Death was enveloping everything. That is all the meaning, literally, of this sentence. In the beginning of things, what was there? Nothing was there. There was a devouring, all-consuming death-principle, as it were; nothing else can we conceive. In the Veda, also, there is this very same point reflected in the Nasadiya Sukta, which proclaims that, in the beginning, there was neither existence, nor non-existence.” Compare this with the scientific theory of Big Bang!

OK. The Ten Commandments. Why now? Because Religion...:

✚ ...Also consists of value *statements, morals, ethics, ideologies, ontological statements on reality as well as metareality*, and so on and so forth. I came to realize the possible content of this on two different levels. i) During my first years in India I was constantly asked: “And what religion do you have...?” And my answers that I don't have any religion always seemed to trigger some kind of unexpected reactions. Some people looked extremely surprised. Others looked *even more* surprised. And some people looked bloody *disturbed* and even *scared*. And naturally my question, being born in an individualistically oriented “secularized” society in modernity and post-modernity, was: “*Why?*” Why I am not allowed to a non-believing belief? Finally I expressed my frustration to a good friend of mine in Mumbai, and he – shaking his head in disbelief – said: “Well, dear brother, you, of all people, claiming to be a social

scientist especially interested in transcultural sensitivity, should actually understand that these questions do not refer to, or even imply, anything about God, Allah, Jahve, It...What they actually ask you is: "What values do you have? What is good and what is bad? Which are your morals, your ethics, your behaviour, your...yes, even eating habits?" And I say: Well, I don't have any! Hence, in terms of their reactions, no wonder! And ii) after having started to study Hinduism I realized many things. The first 20 books gave me a kind of understanding that Hinduism can be interpreted in 20 different ways. But there was actually one thing that – apart from everything else – struck me. In all of these disparate texts there was at least one thing they could agree upon. One thing that I couldn't understand at first. You can be a Hindu and an Atheist. At the same time. (And now, with my new Muslim family I also realize that you can be a Muslim and an Atheist. At the same time). Why didn't I understand? Well, it is so obvious now that religions are so much more than a simple question of creationism or evolutionism! Religions all over the world decide (whether you like it or not) your pattern of life and, "yes, even /your/ eating habits. And – finally – The 10 Commandments:

"And God spoke all these words, saying,

I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

¹ Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

² Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

³ Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

⁴ Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

⁵ Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

⁶ Thou shalt not kill.

⁷ Thou shalt not commit adultery.

⁸ Thou shalt not steal...

⁹. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

¹⁰. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or any thing that is thy neighbour's..."

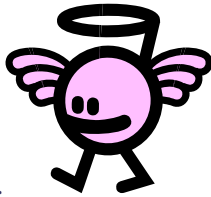
Now, I am quite sure that all of my learned readers will notice the "strange" resemblance, yes, even *correlation*, between these values, these morals, these ethics, these bidding rules and those of e.g. Islam and/or Hinduism. It is also a stated fact that all religions have all the answers also to these kinds of commitments. Take e.g. "Thou shalt not kill." Actually this is prevalent in all religions and in the same way. Do not kill (unless, and by the way; if it is not absolutely necessary!). Hence you are totally covered, whatever you do, and hence you can go to war with the Bible or the Quran in one hand, and a Kalashnikov (or so...) in the other hand. Hence religion and the immanent, implicit, and now and then explicit, kinds of values, norms, etcetera, can be used by i) power holders to legitimize power, by ii) powerless people to try to gain, or come back to power, and iii) by single individuals and/or groups/communities as some kind of comfort in a turbulent and chaotic world. And this also gives me the opportunity to turn back to Lord Ganesha!



There are many different stories about him, but my favourite one is the story about the mango. It is said that Parvati and Shiva – his mother and father – once approached Ganesha and his brother. Ganesha is of course big and bulky with an elephant's head, and his brother is a slim and fast young man. They came to these two sons of theirs and showed them a mango fruit telling them that this very fruit is holy and we want to give it to you. However it is not possible to divide it into two halves. Hence we have decided that you should compete – we want you to take a race. Take a turn around the universe, and he who returns first to this place, to us, will receive this holy mango. And Ganesha's brother immediately started running. But our Lord Ganesha pondered for some

time, and then he nicely and slowly took a walk around his mother and father. *And then they gave him the holy mango.* Why? Well, isn't this a most beautiful story about the most important concept in a collectively oriented society/community, family? Family=Universe! OK? You get the point? Religions are, in this sense, extremely useful, and furthermore they, in case you cannot find what you want, you can always turn to different kinds of interpretations (like e.g. the apocryphal scriptures or the hadith). Anyway, religions also are:

- ✚ ...*Social order.* All religions have profound and explicit “legitimizational” contents. I have, e.g., myself heard Swedish priests stating from the pulpit that: “All powers come from God. God is giving power to those who deserve it...And you should always, hence, obey all power holders.” And I can still hear this in the mosque. In the synagogue. But not in the temple of Hinduism! However, the priests, swamis, gurus, pundits, nevertheless and without any doubt tell you who to obey, and how. Maybe not in the temple, but definitely outside accompanied by some delicious masala chai! Repression – whether you talk in terms of ideological/internal repression or naked, brutal, external violence – seems to have a natural coexistence with our religions.
- ✚ ...*Social coherence.* All religions seem to have a profound and basic ontology which eventually will enhance and strengthen – if you like – the social structures of a(ny) community. Social coherence has the implications that there is a possibility to show your – as it were – belonging to a community, and hence becoming ostentation ally included. And to be included is, by all means, the *most* important social, as well as cultural, belonging. Without it you may very well be excluded – which in its turn is totally devastating! When I come to some of my former communities in Mumbai or Pune, I can very easily tell my entire communities about my arrival just by visiting the nearby temple – and after maybe two to three hours everybody will know: “OK, baba Arjun has come home again!” And now, coming to Dhaka, or rather Comilla, I only need to come to the nearby mosque to let everybody know that: “OK, now that pink Imam is here again!” *And I am included.* Now, let me tell you a story. My former brother-in-law was married to a woman from USA. After having lived in Jeddah they moved (after some time in Sweden) to her family in US. This family was living in Louisiana and they were very much involved in the oil-business. Once he called me and said that he was extremely frustrated about his family. He said something like this: “I am so upset about my relatives here in US. I mean they spend six days of the week in terms of exploitation and ... well, you know, and then, on the 7th day they all meet in the Methodist church to clean their sins, to become “sinless”. I have (he said) decided not to join them, and they seem to really hate me because of that. Why? What's wrong with these people? And I told him that they actually, probably, didn't come to church for any other reason than what I have already said about social coherence. Your family – I said – most probably come to church to show, *not* any religious compatibility to the community, but rather to show that: Here we are! We belong to you – And you belong to us – We belong to each other. *We belong and we are parts of the same community!*” He decided not to believe me and six months later he came back to Sweden. His decision not to come to church was considered as – not so very much non-religious as a *definite decision not to want to be a member of the community!* He was, hence, excluded. Nobody talked to him and eventually he couldn't even buy groceries since the *entire* community, and not only his family, excluded him. He came back to Sweden. Alone. Excluded.



... Religion is also *rituals, symbols, and/or ritualistic behaviour*. And if we can make it totally (?) clear (?) that all religions have some very vital and substantial issues in common, we can also state that when it comes to also *rituals, symbols, and/or ritualistic behaviour* we will find that i) all religions have rituals, and ii) these rituals differ from each other. The rituals/symbols are excluding. Whenever I enter a – e.g. – temple, church, mosque, synagogue...I will find myself somewhat alienated/reified unless I haven't been socialised into the ritualistic behaviour and hence haven't internalised any of it. I know that Muslims kneel



and put their heads to the ground (but in one sense I do not know why...), I know that Christians – especially Catholics – have lots of symbolic behaviour as well as symbols (but in one sense I do not know



why...) I know that Jews have lots of ceremonies and rituals that I – in one sense – do not understand. And I know that Catholics have lots



of ceremonies - which I also – in a sense - do not comprehend. And another thing is quite obvious in the explicit symbols of all religions. And that we can carry these symbols to make it i) obvious to our friends that we belong, and ii) obvious to our foes that they do not! And we can also make our surroundings quite confused by using symbols which give a double or even triple message! I have myself, e.g., been travelling in India with Muslim clothes, a Hindu necklace and a Jewish cap, and hence been asked: Who are you? I have personally answered that I am a Neo-Ghandian (you know, “I am a muslim, I am a catholic, I am a hindu...”). If

I, furthermore, greet someone in e.g. Bangladesh with salaam aleikum, someone in e.g. India with namaste, someone in Israel with shalom, someone... Well, I think you – again get the point!

✚ ...And finally, religion is also traditions/traditional habits. It is a fact that in e.g. Sweden, which is considered to be a most secularised country, we still marry in church in front of a Christian congregation, promising to God that nothing will ever divide us but death. (Regardless the very fact that out of all marriages some 50% will end in a divorce). We also baptise our children (and seem to believe that we in that ceremony give the child a name – yes, we actually seem to believe that it is a name-giving ceremony) and hence we have totally forgotten that baptism is a holy ceremony in order to introduce the new born into the Christian community. And so on and so forth. Anything else? Well, let it be like this for some time and let me now turn to my sociological fathers – Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, as well as to e.g. Indian sociologists such as Ghurye and Srinivas – in order to through history and present try to look ahead. We need e.g. to look into the concept of fundamentalism, feudalism, capitalism, socialism...etcetera.

✚ However! Religion is basic parts of our common societies. I do believe that my eager ☺ readers have at this point realised that this writer seems to be a pronounced religiously inclined scientist. *Nothing could be more wrong!* I want, however, to make it very much clear that religion *per se* can be looked upon as a coin, and that a coin normally always has two sides. I have in this introductory introduction to a chapter in terms of religions in my coming book about sociology and social psychology, tried to come to terms with the *good* sides of religion. *Because, whatever we say, they are actually there.* So what about the *bad* sides? Well, suffice it to say, just now, that the bad sides seem to be stupidly as well as overwhelmingly, the global/universal opinion. Especially in terms of Islam. And I want it to be quite clear that I am *neither* Hindu, *nor* a Christian, *nor* a Muslim, but *basically* a social scientist especially interested in social (historical, cultural...) backgrounds of religion. I truly believe in the 19th century philosophers like above all Karl Marx (and e.g. Feuerbach), even though I, as indicated above, also as it were, listen to e.g. Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, and his firm statement that religions – whenever and wherever – are historical, cultural as well as social constructions. This is the metamorphoses of God. God as made by humans. And not the other way around. It is also a vulnerable fact that many of our so called religious groups – who incidentally seem to know absolutely nothing of their religion,¹ also claim that the rest of us are ignorant and even arrogant. Have you, by the way, talked to JMB in Bangladesh? It is exactly the same. They do not know even half of what you and me know about Islam – Well, as this seems to be the fact I find it next to impossible to talk to the so called religious groups. I was once standing on a hillside in Maharashtra together with some revolutionary friends. We were looking down when the clouds diminished and the sun gave us some warmth, and we were saying; is this the world that we want to give to our children? Is this the world that we look forward to? Is this the world?

And we were crying.

Anders Jonsson (andersji2001@yahoo.com or anders.jonsson@sam.oru.se)

¹ Please look at e.g. Shiva Sena in Mumbai. I have been discussing Hinduism with some of these idiots and found that they know – to put it bluntly – *zilch* about Hinduism – though they claim to be the only ones!