

The Role of Eastern Religious Traditions in Society

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In the State of Nature, back when people lived semi-nomadic lives without governments and social structures, the human experience was constructed entirely on a subjective basis: with no paradigms or social roles, people were free to construct their own meaning of life—granted, the demands of survival did not afford humans much time for contemplation or leisurely thought. Gradually, men and women gathered in villages, constructing the first societies based on cooperation, self-interest, or a combination of both. While philosophers disagree about the nature of humans and their actions, they all agree that conventions are necessary for life in communities to exist: morality, politics, society, and all aspects of everyday life are explicit or implicit conventions. Hobbes called this set of conventions "commodious living" (38), arguing that they facilitate and regulate life in society.

As Rousseau contended, almost in protest, "[m]an was born free, and he is everywhere in chains" (49). Social conventions affect human behavior and ideas in all areas of activity, regulating affairs as intimate as domestic life and emotions, and extending beyond to more bureaucratic areas such as employment and legal procedures. Rather than chains, these conventions are the tools people need to live in society. They result from widely-accepted views and beliefs, and they become cornerstones of organized life.

Historically, organized religion has held an influential role in social conventions, and diverse religious doctrines continue to influence social dynamics around the world. To a large extent, these doctrines determine many of the ethics, codes of conduct, hierarchies, and rituals practiced by billions of people. Moreover, these beliefs go beyond religious spaces and permeate all layers of social convention.

Because of their ubiquity, religions have the potential to organize societies through diverse structures and rituals. Religions can be identified as an ordering principle of society because they function as self-legitimizing authorities and sources of various beliefs. They are self-legitimizing authorities because they establish the rules of the earthly life and the afterlife, mediating between individuals and the divinity. On a

large scale, religions determine how society is structured, how it functions, and how individuals will seek to self-fashion.¹

Rites are a common element across many religions. They symbolize the participation of people in religious affairs. In a study of the dynamics of religion in modern society, Durkheim defines rites as determined modes of action, resulting from a particular belief (171). He believed the performance of rites is not restricted to the realm of the divine but often extends into the profane, thereby becoming a part of daily life (185). When individuals perform rites, they are participating in the social structures shaped by religion. In the same line of thought, Ching argues that rites “give expression to communal beliefs,” suggesting that each individual’s performance of rites develops and enforces these beliefs (61). For instance, the cult of ancestors found in modern Chinese religions is an extension of the veneration of elders in the afterlife found in various ancient religious practices across Asia; in modern times, Chinese families place a heavy emphasis on respect for their elders. In the same manner, religion establishes what is socially appropriate, the patterns of conduct, and the expectations of each member of the social group. This distinction between the influence of religion in the social sphere—social structures and their function—and its influence on the individual—the *actor* in the social sphere—highlights the functionality of religion as it both defines and regulates daily life. Seen as units in their environment, people perform in rites to fulfill their duty as members of a religion.

Modern religious practices interact with other elements of culture to influence social structures and behavior. Nevertheless, religion influences people more significantly than other elements of culture because of the nature of religious practices, which require people to participate in the performance of rites or to obey certain cosmological rules. Geertz argues that duty, or the motivation to act in accordance with religious beliefs, is pervasive across most religious systems and is justified as an element of “the order of the universe” (90); duty regulates an individual’s actions within society, which is also a part of this universal order. People fulfill their duty because of their belief in some form of punishment or reward in the afterlife derived from their actions.

Some religious systems also encourage people to achieve a certain life purpose, often closely tied to fulfillment in the afterlife. Hindus believe the objective of earthly life is to respect the laws of Dharma and gain benefit in the cycle of life and reincarnation. In the same fashion, religious rites give expression to communal beliefs, and the self-perceived role of each individual becomes a physical manifestation of these beliefs. Therefore, a functionalist study of religion must explore both the relationship between specific beliefs and practice, and the role of the individual as part of a community or society. These two elements in the practice of religious traditions influence what is perceived as order within a society.

Practicing a religion is the most direct form of individual conditioning. Considering that the social function of religion—shaping social structures and dynamics—depends on the interpretation and application of information in a specific and consistent manner by all members of society, it can be analyzed through a religion

¹ Self-fashioning is the process of constructing one’s identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards. See Greenblatt’s introduction to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*.

“meta-frame.”² A religion meta-frame is a type of framing³ analysis that superimposes the priority of religion in human life above all other social structures of beliefs. It suggests that this activity extends to all aspects of social life in an overarching manner—hence the affix “meta.” When a religion meta-frame is in operation, religion becomes the natural order for everyday life, an order that manifests through rituals, cultural norms, stereotypes, and forms of government. In this way, religion serves as the primordial principle of social organization. Yet it is worth questioning why humans adhere loyally to religion since there are other social structures that could provide order and meaning to human life. One explanation for the primacy of religion comes from Freud, who argued that religious beliefs fulfill the individual's “egotistic wish for protection” (22-3). He suggests religion mediates the ego⁴ and the the environment (12-5); this delimitation is necessary for the socially conditioned individual's identity to interact with and within his/her environment. In other words, the knowledge of a religious system, combined with the need for protection of the ego, motivates humans to maintain religious beliefs that allow them to understand their social context and to feel protected.

As previously discussed, religion plays an essential role in defining the identity of the individual. Freud believed that the superego replicates the external authority figure of religion, but also that it internalizes the individual's resistance to this authority (17). People are socialized to operate in their religious world, but they are also socialized to subconsciously enforce their religious beliefs in the superego. As the ego or self develops, and the individual leaves the supervision of the father and the domestic sphere behind, religion appears to remain an element of the ego and superego.

Because religion shapes the individual and the social structures simultaneously, the role of the self and the order of society are extensions of each other. As Ching suggests, communal rites allow individuals to fulfill their religious duty as well as fulfill personal expectations of themselves (63). This phenomenon can be observed in various eastern religious practices, including the *varnasrama-dharma* system of the Vedic-period Hinduism, the separation between laity and *sangha* in Mahayana Buddhism, and Confucianism's bold emphasis on filial piety within modern Chinese religious practices.

In the Hindu practice of the Vedic period, the *varnasrama-dharma* system—also known as the Varna or caste system—organizes society according to various social strata and life stages, or *varna* and *asrama* respectively. According to Flood, this mode of social

² The sociological construct of the meta-frame was first applied to the use of security as the ordering principle of modern society. Bajc's introduction to *Security and Everyday Life* discusses how security has become the most important value of the Western world and how it has subjected all social activity to the pursuit of that value.

³ Framing is a process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner (Kuypers 11).

⁴ According to Snowden, "In Freud's structural model of the psyche: 'id (instinct)' is the innate, subconscious instinct; 'ego (self)' is the consciously-organized decision making part of the psyche, and 'super-ego (conscience)' is the critical and moralizing function which is developed through experience over time" (115-7).

organization is part of *dharmā*⁵—or the balanced order of the universe—and constitutes the earthly portion of the Hindu cosmology (65). In Hinduism, earthly life is considered a stage of *samsara*,⁶ and souls progress towards liberation from *samsara* through various earthly lives, each a continuation of the previous. Through each of these lives, people accrue *karma*⁷ based on their actions, determining their caste in their next reincarnation.

The *varna* system is part of “a larger ‘chain of being,’ fitting into a cosmic hierarchy where various categories (*jati*) are arranged in differing degrees of subtlety and purity and associated with each other” (Flood 58). Before the caste system was outlawed, duty and obedience were necessary to ascend the caste hierarchy in the next reincarnation. In many ways, the caste system restricted the liberties and opportunities of people who belonged to the lowest castes. For instance, only those who were twice-born⁸ and part of one of the superior *varna* categories were allowed to hear and learn the *vedas*,⁹ participate in sacred rituals, and choose the *asrama* they would like to pursue in their adult life.

Besides caste stratification, other features of social classification derived from the practice of Vedic-period Hinduism. For instance, gender is a variable that can limit people’s liberty: subject first to their fathers, and later to their husbands, women were always subject to male authority figures (Flood 66). Furthermore, the submission of women in Vedic texts suggests that gender stratification has an allegedly sacred conditioning. Under these categories of social organization, all elements of earthly life are mediated by karmic consequences, resulting in a particular form of life in reincarnation.

Outlawed in 1949, the caste system is considered an oppressive practice. Today, discourse involving class and caste in India is commonly regarded as discriminatory. While the Indian government has promoted the equality of all people for over six decades, traces of the caste system are still present in the social structures of modern-day India. From political platforms to opportunities in education and the job market, novelist and culture critic Sankaran draws many similarities between the post-caste system in Indian society and the racial tensions that remain relevant in the United States (n.p.). These traces of the Vedic caste system in India serve as evidence of the pervasive force of the religious meta-frame.

The motivations to conform to these practices of Vedic-period Hinduism are rooted in the authority of *dharmā* and its emphasis on orthopraxy¹⁰ and ritualism:

⁵ Flood explains that *dharmā* is “Sanskrit to the English term ‘religion’, but [it also] has a wider connotation than this, incorporating the ideas of ‘truth’, ‘duty’, ‘ethics’, ‘law’ and even ‘natural law’”; in the *varnasrama-dharma*, it also includes “obligation” (11, 58-62).

⁶ The cycle of birth and death, connected by reincarnation (Flood 75)

⁷ Sanskrit for “the law of actions and effects” (Flood 6)

⁸ Boys of the three superior castes who had undergone initiation (*upanayana*) (Flood 58)

⁹ Sacred texts of Hinduism (Flood 39)

¹⁰ Orthopraxy signifies the emphasis on conduct and behavior over beliefs. In Hinduism, “[b]ehavior, expressing Hindu values and power structures, takes precedence over belief” (Flood 16).

obeying the caste system and fulfilling the duties and expectations of one's caste are fundamental requirements to accrue *karma*. For instance, duty and family life are more important than asceticism and spiritual devotion in most stages of *samsara*. While spiritual liberation or *moksa*¹¹ is a legitimate concern of the twice-born *varna* members, the duties of *dharmā* always come before *moksa*: "if he [an individual from the higher three castes who has undergone initiation] has not fulfilled his social obligations then he goes to hell, making it clear that while renunciation [one of the *asrama* stages] and the goal of liberation are valid, they must be deferred until social obligations have been met" (Flood 64). It is clear that Vedic-period Hinduism constructed social structures and conditioned individuals as a result of rituals and practice, so emphasized in religious texts.

When present, religion is the primary ordering social principle because it justifies the existence of social structures and conditions all interactions between individuals. Similarly to Vedic-period Hinduism, the Mahayana Buddhist meta-frame guides individuals to become enlightened and thereby achieve *nirvana* or extinguishment of suffering. The fastest route to *nirvana* is monkhood, and the initiation rites required to become a monk represent a person's transition from the realm of the profane and into the realm of the sacred as well as his commitment to continue the teaching duty of the Buddha (Durkheim 11).

In a religion where advancement towards *nirvana* can manifest as a hierarchy, *buddhas* and *arhats* (saints) occupy the highest positions. As members of the religious elite, they mediate the instruction of *Dharma*¹² and they are revered as teachers of truth and wisdom (Gethin 34-36). Their teaching labor is continued by the members of the *sangha*,¹³ whose duties include guiding believers towards enlightenment as well as perfecting their knowledge and their practice of *Dharma*. The *Vinaya*¹⁴ exhorts followers to become part of the *sangha*, and it constitutes the foundation of the practice of Buddhism. The *Vinaya* also mentions the importance of a laity, since members of the *sangha* are not allowed to work and they require the laity's material help to survive. This relationship, based on the principle of codependence, regulates the interactions between the laity and the *sangha*, establishing a path between the earthly and the divine (Gethin 107). In this relationship, the *sangha* is hierarchically superior to the laity because the latter cannot access the divine without the former. Therefore, Buddhism operates as the primordial organizing principle because social organization happens largely as a function of religion.

In some societies, the influence of religious traditions on hierarchies and governance is more noticeable than in others. For instance, in early Chinese folk religion, dynastic governments were legitimized by the belief in the existence of a direct bloodline between one of the Five Emperors and the ruling dynasty—for example, the relationship between Emperor *Yü* and the Xi Dynasty (Mungello 97). This belief developed over a period of time from various folk rituals and practices that sought to

¹¹ Liberation from the cycle of life (Flood 79)

¹² The teachings of the Buddha (Gethin 35)

¹³ Community of accomplished Buddhist disciples (Gethin 34)

¹⁴ One of the three *pitakas* of the Buddhist canon, the *Vinaya* describes the regulations and rules of the *sangha* (Gethin 87).

interact with the divine, conceived as a group of high-ranking ancestors. According to Ching, divination was central to the act of governing in ancient China and emperors would often consult the shamans and oracles for guidance on important issues (27-9). This practice led to the development of the philosophy of Heavenly Mandate, which considered the political ruler to be a descendant of the royal family favored by *Tian*.¹⁵ Because of this relationship, rulers also served as mediators between the realms of the sacred and the profane (Ching 60-2). In later Chinese dynastic history, the link between political rulers and *Tian* strengthened. The emperor, or “Son of Heaven,” began consulting the oracle directly on matters of state, reinforcing the unity between state and religion, and replacing a link of bloodline with one of divine favor (63). In this period, Chinese society held that the emperor’s authority was invested in him by *Tian* regardless of bloodline, linking social and political obligation to religious obligation. Since power derived from interactions with the divine, and only the emperor was afforded these interactions, he held the power to regulate everyday life. Beyond overseeing political, military, and state affairs, he determined moral guidelines and rituals. It is under the auspices of the emperor that Confucianism became the guiding ideology of the state in 125 BCE, demonstrating how religion holds the potential to organize society.

Before Confucianism was adopted as the official state doctrine, it was largely devoid of religious connotations. However, Chinese religions are characterized by fluidity and syncretism, incorporating rituals and practices from various religions and linking them to existing beliefs. When Confucianism was adopted as the moral compass of the empire, it was linked to the philosophy of Divine Mandate and therefore endowed with divine legitimacy. Ching entertains a discussion on the appropriate categorization of Confucianism, arriving at the conclusion that it is best understood as a “doctrinal system, ... a humanism that is open to religious values” since it was fully compatible with earlier Chinese folk religion (52-65).

The five relationships of Confucian philosophy serve as regulating social parameters and determine acceptable individual identities by setting out acceptable behaviors associated with each position in the hierarchy. Authority in this hierarchy varies endogenously according to each position in the relationship. Furthermore, strong allegiance to an authoritarian father figure is maintained because Chinese social structures are intended to resemble those of a large family (Ching 58). Since the father-son relationship is replicated at various levels—from the ruler-subject relationship at the top of the hierarchy to the friend-friend relationship at the bottom—the hierarchy is always explicit and evident. Furthermore, Confucian thought prescribes a balance between *Jen* and *Li*—the inner orientation and thoughts of the individual, and the outward social behavior, respectively—to maintain balanced, fruitful, and productive relationships. By adhering to these principles and values, the individual contributes to social harmony and order.

When the teachings of the Five Classics or the Analects became mainstream in Chinese society, family-rooted hierarchies were already a prominent feature of Chinese folk religion. Filial piety was a major feature of the ancient religion of China (Chin 19-22). The cult of ancestors fulfilled certain “psychological needs” of protection from the

¹⁵ Literally “heaven,” *Tian* is a divine figure (god), superior to all ancestral veneration, sages, or sovereigns (Ching 18-22).

deceased because divination offered to extended patriarchal guidance into the afterlife. This tradition suggests that the father figure, primordial to the agency of power in the superego, is not transferred from the father to the religious system, but that the former *becomes* part of the latter in Chinese religion. In other words, religion immortalizes the father figure, for it bridges the earthly and the afterlife, allowing the transfer of a social function from earthly life to the afterlife, accessible only through religious practice. Although modern practices have since changed, the general sentiment of filial piety has carried over to modern family rituals like marriage and memorials for the deceased (Ching 64-65).

Modern social conventions show many signs of the constant influence of organized religion. In the realm of the profane, religious beliefs have shaped views about birth, death, social class, family ties, government authority, and morality, demonstrating how social structures remain firmly grounded once they are adopted through religion.

Organized religions act as the primary social ordering principle because modes of behavior, social structures, and identities are constructed by beliefs and rituals. More pragmatically, religious beliefs also serve to legitimize other social structures, such as Confucianism in early Chinese religion. Broadly, religious ideology defines the cultural codes that motivate societies to organize according to a predetermined hierarchy, to pursue certain earthly and divine objectives according to the laws of the universe, and to follow certain procedures and perform certain rites to maintain stability and continuity. Religion fulfills this defining role because it connects human needs, emotions, and cognition, contributing to the availability of shared experiences and meaning. Since the Enlightenment, the nature of the social contract, not religion, has been the main concern of political philosophy. However, religion has shaped most conceptions about human nature and the order of the universe, remaining one of the most complex areas of social studies.

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