

# Hindu Religious Traditions and the Concept of 'Religion'

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1996 GONDA LECTURE

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## HINDU RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND THE CONCEPT OF 'RELIGION'

The Jan Gonda memorial lecture is a welcome opportunity to offer a tribute to this great scholar whose vast erudition and insight is manifest in numerous publications covering a large variety of subjects in Indian studies. In my view, the main merit of his contribution lies in the field of Indian religious history in general and in the history of Indian religious ideas and concepts in particular. It is, therefore, his favorite domain of study — Indian religion — that I am taking up today.

Two of the three volumes dedicated to India in the famous 36-volume-series "Die Religionen der Menschheit"<sup>1</sup> were written by Jan Gonda. Today,<sup>2</sup> 36 years after the publication of the first volume by the Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart, this is still the standard work on Indian religions. Although research has advanced considerably in the intervening period — and Jan Gonda himself has added a good share to it — this work continues to be indispensable, due to the wealth of information it contains.

Jan Gonda's detail-loaded presentation covers roughly 3000 years from the initial stages of canonization of Vedic texts to modern post-independence India as represented by figures like Śrī Aurobindo and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. He divided this enormous span of time into three sections, which he saw as linked together by a continuous stream of tradition: The Veda, spanning the period from the Āryan immigration to, roughly, 600 BC; Early (or older) Hinduism represented mainly by the epic Hinduism and ending around 400 AD, when the Gupta empire had reached the peak of its power; and Later (or younger) Hinduism covering the period from 400 AD to the present. The 3rd volume of

<sup>1</sup> Jan Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens: 1 Veda und älterer Hinduismus; 11 Der jüngere Hinduismus* (*Die Religionen der Menschheit*, vols. 11, 12) Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1960, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Friday November 1st, 1996.

'Die Religionen Indiens' adds Buddhism, Jainism and tribal religions<sup>3</sup> to the overwhelmingly dominant Veda-Hinduism-continuum.<sup>4</sup>

This total of Indian religions has become part of Western general knowledge. Every child in school, if at all informed about the non-Christian religions, knows at least Hinduism and Buddhism. In world statistics of religion, Hinduism ranks third after Christianity and Islam according to the number of its followers. The sheer numbers lend weight to it and the Hindu diaspora is now distributed across all continents.

Yet there is a misleading factor in this picture. Hinduism is not a religion in the same sense as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, or Buddhism, Jainism, Daoism or Shintoism are. Hinduism is an entity which contains within itself a set of several distinct religions having different theologies, and among these even several monotheisms, each of which has its own set of holy scriptures and each addressing a different highest god. In addition to these there are, within Hinduism, elaborate polytheistic, pantheistic and monistic systems. If there is sense in applying the same term only to comparable entities, we have to revise our views about Hinduism as a religion, we have to revise all schoolbooks and statistics and, more importantly, we have to reconsider our inherited preconceptions.

Jan Gonda was aware of this fact, but at the time of publication of "Die Religionen Indiens" he did not yet dare to say it. It does not show in the title nor in the subtitles or in the major generalizing passages of his great work. Instead, Hinduism appears as a continuation of Vedic polytheism with the difference that Indra and his companion gods gradually lose their dominant position while other Vedic gods like Viṣṇu and Rudra gain prominence, along with some popular folk deities and goddesses. Only towards the end of the first volume, hidden away in a brief sentence on page 342 (which I myself did not notice until recently) he admits: "Der Hinduismus ist nicht eine Religion, sondern stellt die ganze Kultur Indiens etwa der letzten zwanzig Jahrhunderte dar." (Hinduism is not a religion but rather represents the entire culture of India during approximately the last twenty centuries.)

<sup>3</sup> Die Religionen Indiens: III Buddhismus, Jinismus, Primitivvölker von André Bareau, Walther Schubring, Christoph v. Fürer-Haimendorf, (Die Religionen der Menschheit vol. 13), Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Indian scholars of the late 19th and of the 20th century — and some Western authors too — would include the Veda in Hinduism and make it one single religion: the 'eternal' religion (*sanātana dharma*).



In this sentence he was right, and he was probably the first to say so. Hinduism is, indeed, a culture, a highly productive one which has given rise to a number of religions.

Ten years later, in 1970 when Gonda published *Viṣṇuism and Śivaism, a Comparison*<sup>5</sup> he was ready to treat these two as separate religions. As early as that time he would certainly have agreed that there were other religions too. The Vedic religion continued to exist, though on a lesser scale. The Sauras and Kaumāras were followers of highly influential religions which enjoyed royal protection for many centuries before they were absorbed by Viṣṇuism and Śivaism respectively.<sup>6</sup> The same is true for cults of Southern India like that of Murukan. Aiyānār, Khandobā, Viṭṭhala etc., to mention only a few out of many, may have been independent deities as well.

An opposite development took place when the elephant-headed god Gaṇapati and, more prominently, the Great Goddess broke away from Śivaism and established a religious identity of their own.<sup>7</sup> It was regional and relatively restricted in the case of Gaṇapati, whereas the independent Goddess, in later Śāktism, gained more and more ground and continues to do so to the present day.

Nor should we forget Advaita Vedānta and Smārta religion. The former, a strictly monistic, non-theistic system with a soteriological character, appealed to

<sup>5</sup> London: The Athlone Press 1970

<sup>6</sup> The war god Kumāra/Skanda was included in the Śaiva religion by declaring him to be a son of Śiva. The cult of the sun god S'rya was partly absorbed by Viṣṇuism and partly by Śivaism. See H. v. Stietencron: Indische Sonnenpriester. Sāmba und die Śākadvīpiya Brāhmaṇa. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1966.

<sup>7</sup> The rise of Gaṇapati or Gaṇeśa to the position of Highest Deity in the Deccan in the late medieval period is documented in Gaṇeśapurāṇa (Poona 1876 and Bombay 1892), Mudgalapurāṇa (Nirṇayasāgar Press Bombay 1976) and several late Upaniṣads. Available in English translation by G. Bailey is Gaṇeśapurāṇa Part 1: Upāsanākhaṇa, (Purāṇa Research Publications, Tübingen, vol. 4, Part 1) Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1995. See also P. B. Courtright, Gaṇeśa, Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings, New York 1985 and his article on the Gāṇapatyas in M. Eliade, Encyclopedia of Religion vol. 5, pp. 481–482, New York 1987. In Northern and Central India a similar development is evident for Hanumān whose worship detaches itself from that of Rāma in the late medieval period without production of new sacred scriptures. For the Devī this development is better known and need not be documented here.

an influential elite by its high degree of abstraction and by referring to the ultimate oneness of all existence. Derived from Upaniṣadic thought and aimed at keeping Buddhism at bay, Advaita Vedānta received its classical formulation with Śāṅkara (7.–8. cent.?). It gained royal support and a strong institutional basis at the time of the Vijayanagar empire (14th–16th century).

The Smārtas, later used as a general term for Advaitins,<sup>8</sup> were initially priests in the service of the nobility. Whatever the religious trends of the time, they continued to see their main task in the preservation of social order and duty (*dharma*) as laid down in Sūtra and Smṛti literature and popularized by the great Epic Mahābhārata and several Purāṇas. Successfully they defended the hierarchically ordered social setup against egalitarian impulses of the rising theistic religions, stabilizing middle-class and upper-class society by the traditional life-long series of sacraments for each individual and by prescriptions of proper conduct for each social class and stage of life. Many of them were Advaitins by conviction, but not all of them belonged to a monastic order. They were less ascetic in their practice and more in touch with ordinary people whose theistic faiths were accepted by the Smārtas as a possible, though inferior approach. While relegating all the gods to a lower level of existence, on that level they made use of them for a popular syncretism mostly under Śaiva dominance.<sup>9</sup> By selecting the five most important deities<sup>10</sup> for worship in a

<sup>8</sup> The Smārta tradition requires further exploration. For Northern India see V. S. Pathak, *Smārta Religious Tradition* (being a study of the epigraphic data on the Smārta religious tradition of Northern India, c. 600 A.D. to c. 1200 A.D.). Meerut: Kusumāñjali Prakāśan, 1987. For Southern India see Yoshitsugu Sawai, *The Faith of Ascetics and Lay Smārtas. A Study of the Śāṅkaran Tradition of Śṛṅgeri* (Publications of the De Nobili Research Library vol. xix) Vienna/Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1992.

<sup>9</sup> The Śaiva Smārtas, characterized by a horizontal *tripuṇḍra* on their forehead, consider Śiva as the most powerful mediator between the individual and *parabrahman*. Smārtas of Vaiṣṇava affiliation, wearing *ūrdhvaṇḍra* on their forehead and worshipping only Vishnu (*kevalaviṣṇupūjaka*) do not normally serve in *pañcāyatana* Śiva temples but interpret Nārāyaṇa as *parabrahman*.

<sup>10</sup> These were in the late Gupta and post-Gupta period Śiva, Viṣṇu, Durgā, Sūrya, and Gaṇeśa. For the purpose of offering independent worship to each of these deities in a common temple complex, the *pañcāyatana* type of temples was developed. For early specimens see Odette Viennot, *Temples de l'Inde centrale et occidentale. Etude stylistique et essai de chronologie relative du 6ème au milieu du 10ème siècle*. 2 vols., Paris: Ecole Française d' Extrême Orient 1976.

common temple compound, with the god of the royal patron usually in the center, they pleased the king and greatly facilitated his duty to maintain religious peace and protect all religions. This was a religion expressly designed for those who were not yet able to grasp the ultimate truth. It was also a splendid source of income and power, for the Smārtas acted as the supervisors of these temple complexes and often as religious advisors of the king.

In a sense, this Smārta effort was an early attempt at unifying the various Hindu religions under the umbrella of *Advaita Vedānta*. After several centuries of prosperity, the Smārtas had to suffer a setback when the *bhakti* movements swept across India, reasserting the exclusiveness of monotheistic devotion and the necessity of divine grace for ultimate liberation. Nevertheless, the Smārta religion is still present in India today.

Yet another religious development is constituted by the *nirguṇa-bhakti* and *satnāmī* religions, which combined an intensely devotional approach of the *bhakti* type with an abstract, formless concept of the divine and integrated some elements from the mystic tradition of Sufi Islam as well. The Sikhs represent the most well-known of these religions; but there are a number of others, all attracting large numbers of devotees in a relationship where a line of *sants* or *gurus* act as a mediator between the limited individual and the unlimited universal power.

Finally, there are some religious movements of the 19th century that established themselves as independent religious communities, notably the Brāhma Samāj, the Ārya Samāj and the Rādhāsvāmī Satsang.<sup>11</sup>

While all of these were literate religions with sacred scriptures or decisive interpretations of their own, all the while there was so-called folk religion and tribal religion, not only in proximity but also in a give-and-take relation with these religions. Since both these labels for popular religiosity tend to conceal the

<sup>11</sup> Brāhma Samāj (founded 1828 by Rām Mohan Roy) and Ārya Samāj (founded 1875 by Dayānanda Sarasvatī) were originally genuine reform movements reacting to Western critique of Hindu idolatry and social injustice. Their aim was to regain self-respect in religious matters as well as national independence. In contrast, the Rādhāsvāmī satsang, (founded 1861 by Śivadayāl Singh) proclaimed a new path to salvation for all people on earth and declared its three first 'true leaders', or *satgurus*, to be incarnations of the all-pervading god Kṛṣṇa.

extraordinary variety of beliefs and practices that vary from region to region, are often purely locality-based and all the same can attract huge crowds during seasonal or annual festivals, the number of co-existing religions increases even more.<sup>12</sup> With the exception of tribal religions, all of them have been considered sects of Hinduism; it is time to study them as separate religions that all form part of Hindu culture.

### *The creation of Hinduism*

How, then, could the notion of Hinduism arise and persist? Looking back in history, we can discern at least three factors that contributed to creating the Western invention of Hinduism as a religion. Two of them predated the coining of the term 'Hinduism', one even predated Europeans' first physical contact with India after the time of Alexander.

The latter factor consisted in a preconceived notion common to all missionaries, whether Catholic or Protestant, who reached India from the late 15th century onwards. It probably was the commonplace also of the traders and, possibly, the more educated among the sailors and soldiers, all of whom were in contact with the men of the Church.

This was the notion of being the Lord's chosen people — no longer the Jews, but the Christians, who were fortunate in having recognized His own Son and followed Him — and it related to the deplorable state of religion in this world which necessitated crusades and missionary zeal. It was inherited from medieval attempts at sketching a universal history.

According to this concept, the population of the world was divided into the followers of no more than four religions (*leges*). Three of them were the three monotheisms derived from the faith of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The fourth religion was that of the peoples without revelation, the *gentes*

<sup>12</sup> Research in these religions has been intensified by G.-D. Sontheimer, David Shulman, Heidrun Brückner and several scholars in Social Anthropology. For recent examples see Heidrun Brückner, *Fürstliche Feste: Texte und Rituale der Tulu-Volksreligion an der Westküste Südindiens*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1995; Cornelia Mallebrein, *Die anderen Götter. Volks- und Stammesbronzen aus Indien*, Köln: Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum 1993.

or *pagani* who were ruled by Satan and — after successful extinction of Roman and Greek paganism — lived in the rest of the world on the margins of civilization.

In the period of sea-borne trade, those margins of civilization proved to be larger than expected. They consisted of hundreds of islands and some huge continents full of people. The children of Satan were many and they dangerously surrounded Christianity and the other monotheisms in the East, West and South.

If their superstitious beliefs appeared to be different in various corners of the world, as was soon detected, this did not change the concept of the four religions. Satan was capable of many lies and the bewildering multiformity formed part of his diabolic plan to cause utter confusion in the minds of the misguided heathens.

The general term for these heathen was lat. *gentiles*, and in order to distinguish between them at least geographically, they were treated as sects according to major geographical units. As late as 1711 when Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg wrote on the heathen of the Malabar coast of India, he treated the natives of America, Africa and East India as members of three different sects of the same religion.<sup>13</sup>

Relevant for the Western preconception of native Indian religious thoughts and practices is, therefore, the notion that whatever the differences observed, they cannot be but part of *one* Religion. The concept of four world religions excluded *a priori* any other possibility.

The second factor comes from the Muslim administration, many elements of which were taken over by the British during Company rule. The Muslims had made a tax-relevant distinction between themselves and Hindus, i.e., native Indians of various creeds<sup>14</sup> who had not converted to Islam: The Hindus, as

<sup>13</sup> Ziegenbalg's *Malabarisches Heidentum*, Herausgegeben und mit Indices versehen von W. Caland (Verhandelingen der koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, Aft. Letterk., Nieuwe Reeks, Deel xxv, No 3) Amsterdam 1926. Compare also "De Open-Deure tot het verborgen Heydendom" by the Dutch Calvinist missionary Abraham Roger (died 1649), published in Leiden 1651 and Phillippus Baldaeus' *Afgoderey der oost-indische Heydenen*, Amsterdam 1672.

<sup>14</sup> That the Muslims did notice the variety of belief systems among their Hindu (i.e., Indian) subjects is evident from the account of scholars like Abū l-Qāsim, Mas'ūdī, al-Bīrūnī, Idrīsī and Shahrastānī. See Lawrence Bruce, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, The Hague: Mouton 1976.

non-believers, had to pay additional taxes such as the head-tax and pilgrim's tax in return for protection (except for brief periods of greater tolerance).<sup>15</sup> For the British, this combination with a religiously-defined tax established a religious connotation of the term Hindu, and this served to support their own preconceived notion.<sup>16</sup>

A third factor may be seen in the role of Advaita Vedānta in the 19th century. While the missionaries preached against idolatry, widow-burning and sexually depraved religious practices of the Tāntrics, and Western scholars deplored the degeneration from pure Vedic religion to Purāṇic religion with its tropical growth of sectarian superstitions, there was Advaita Vedānta, which remained unassaulted. Seen as a continuation of Upanishadic thought, it was highly appreciated in the West, the support of which further strengthened its position in India itself. It relegated plurality and difference to the realm of ignorance and stressed the ultimate unity, not only of Indian religions, but of spirituality worldwide.

Towards the end of the century, in 1893 at the world parliament of religions in Chicago, the Vedāntin Svāmī Vivekānanda made a first impressive plea for living Indian spirituality as a healing power against the world's materialist afflictions. His staggering success in the West was widely circulated news in India and inspired his fellow Indians with a new sense of self-assurance. Vivekānanda's personal plea for radical social reform met with sustained resistance in India and failed to spread much beyond the establishments of his Ramakrishna Mission. But indirectly, the integrating spirit of Advaita Vedānta contributed substantially to inspire the Hindu nationalist movement in the 19th and 20th century.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In 1562 the Mughal emperor Akbar marries the daughter of the rajput *rājā* Bihārī Mal of Amber. This is followed in 1563 by the abolition of the pilgrim's tax and 1564 also of the head tax. Both taxes were again levied by his successors.

<sup>16</sup> For more detail see H. v. Stietencron, *Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term*. In: G. D. Sontheimer/H.Kulke (eds.), *Hinduism Reconsidered*. Delhi: Manohar 1989, p. 11–27.

<sup>17</sup> Research on Vivekānanda has gained momentum after the publication of his collected correspondence with friends and devotees in the West. See Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*. Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, n.d.; Rajgopal Chattopadhyaya, *Swami Vivekananda in the West*, Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1994.



These three factors served first to create and then to uphold the idea of a common Indian religion. Its basic concept and its name Hinduism were both Western inventions. But there were Muslim and Hindu components to strengthen it and there was notably the nationalist movement which was to make Hinduism a powerful instrument for national unity. If the West invented this religion, it was the anglicized urban intelligentsia of India that adopted it quickly and made it an instrument in their struggle for independence, reconfirming the Western perception.

For the historian of religions, this sequence of events is no excuse. When taken as a religion, Hinduism has been misjudged not only by the Churches, but also by the scholars.

### *What is religion?*

Religion in the present sense of the term is of relatively recent origin.<sup>18</sup> It received its final shape only in the period of Enlightenment in the 18th century. In early Christianity *religio* was one of the human virtues: the attitude of awe or full attention before God. Since it was enumerated together with *cultus* and *pietas*, these two important complexes of ritual practice and personal piety and devotion did not belong to it. Obviously it covered only a small fragment of what religion has come to mean today.

The most common term for Biblical religion up to the Enlightenment period was *fides*: faith, i.e., faith in God, faith in Christ, faith in revelation, in the gospels and in the Church. Other religions were aggressively referred to as *superstitio*. If more neutral terms were needed, *secta* could be used for the followers of pagan movements and *lex* for those of revealed sacred scripture. One could speak of *lex judaica*, *lex christiana* and *lex mahometana*.

<sup>18</sup> For detailed discussion and further bibliography see H. v. Stietencron, *Der Begriff der Religion in der Religionswissenschaft*. In: W. Kerber *Der Begriff der Religion*. Ein Symposium. München 1993, pp. 111–158. See also Ernst Feil et al.: *Zur Bestimmungs- und Abgrenzungproblematik von "Religion"*. In: *Ethik und Sozialwissenschaften. Streitforum für Erziehungskultur*, Nr. 6, (1995) Heft 4.

The word *religio* gradually found its way to prominence from the 15th century onwards, notably in the 16th and 17th century when, with the spread of rationalism and deism, *religio* acquired a different meaning.

To my knowledge it was Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464) who started giving this word a different connotation. Under the impression caused by the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the massacre that ensued, he wrote his controversial essay “*De pace fidei*” where, contrary to the spirit of the Crusades, he advocated peace. What is noteworthy is the line of argument: Both Christians and Muslims stand with awe before their god. In this regard they have something in common, namely *religio*. He even uses *religio* to denote both the Christian and Islamic faiths.<sup>19</sup> This is a new tone in thinking about Islam. Normally the term *lex* would have been used, a term that stresses difference since the two religions have different revelations and therefore different ‘laws’.

This clue is taken up by Marsilio Ficino when he chooses the title “*De christiana religione*” for a treatise written in 1474; and it is followed up further when, with spreading rationalism in the 16th and 17th century, attention is more and more directed to what is common in the different faiths.

Meanwhile, primitive or pagan belief systems had come into the picture. And since *lex* and *fides* were too directly linked with sacred scripture, a new term was required to accommodate these belief systems. The choice fell on *religio*. It now came to refer to a universal property of man: to the fear of God in general and to the resulting relation of man to God, which includes sacrifice, prayer, dance and song of praise, etc., as well as moral behavior, all of which came to be thought of as man’s inborn religious heritage by nature, independent of historical revelation. The idea of ‘natural religion’ started to become a challenge for the church.

This was an ideal basis for receiving and integrating all those accounts of pagan religions that started pouring in from various continents after the discovery of both the Americas and of the sea passage to India and Eastern Asia. In the early 17th century, the first important attempt was made by Herbert of Cherbury to retrieve the original essence of ‘natural religion’ from a comparison of these accounts with the revealed scriptures of the Jews,

<sup>19</sup> E. Feil, *Religio. Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs vom Frühchristentum bis zur Reformation*. Göttingen 1986.

Christians and Muslims.<sup>20</sup> The relevant change in this approach consisted in the fact that Herbert, for the first time, refrained from taking his own religious tradition, Christianity, as the only true religion, qualified to serve as a measuring rod against which the merits or demerits of all other religions could be assessed. Instead, he attempted to place all religions on the same basis by taking 'religion' as a neutral term untinged by personal preferences and unrestricted to the structures of the major religions known at the time. It took the remaining part of the century and some decades of the 18th to expand and clarify the new concept. By the middle of the 18th century, the term 'religion' had finally reached its present meaning. Sufficiently divested of specifically Christian notions, relatively open and undefined, it had become applicable universally to all sorts of religions.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, the knowledge of historical religions and religious phenomena has multiplied to such an extent that it becomes difficult to present a definition of religion suitable for all its historical forms. One can describe the historical religions as often complex and composite phenomena, closely interwoven with society and culture. They have cognitive, emotional and ritual elements; they have also aesthetic, literary, artistic, as well as economic, juridical, institutional and political dimensions. They have individual and social components and their functions are encountered on almost all levels of society.

This concept of religion has room for several main sectors that are interrelated, but not all of which are equally developed in all historical religions. We may broadly identify them as a sector of religious practice, a sector of metaphysical speculation, a sector of religious socialization, and a sector of religious institutions and organization.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert of Cherbury, *De veritate*. In this work Herbert arrives at the conclusion that there are basically five fundamental principles that are common to all religions: The belief in God, the duty to worship Him, a conduct of life in virtue and piety, repentance of sin, and the belief in retribution for good and evil actions after death. For the theological context see H. v. Stietencron, Voraussetzungen westlicher Hinduismusforschung und ihre Folgen. In: E. Müller (ed.) "... aus der anmuthigen Gelehrsamkeit". Tübinger Studien zum 18. Jahrhundert. Dietrich Geyer zum 60. Geburtstag. Tübingen: Attempto 1988, pp. 123-153, in particular pp. 134-138. Comp. also H. Scholz, Die Religionsphilosophie des Herbert von Cherbury, Giessen 1914.

<sup>21</sup> H. v. Stietencron, Der Begriff der Religion ... (see note 18) pp. 120f.

Of these, the first sector comprises all the human actions in confrontation with superhuman powers and deceased ancestors: All types of sacrifice and ritual procedure, of magic, prayer and other forms of devotion belong to it. It is this sector where religious specialization has its initial place.

Confrontation with unseen powers results in action, but also in speculation. Notions about the realm of the deceased ancestors, about the nature and the powers of superhuman beings, about cosmogony and cosmology, about the human soul and its fate — in short: the entirety of theology and anthropology is to be found in this sector, as well as the legitimization of social hierarchies that can be derived from them.

Closely related to the former two, the third sector is concerned with the preservation of authority and the transmission of sacred knowledge. Its main object is to integrate the next generations into a society that, by reciprocal demand of gifts, is linked to and dependent on deities or unseen superhuman powers and to the deceased ancestors. The *rites de passage*, the study of ritual skills and sacred tradition and the internalization of social laws of behavior belong to this sector.

These three sectors combine to produce that *coherent world view* and that *corporately shared belief system* which is essential for our term religion. They supply meaning to life in general, and they do so particularly in cases of incomprehensible affliction or calamity; they divert or channel fear and social aggression, they provide orientation and perspective in the ups and downs of a life which is invariably confronted with impending death.

The fourth sector evolves when specialization leads to formalized religious institutions. It then develops the organizational, economic and political aspects of religion — including the control of dogma inside the group and the relation to worldly power outside. All priestly offices and hierarchy as well as all temple organization and administration, also including its economy, its public presence in impressive religious architecture and much of the more sophisticated religious art belongs to this fourth section.

### *Hinduism fails to qualify as religion*

With this broadly outlined frame of the Western conception of religion in mind, let us now look once more at the Hindu religions. While each of them, singly,

qualifies to be called a religion, because each offers a coherent world view and covers all the sectors mentioned above, the whole of Hinduism does not. Neither a coherent world view nor a corporately shared belief system can be claimed for it.<sup>22</sup>

If we look at the same sectors of the religious phenomenon mentioned before and take the whole of Hinduism as the unit of which they form part, it turns out that we find decisive internal differences or inconsistencies in each of them. In ritual there are contradictory prescriptions for the rites of initiation, for the form of daily and occasional worship, for the objects to be offered in sacrifice and the ingredients and mantras to be used, and for the major festivals to be arranged.

On the level of theology there are markedly differing conceptions about the nature and manifestation of divine beings and about the ultimate reality or the character and name of the highest god. Accordingly, the cosmology and cosmogony differ, as well as the conception of the human soul. Its chances for liberation, the best path to reaching it, the goal to be attained, and the soul's condition in the state of liberation are all defined differently.

These differences are embodied in different sets of sacred scriptures. The ordinary Hindu devotee knows only those of his own religion; he normally ignores most, or all, of the sacred scriptures of other Hindu religions.

Moreover, in a multi-religious society, theology cannot avoid clarifying its stand in regard to the supreme deity of other religions. In this respect, the treatment varies from rejecting the god of others as an illusion, to accepting him as a mere servant, or as a devotee, or a functionary authorized for a certain task assigned to him, or — and this is the maximum concession — a partial aspect or temporary manifestation of one's own supreme God for a particular

<sup>22</sup> Differences are obvious where the sacrifice of buffaloes, goats or chicken is confronted with the prescription of *ahimsā* or non-violation of living beings; where continence (*brahmacarya*), abstinence from intoxicating drink and purity as necessary conditions for successful ritual meet with the prescribed practice of taking intoxicants and ritual copulation; and where people avoid contact with the religious practices of others for fear of pollution.

cosmogonic purpose. All passages claiming that Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva are actually the same belong to this last category.<sup>23</sup>

In the sector of socialization into the religious tradition, each of the Hindu religions has a different initiation (*dīkṣā*) and a different *guru-paramparā*, i.e., the lines of tradition from authorized teacher to initiated pupil are not the same. This is decisive, because it affects the legitimization for the reception, transmission and authoritative interpretation of sacred knowledge. They are mutually exclusive.

Finally, there remains the sector of religious institutions. They are by far less developed and less centralized in the Hindu religions than, for example, in the Christian church. But they exist in the form of different sets of spiritual hierarchies, (*gurus, jagatgurus, gosvāmīs, santis* etc.) and in the form of institutions such as temples, monasteries (*maṭha*), schools, pilgrims' resthouses, etc., pertaining to the different religions and each controlled by a governing body of local priests.

In view of all these differences, religious theory and practice in so-called Hinduism is not, and cannot be, consistent. But it is consistent in each one of the different Hindu religions. There is no code of religious behavior valid for all Hindus. Nor is there any authoritative scripture that guides them all in their social life pattern and spiritual aspirations. But both the code of behavior and the authoritative set of scriptures are available to the followers of each of the Hindu religions. It was our mistake not to see them as such.

### *Some epistemological considerations*

Let us now turn to some considerations regarding the equivalence of religious terminology. It has become common practice to apply the 18th century

<sup>23</sup> Known as *trimūrti*-concept, the cooperation of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva in the creation, preservation and destruction of the world as well as purāṇic passages identifying the three gods have been taken to show the unity of Hinduism. But the context shows in all cases, that all three are dependent on a higher god, that they are not immortal, that they are subject to *māyā* (illusion) and therefore bound to the cycle of rebirths (*saṃsāra*). They are to be distinguished from their homonyms Viṣṇu or Śiva as transcendental gods.



European term 'religion' to phenomena outside the European tradition and this was precisely what the term was meant for. But is one entitled to do so? Or, by doing so, is a concept imposed on the observed culture which is not germane to it?

Terms, as we all know, are products of the human mind. They have been coined in a specific cultural constellation and, most importantly, they depend on the structure of language and thought that governs that particular culture. Applying these terms to phenomena of another culture provides us with a reliable basis for communicating our observations of the 'Other' (foreign culture) to members of our own culture. So far, so good. But whether these perceptions correspond to what the members of the observed culture themselves perceive as their own cultural reality is not so sure.

This doubt, once expressed, poses a serious challenge not only to all attempts at inter-religious dialogue but also to all scholarly efforts to understand a foreign religion. It is only natural, therefore, to try and reject it, e.g., by pointing out that it is certainly legitimate to apply a term, although derived from one phenomenon, to all comparable phenomena. This procedure should be possible in cross-cultural analysis as well. After all, it is not the language-bound word that matters, but the concept it carries.

This is partly true. But unfortunately the situation is not as simple as that. It is not only words that are changed with the change of language; what changes is the shape of the perceived reality in our minds. Reality — i.e., reality as a mental construct (*Bewußtseinsinhalt*) — is divided by language into more or less small sections, each of which is named with a word. The dividing lines between these sections are marked by the transition from one word to another. Looking at this relation between reality and language from the side of language, one can say: each word refers to a relatively well-defined semantic area (which may be more precisely determined by the context). Whatever lies beyond it is covered by another word. The semantic areas of words can overlap. In the case of larger and more narrow terms they even have to overlap.

The problem is that the pattern of *how* reality is divided into semantic areas covered by words is not uniform for all mankind, but shows variations depending on language and culture. This is familiar to everyone who has tried to translate from one language to another and has had to struggle with the fact that direct equivalents are not always available. In these cases, the meaning is

changed whatever translation one chooses, sometimes only by a shade, sometimes even to a considerable degree.

This is not just a question of different linguistic conventions. We rather have to acknowledge that the human species, whose thinking operates predominantly with linguistic units and with images or image sequences, builds up both its outer world of objective reality and its inner world of experiences and emotions from fragments of perception, the size and form of which differ from culture to culture and from language to language. As a result, the perceived and experienced reality also differs. The world, then, exists in our mind as a composite image like a puzzle composed of many parts. These parts can have different sizes and forms in different cultures. The whole composed picture may be similar, but its elements are not.

Applied to our term 'religion', this means that, if there is no equivalent term in another culture, it is not only the word that is missing, but that particular entity 'religion' itself, as a consciously perceived phenomenon, does not exist — except among those who have learned to think in European terms. In Europe, too, we must remember, its final shape was a product of the Enlightenment and did not exist prior to the 18th century.

### *The meaning and range of terms*

If we are looking for an equivalent of our term 'religion' in Sanskrit, this language offers quite a number of terms, none of which fully corresponds to the term 'religion'. Only the most important ones may be mentioned here.

There are three terms commonly used for the cognitive aspect of religion: *mata* — the product of thought, the (theological or philosophical) system; *vāda* — the explication, teaching, or doctrine; and *darśana* — the world view, the (philosophical and theological) system. They reveal that our distinction between theology and philosophy is not universal. Philosophy, too, has a soteriological aspect in India. These three terms relate to our term 'religion' in the same manner as theology and philosophy do, i.e., their range of meaning is narrower than our term religion. Religious practice in *ritus*, *cultus* and personal piety is excluded, as well as all the creative elements of religious art in poetry, music,

dance, architecture, sculpture and painting. While the social aspects are partly included, the economic sector is not at all addressed by these terms.

The words *karma* or *kriyā* denote ritual action and action for public welfare motivated by religion. They include all aspects of prescribed religious action from home prayer to sacrifice, from meditation or ascetic self-mortification to public charity, and from cleaning the courtyard of a temple to building a new temple. They cover the aspect of practice in religion, the service, but do not include the theological aspects.

The term *mārga* — the path (to salvation) — stands for different means of access to heaven, or to self-perfection and final liberation. These paths offer easier or more difficult approaches to perfection meant for different people: long roads and shortcuts.<sup>24</sup> These different lines of access to transcendent realities exist side by side in the same religious system and are present in most of the other systems also. This shows that *mārga*, too, is a narrower term than 'religion'.

*śraddhā* — faith, trust or confidence (in a superhuman power or teaching) — is closely related to Latin *fides*. From the soteriological point of view it is an essential condition, but the external elements of religion are not addressed by this term.

An important term in our comparison is *sampradāya*. The literal translation would be 'tradition'. But the meaning in actual use comes very close to our term 'denomination'. It denotes a social group sharing the belief in a certain interpretation of religious doctrine that is accepted as authoritative and handed down by a line of authorized teachers. The *sampradāya* as a religious group has distinctly recognizable norms of religious conduct and practice. There may be different sects within a *sampradāya*, such as, e.g., the Teṅgalai and Vaḍagalai in the Sṛisampradāya of Viśiṣṭādvaita Viṣṇuism. And there may be several *sampradāyas* in one religion such as Śivaism or Viṣṇuism — if we take the belief

<sup>24</sup> It is characteristic of religions that each considers its own way to be the best. To accept other paths as possible, if longer, roads is already much. To see them as equally suited is rare, even in India, where personalities like Rāmakṛṣṇa or Gandhi have experimented with more than one religion.

in the same highest god and the reliance on the same sacred scriptures as an indication of underlying unity.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the standard translation usually offered by Indians for the term religion is *dharma*. This is a term that stresses the normative aspect of religion. It refers to the divine ordinances laid down, according to some, by the god Brahmā himself and codified by the primordial man Manu or various seers: all those commandments, duties, ritual and social obligations that are required for maintaining cosmic and social order as well as moral conduct. *Dharma* comprises the duties of human beings in society and towards the gods and ancestors, it determines the roles of men and women, the tasks and duties of all professions and social orders — and also the religious practice of the different religions. Each single religion has its *dharma*, but so does each denomination and each sect. And the entities can be further reduced in size to the duties of caste, of family, and of the individual person or even to a stage in his or her life — it is always the term *dharma* that is employed.

Beyond the human sphere, *dharma* operates in the respective realms of animals and plants and in the laws of nature. It is the *dharma* of plants to grow according to their species and to serve as food for other beings. Following their *dharma* the beasts of prey kill other animals and devour them. And it is the *dharma* of fire to burn, to cook food, to bring light and warmth to the houses at night, and to transform, in the sacrificial fire, the offerings of men and carry them to the gods. Obviously, the range of application of the term *dharma* is considerably broader than that of our term 'religion': It covers all the regulating and normative factors in nature and in society.

The example shows that a culture as highly developed as that of India draws the caesuras or boundaries of its conceptional entities differently than we do today. India does not, for example, separate 'religion' as something distinct from philosophy nor does it unite the cognitive, ritual, emotional and institutional

<sup>25</sup> This is not sure in all cases. Thus the followers of the *Śrīsampradāya* may be inclined to distance themselves from all the Vaiṣṇava *sampradāyas* that have Bālakṛṣṇa, Rādhākṛṣṇa or Rāma as the focus of worship.

aspects of religion under one term.<sup>26</sup> But it does possess in the word *dharma* a wider term uniting the established norms of behavior of all living creatures (and some laws of nature, too) in a concept that allows two equally important goals to be achieved: the contribution of each part of worldly existence to the continuation of the cosmic organism as a whole; and the realization of each soul's individual path from bondage to release. A corresponding concept did not arise in the West.<sup>27</sup>

### *Dimensions of perception*

What do we gain by saying that there are several religions in Hinduism if the Hindus themselves seem to see it differently? The first and most important advantage is that the same term (religion) is no more applied to entirely incompatible entities. This is a basic condition for every comparative study of religions. Methodological soundness and intellectual honesty call for it. Secondly, it removes misunderstandings. While Hinduism tended to be seen by Christian theologians as an incoherent, self-contradictory, logically untenable and even by its own standards morally deficient religious system, it now dissolves into a number of intellectually coherent, socially responsible religions with, in some cases, highly sophisticated theological propositions and with explicit and argued moral standards. It thus enables inter-religious dialogue to function more effectively. For the academic scholar, too, it makes it easier to comprehend the individual Indian religions, divided as they actually are in sects and subsects, in

<sup>26</sup> *Sampradāya* would be a near candidate, as we have seen. Another one is *āgama*. Both carry the meaning of "tradition". But while the former denotes the social context in which tradition is 'handed down' from authorized teacher to initiated pupil, the second refers to the tradition as sacred text and explaining commentaries, all of which may be transmitted orally or in written form. Religion as a human attitude in the presence of God is not expressed in these terms. Here *bhakti* would be the corresponding word. But this, in turn, does not cover the institutional and theological aspects of religion.

<sup>27</sup> Its two basic components, the *harmonia mundi* and the *purificatio animae*, are both present, but the more explicit separation of man from nature seems to have prevented a similar concept from taking form. The *ma'at* of ancient Egypt appears to be the closest parallel to the *dharma* concept or its predecessor, the Vedic *ṛta*.

terms of their internal endeavor to improve conceptualization of man and the world, of immanence and transcendence, of the meaning of life and the nature of the divine. Their historical development, their mutual competition, interaction and change can be focussed more clearly in this light and it becomes easier to appreciate their particular contribution to the Indian culture. Thirdly, it allows us to gain a different perspective when confronted with Hindu society and its relatively peaceful coexistence of different creeds. Historical parallels to this situation are found in the Hellenistic and Roman tradition but are largely missing in Christianity and Islam. In an atmosphere of accepted religious plurality, where intellectual competition exists but violent confrontations are rare and consequently the borderlines between religions not so jealously maintained, we find a number of processes that seem to open spaces for social and psychological interaction. Some of them may be mentioned here before once more returning to the perception of Hindu religious unity.

For about 2000 years, Indians have been able to experiment with a multi-religious setting.<sup>28</sup> In many cases, people could move from one religion to another; they were allowed to try the variety of tools for self-perfection that these religions offered. This situation has influenced the self-perception of religious communities and their understanding of the other religions. It was, for example, no problem to integrate these into the conceptual framework of transmigration and karma. In the same way as the plants, the various species of animals and the different castes among men offer spaces for incarnation on different levels of purity, so also do the different religions offer different spaces for self-purification on one's path to liberation. Of course, opinions on the hierarchy of religions differ because the followers of each religion believe themselves to be on the direct road to the highest goal. Other religions appear to be following a side track, leading their followers on a roundabout path or even astray. But this is of minor importance where reincarnation is an accepted perspective: there will be other chances coming. For the Christian who is used to reckoning with missionary zeal and religious confrontation it is important to

<sup>28</sup> The period envisaged here commences with Greek, Śaka and Kuṣāṇa rule in north-western India (from 1st cent. B.C.) and with the spread of non-Vedic popular religions and early bhakti theology.



note, in Hinduism, the presence of various interfaces between religions, where rigid structures dissolve and differences at times become irrelevant.

Contact between different forms of religion is possible, often even inevitable. In rural India, every person finds himself or herself placed in a local and regional context that is marked by a plurality of religious beliefs and also with a particular religious topography. The latter is usually characterized by a number of centers of gravity in which the manifestation of one or the other deity is believed to be particularly powerful.<sup>29</sup> Beyond this regional horizon, there is the all-India network of famous places of pilgrimage, each centering around a dominant deity. But since the notion of sacred space is dominant, they usually have an agglomeration of most of the other important cults as well.

Such a surrounding makes for an unavoidable presence of different belief systems — normally at least four: the local folk religion which reckons with a number of potentially dangerous deities, whose appeasement may be required for the sake of physical well-being; plus the Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, Śākta<sup>30</sup> and sometimes also Muslim, Jain or Christian religions, that all claim to be necessary for increasing spiritual benefit. The awareness of multiple choice for divine help is constantly given, although checked by a sense of belonging, in which caste and religious affiliation often — but not always — form a powerful unit.

In such surroundings, one cannot but develop a sensorium for polytheism, even if the teaching of one's own religion happens to be monotheistic. In fact, polytheism — and with it the existence of several gods and their cults — is rarely denied. What is denied by the brahman theologians of monotheistic or monistic religions is, that any of these gods can grant liberation from the cycle of rebirth. For that purpose, one has to be reborn into a family of the 'pure' religion, i.e., one's own religion — or to convert to it, which is less easy.

There are many other occasions when contact with religious experience or practice other than that of one's own tradition is almost inevitable. Major religious festivals often unite people irrespective of creed. Similarly, the social

<sup>29</sup> These need not be all marked by major temples. They may be places at the foot of a rock or a tree, or at a perennial source of water, where divine manifestation is considered particularly intensive.

<sup>30</sup> All split into different *sampradāyas* or denominations. In addition, there are in certain regions important cults like that of Gaṇapati, Murukan, Hanumān and others. The choice is further enriched by the Smārtas and a variety of *yogins*, *gurus* or *saṃnyāsins*.

setting itself influences religious understanding. Children growing up in a well-to-do upper-class urban or rural family will be exposed not only to the religious practices of their parents but also — and possibly more so — to those of their low-caste nurse and servants. In that ambience, it is the goddesses of fever, smallpox and other diseases who loom around the corner and have to be pacified, or those who protect against accidents on the roads and the loss of cattle. That the demarcating line between folk religion and scriptural religion is imprecise and fluctuating can best be seen in ritual practice, where all kinds of spirits have to be kept under control.

In this connection, it is also important to remember that marriage partners should be of the same caste but need not necessarily be of the same religion. In such a case, the wife, after marriage, is obliged to participate in the rituals of her husband and to change her food habits accordingly; but she is allowed to also maintain her own family's religious tradition. The family deity (*kula devatā*) and the god or goddess to whom one's personal devotion is addressed (*iṣṭa devatā*) need not be the same. This can lead to the presence of different deities in the home shrine. Once they are ritually installed there, they will normally not be removed by later generations.<sup>31</sup>

The resultant polytheism is, as mentioned before, accepted and included in the monotheistic systems. It belongs to a lower level of understanding but is considered of no harm. Higher knowledge becomes necessary when salvation is sought. On that level, polytheism disappears and only one deity remains to grant final liberation. This is important for understanding the dichotomy of unity and plurality of religions in India. The One is always the highest level of existence, the Many is its spreading out into the plurality of names and forms.

In practice, contact with other religions depends, apart from personal leanings, on creed, caste, education and regional factors. These account for variants in how the Hindus of different religious affiliation themselves feel about

<sup>31</sup> Home shrines can be a fascinating object of study, both in respect to the personal religious leanings of the owner and in regard to the history of religious syncretism on a micro level.

the unity or difference of their religious milieu. A Vaiṣṇava of the Vallabha- or Gauḍīya-*sampradāya*, as well as an orthodox Śaiva, for all of whom salvation depends on pure religious conduct and intensity of devotion, will rigorously insist on difference; whereas an Advaitin or Smārta will rather advocate unity because, in his eyes, the various religions are equally suited as a kind of preparatory school for self-purification, necessary for reaching the higher level of monistic knowledge.

But liberation, though a remote goal for everyone, is in this life an attainable aim only for the exceptional few. It is not a dominant perspective for most of the Hindus, a fact that contributes to reducing the importance of religious affiliation. What is hoped for is a future life in a higher social order and in better conditions, both material and spiritual. To possess riches or knowledge or both, and to give liberally, are the major sources of social prestige.

### *Modern Hindu self-perception*

There are two reasons for returning to the concept of Hindu unity: one has to do with developments in modern times, the other with the fascination of a mental experiment.

The awareness of historical developments in a variety of Hindu religions also sharpens the eye for changes that occurred in the 19th and 20th century. For two millennia preceding the middle of last century, the Indian subcontinent had been divided into clearly distinct regional kingdoms, languages and traditions. It was only after the emergence of British India and the beginnings of an Indian national movement, that an all-India Hindu identity gradually became an important issue. Efforts to forge a reformed Hindu religion that would stand comparison with Christianity, had already been made in the writings of Rājā Rām Mohan Roy and the foundation of the Brāhma Samāj (1828). They were now resumed by several reformers. We can observe that these movements were a phenomenon mainly of the upper urban middle class (often with access to British education and the results of Western oriental scholarship). They did not merge into one organization, but competed with each other for power in a political and administrative setup, where statistics could become relevant for assessing social importance, and where even campaigns for converting outcasts

were organized to increase membership.<sup>32</sup> It is also evident that, in rural India (still standing for 80 percent of the total population), the old religions continued to exist in traditional interaction with but little change. Nevertheless, the national movement, the loss of Islamic Pakistan and Bangladesh, the prolonged struggle for possession of Kashmir, and continuous propaganda for national unity throughout the mass media during the fifty years since independence, have succeeded in creating a new sense of Hindu identity, that is set off against Islam and has acquired a religious dimension.

Modern, self-assertive political Hinduism displays this change. Its ideological drive is towards consolidation in order to gain political strength. It therefore embraces all religions as being 'Hindu' that originated on Indian soil, Buddhism, Jainism and the Sikh religion included, even if these are hardly inclined to accept the proposal.<sup>33</sup> And it rejects Muslims, Parsees, Christians and Jews as being loyal to prophets born outside India, even though their ancestors may have lived in India for countless generations. The ideology of nationalism, imported from Europe and now instrumentalized for the purpose of creating a 'national' Hindu religion to the detriment of 'minorities', seems to be bringing about a change in the much praised Hindu religious tolerance. Of course, such centralist tendencies derive their appeal from the promise of social and political influence. But they also provoke opposition outside the center, where the prospect of the traditional religions losing their identity may arouse apprehension. This was the case with the Sikhs, and it may well be so with the traditional Hindu religions too, particularly in the South.

A different and intellectually more challenging kind of unifying perspective is posed by the above-mentioned Indian concept of *dharmā*. We have seen that the term has a much wider range of application than the term religion. Its peculiar lack of specificity allows for all kinds of valid norms and action in

<sup>32</sup> This policy, intensively practiced by the Ārya Samāj in response to Christian and Muslim conversion, was a prelude to the later race for an electorate among the numerically strong scheduled castes, today's Dalits, and other backward castes.

<sup>33</sup> This appropriation of related Indian religions was included in the Indian constitution and was one of the reasons for the Sikhs' struggle for amendment of the constitution and for an independent state of their own.

nature and society to be evoked by the same term, and this fact provides a chance for opening up a different perspective on religions.

An expression like 'Hindu dharma' does indeed refer to all Hindu religions, while at the same time not obliterating their differences, their internal subdivisions etc. However different the *dharma*s adopted as guideline for religious practice and social behavior among Hindus may be, they are all included in 'Hindu dharma'. The element 'Hindu', of Persian origin, was used by outsiders from Persia and Arabia to denote the *people* of India, not their religion. This is the basic sense still present in the word: the emphasis is more on *Indian* than on religion, although it now excludes the immigrated religious communities: the Muslims, Parsees, Christians, etc., who stressed their supposed cultural superiority by not applying the word Hindu to themselves.

For us, the particular interest in this use of *dharma* combined with the name of a major region lies in the holistic view it offers: a whole area with all its religious and cultural diversity in space and time, is envisaged as governed by this combined expression of a multiform regional *dharma*.

Following the Indian example — and strictly maintaining comparability — we could look at the Near East from a similar perspective. Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Old Syrian religion as well as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the whole spectrum of folk religion or tribal religion of the area, would all be joined in one religious entity or regional *dharma*. One could debate whether Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism also belong to it, and whether the Hellenistic Gnosis had its origin in the region or outside. In any case, this would direct our attention to the many major and minor common elements that exist in most of the Near-Eastern religions, to similar basic concepts and to identical details of tradition such as, for example, the garden of Eden, which can be traced back to ancient Sumer and has persisted in the major Near-Eastern religions ever since. In the occidental tradition, marked as it was by crusades and ghettos, and by efforts to distance Christianity from other Near-Eastern religions, the attention lay on difference rather than similarity. Conflict was often the result. The same was true for other prophetic religions like Judaism and Islam.

Conflicts always tend to intensify in border areas, also along cultural and religious borderlines, which are creations of our mind and of the terms that perpetuate once defined cultural units. The Near Eastern and occidental tendency to emphasize difference has its counterweight in the Indian tendency

to emphasize similarity in entities that are structurally or genetically related. Seen in historical perspective, the European model tended to enhance conflicts, whereas the South-Asian model tended to reduce them.

For the study of religion, encompassing concepts such as the *dharma* of a major cultural area, or subcontinent, are useful for getting a birds-eye view of that culture over a long period of time. This can enrich, but cannot supplant, the careful study of individual religions. And even these are often too vast a subject. It is when we come to the four major sectors of religion mentioned before, or to the different *sampradāyas*, and further down to regional and local religion, that we meet with the actual function of religion in society. It is here also, that we can study the relations between socio-economic and environmental living conditions, and conceptual changes in religious ideas.











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