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The Caste Connection.
On the Sacred Foundations of Social Hierarchy

Abstract: *Today, some commentators argue that the caste system in India is founded in Hinduism; others deny this in the case. This article argues that we do not possess any conceptual apparatus to address this question today, because it was originally raised and answered in a Christian-theological context. The secularization of a Protestant-Christian notion of false religion gave shape to the European conception of 'the caste system' as an immoral social hierarchy. Basic theological ideas about the connection between false religion and social practice were transformed into topoi of social theorizing, which constituted the caste system as an experiential entity and conceptual unit in the Western cultural experience of India.*

Key words: caste system – Hinduism – India – Reformation – Protestantism – hierarchy

Contemporary debates about the caste system regularly draw attention to the religious foundations of the rigid hierarchy that supposedly characterizes Indian society. A report prepared by Human Rights Watch for the 2001 United Nations World Conference against Racism states that "*India's caste system is perhaps the world's longest surviving social hierarchy. A defining feature of Hinduism, caste encompasses a complex ordering of social groups on the basis of ritual purity.*" Differences in status between castes are traditionally justified by the religious doctrine of karma, the report adds. The authors also describe the hierarchy of four *varṇas* or "caste categories" found in Hindu scriptures: "*In order of precedence these are the Brahmins (priests and teachers), the Ksyatriyas (rulers and soldiers), the Vaisyas (merchants and traders), and the Shudras (laborers and artisans)*", whereas the untouchables are excluded. Finally, the report turns

to listing the evils allegedly caused by the caste system: "hidden apartheid", physical violence, exclusion from temples, and a rigid allocation of labour.[2]

In brief, the claim is that the caste hierarchy has its roots in the Hindu religion, which accounts for its hold on Indian society in spite of its obvious immorality. This is not a new story. Writing in the 1930s, B. R. Ambedkar, advocate of the untouchables and chairman of India's Constituent Assembly Drafting Committee, had already concluded the following: "*It is not possible to break Caste without annihilating the religious notions on which it, the Caste system, is founded.*" In his *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Ambedkar argues that the central flaw of Hinduism is its representation of caste as a divine order: "*The Hindus hold to the sacredness of the social order. Caste has a divine basis. You must therefore destroy the sacredness and divinity with which Caste has become invested.*" As the priests of Hindu religion, the Brahmins not only promote the doctrine of inequality but also endorse the duty of oppressing the lower classes: "*There is no social evil and no social wrong to which the Brahmin does not give his support.*"[3]

From the nineteenth century until today, many have affirmed that the caste system has its foundations in Hindu religion; others deny that this is the case. The first group quotes *Manu's Code of Law* and other 'Hindu scriptures' to demonstrate how these sanction the caste hierarchy. They also point to historical 'facts' of Indian society: the system was invented by the Brahmins, who put down the rules of purity and pollution sustaining the hierarchy and positioned themselves at its top. In addition, they accuse the upper castes of preventing lower castes from entering temples, declaring them untouchable, preventing social mobility, and appropriating a variety of privileges.[4]

The second group invokes another set of texts and facts to show that no such connection exists. Historically, they argue, classical Hinduism did not know of any caste

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2   *Caste Discrimination: A Global Concern, A Report by Human Rights Watch for the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, South Africa, September 2001*, Human Rights Watch 13.3, 2001, pp. 5–8. For similar statements, see the debates in a Subcommittee of the United States Congress: *India's Unfinished Agenda: Equality and Justice for 200 Million Victims of the Caste System*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations of the Committee on International Relations House of Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress, First Session (October 6, 2005), pp. 10–11, 14, 16–18, 29–31.

3   Bhimrao Ramji AMBEDKAR, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, vol. 1*, Bombay 1989, pp. 27, 69, 146.

4   Different elements of this account are found in: Louis DUMONT, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, Chicago 1980; N. JAYARAM, *Caste and Hinduism: Changing Protean Relationship*, in: M. N. Srinivas (ed.), Caste: Its Twentieth-Century Avatar, New Delhi 1996, pp. 74–76; Klaus K. KLOSTERMAIER, *A Survey of Hinduism*, Albany 2007, pp. 288–298; Gail OMVEDT, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*, New Delhi 2011, p. 2; Stanley WOLPERT, *India*, Berkeley 2009, pp. 110–125.

system and the Vedas ignore such a system based on birth. While some *Dharmaśāstra* texts prevent *Shūdras* from performing Vedic rites and receiving the sacred thread, others explicitly allow them to do so. Many traditional Hindu stories challenge the caste hierarchy. Contemporary Indian society, these authors argue, does not provide evidence for the alleged link between caste and religion. The relation between the four *varṇas* and the many *jātis* (communities determined by birth) is anything but clear. In the Hindu traditions, not all 'priests' are Brahmins and not all Brahmins are 'priests'. Moreover, many castes claim to be superior to all others and social hierarchy differs from place to place.[5]

On both sides, these debates are pervaded by moral overtones: the religiosity of caste appears to be a decisive factor in coming to a normative judgement about Hinduism and Indian culture in general. Instead of taking any position in the debate, we will raise a basic question: How can one establish on cognitive grounds that there is a connection between Hinduism and the caste system? Is there any adequate criterion that allows us to assess the presence or absence of this connection? If the issue cannot be settled in a reasonable way, it becomes difficult to understand why it has been the object of dispute for more than two centuries and how it could play such a decisive role in moral judgements about Hinduism and Indian society.

Connecting Caste and Religion

From which premises could we infer that the caste system has its foundation in the Hindu religion? One may suggest that we should ask the Hindus and find out from them whether or not the rules of caste are part of their religion. However, as Max Müller already noted in the nineteenth century, "*some will answer that they are, others that they are not*".[6]

The next step is to turn to Sanskrit texts that allegedly sanction this social hierarchy. Among the many passages cited, the most illustrative examples are from the *Mānavadharmaśāstra* – a text often presented as the Hindu code of law. One of

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5   Works from different periods have presented some of these arguments, for instance: Friedrich Max MÜLLER, *Chips from a German Workshop, vol. 2*, New York 1876, pp. 295–353; M. V. NADKARNI, *Hinduism: A Gandhian Perspective*, New Delhi 2006, pp. 77–130; K. M. SEN, *Hinduism*, London and New Delhi 2005, pp. 20–21. See also a report by the HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION, *Hinduism: Not Cast in Caste, Seeking an End to Caste-based Discrimination* (2011). From a very different angle, the anthropologist C. J. FULLER also argues against hastily linking the religion of Hinduism with the caste system; see his *Gods, Priests and Purity: On the Relation Between Hinduism and the Caste System*, Man: New Series 14, 1979, pp. 459–476.

6   F. M. MÜLLER, *Chips*, p. 299.

its chapters regulates the occupations, residence, and dress of castes. Some groups must live outside the villages, own dogs and donkeys, and wear the clothes of the dead. As the highest-born person, a Brahmin should live by six occupations, "*teaching and studying, offering sacrifices and officiating at sacrifices, and giving and accepting gifts*". Śūdras should serve those above them in the hierarchy: "*Even a capable Śūdra must not accumulate wealth; for when a Śūdra becomes wealthy, he harasses Brahmins.*" The penance required for crimes also mirrors the caste hierarchy: "*One-fourth the penance for the murder of a Brahmin is prescribed by tradition for the murder of a Kṣatriya; one-eighth for the murder of a virtuous Vaiśya; and one-sixteenth for the murder of a Śūdra.*"[7]

Do such passages constitute the religious foundations of the caste system? First, let us assume for the time being that these texts are indeed "scriptures" of some kind. Even then, the fact that they serve to sanction caste discrimination does not establish a connection between Hinduism and caste. Consider the analogy of Christianity and slavery. Historically, some biblical passages appeared to justify slavery and several bishops defended it in the name of Christian religion. This, however, does not show any intrinsic link between the Christian religion and this social institution. Other clerics drew on the Bible to call for abolishing trade and ownership of slaves.[8] Similarly, Hindu authors call upon Sanskrit texts to show that caste discrimination conflicts with their religion.[9]

Second, how sensible is it to look to such texts to make sense of contemporary Indian society? Imagine an Asian traveller in twentieth-century Europe, struck by the significance of social class in public life. In order to account for this, he selects verses from the Bible and suggests that these constitute the foundation of class society. After all, the exploitation of the poor by the rich is evident in Scripture also. We would not find such an explanation helpful. The idea that sentences from centuries-old texts are constitutive of the society of modern Europe would strike us as bizarre. Perhaps there is truth to the claim that Christianity played a role in shaping class society, but merely citing scriptural passages cannot count as evidence either way.

Third, what is the real status of texts like the *Mānavadharmaśāstra*? Are they indeed sacred scriptures or codes of law? It is unclear which role they played in the crystallization of social structures and customs in India. Colonial authors already noted

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7   Patrick OLIVELLE, *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-dharmaśāstra,* New Delhi 2006, § 10.46–129, 11.127, 11.32.

8   William HAGUE, *Christianity and Slavery: A Review of the Correspondence between Richard Fuller and Francis Wayland on Domestic Slavery, Considered as a Scriptural Institution*, Boston 1847; Robert ROBINSON, *Slavery inconsistent with the Spirit of Christianity*, Cambridge 1788.

9   For example, see M. V. NADKARNI, *Hinduism*, pp. 77–130.

that most Hindus did not know the content of these "sacred books".[10] As they gained more experience in Indian society, they learned about the diversity of customs and usages and noted the multiplicity of *Dharmaśāstra* traditions and texts. Consequently, they began to doubt that Manu's text was the law code of the Hindus or even that there was any such fixed Hindu law.[11] More recently, scholars have confirmed that the *Dharmaśāstras* should not be read as the legal codes of Hindu religion.[12] In that case, there are no grounds for claiming that some such texts reflect the religious foundations of the caste system.

Fourth, it is undeniable that a huge variety of *jātis* co-exist in Indian society and that some of these appear to be characterized by practices of endogamy and commensality. By convention, one could call such groups 'castes'. However, empirically, the structure of Indian society does not reflect any fourfold caste hierarchy. In fact, British colonial officials came to this conclusion when they launched a caste census aimed at classifying the many *jātis* along the lines of the *varṇa* hierarchy. Some tried to place each *jāti* into one of the *varṇa* categories; others stipulated a larger number of categories for the classification of castes; yet others devised complex schemes that arranged groups and sub-groups in terms of some principle of classification of castes. But this merely mirrored the classificatory scheme that they decided to use and not the structures of Indian society.[13]

Generally, the caste census exercise ended in failure. For most *jātis*, it turned out to be impossible to attribute a stable location in the hierarchy. Even worse, it was often impossible to find out to what 'caste' Indians belonged. When asked the question "*What is your caste?*", officials complained, some Hindus would mention one of the four *varṇas*,

10   Robert CHATFIELD, *An Historical Review of the Commercial, Political, and Moral State of Hindoostan, from the earliest period to the present time*, London 1808, pp. 212–213; Sir John STRACHEY, *India: Its Administration & Progress*, London 1911, p. 317; *Proceedings of the Court of Directors, March 1824*, in: British Parliamentary Papers 1826–1827, vol. 20, p. 16.

11   See A. C. BURNELL, *Dâya-Vibhâga: The Law of Inheritance*, Madras 1868, p. xiii; J. H. NELSON, *A View of the Hindu Law as Administered by the High Court of Judicature at Madras*, Madras 1877, pp. i–ii, 2–4, 17 and *A Prospectus of the Scientific Study of the Hindû Law*, London 1881, pp. 12–13, 26–27.

12   Nandini BHATTACHARYYA–PANDA, *Appropriation and Invention of Tradition: The East India Company and Hindu Law in Early Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi 2008; J. D. M. DERRETT, *Religion, Law and the State in India*, London 1968; Richard W. LARIVIERE, *Justices and Panditas: Some Ironies in Contemporary Readings of the Hindu Legal Past*, The Journal of Asian Studies 48, 1989, pp. 757–769; Werner MENSKI, *Hindu Law: Beyond Tradition and Modernity*, New Delhi 2003, pp. 73–74.

13   For a striking example, see John C. NESFIELD, *Brief View of the Caste System of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, together with an examination of the names and figures shown in the census report, 1882*, Allahabad 1885, which the author presented as "*an attempt to classify on a functional basis all the main castes of the United Provinces, and to explain their gradations of rank and the process of their formation*".

others would say they belonged to some "*endogamous sub-caste*", yet others would mention some "*caste-title*" or add "*vague and indefinite*" entries. In short, the Hindus seemed to be ignorant of their own caste system.[14]

This then led to the claim that the caste hierarchy is a normative model invented by the Brahmin priests, who tried to impose it onto Indian society in the name of religion.[15] If this were the case, then there must be some empirical consequences. Any attempt to transform a society along the lines of such a model would require a particular type of institution or authority. Without some kind of centralized authority that inculcates the rules of this hierarchy and monitors compliance, it would be impossible to do so. Look at European history: in the eleventh-century Papal Revolution, Gregory VII and his followers gradually transformed the Church into a single hierarchy by centralizing its authority and building a unified canon law.[16] But no evidence is available from Indian history of such massive attempts to create a centralized religious authority or legal system. Hence, the story about a normative hierarchy dreamt up by the Brahmin priesthood is unfounded speculation.

Considering these difficulties, a basic problem crops up: *How did the dispute about the connection between Hindu religion and the caste system appear significant in the first place, if there is no conceptual apparatus available to settle it*? Let us clarify. Most things in the world are interrelated in some way or the other, but this does not allow for reasonable and relevant debates as to the connection between any two phenomena or sets of objects, say, fossils and smartphones or planetary motion and cardiovascular diseases. In contrast, take sunlight and the growth of plants. Theories of photosynthesis show that there *is* a significant link between these phenomena. Similarly, it took Newton's theory of gravitation to illuminate the connection between the movement of the moon and the oceans' tides. The significance of a connection between any two phenomena depends on a background framework that gives shape to our descriptions of those phenomena. It takes the concepts and criteria of some theory to establish whether or not such a connection exists. This goes not only for the natural sciences, but also for our theorizing about human beings and societies. For instance, psychoanalytical theory links

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14   See Sir Edward A. H. BLUNT, *The Caste System of North India, with special reference to the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, Madras 1931, pp. 8–9; Nicholas B. DIRKS, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Delhi 2002, pp. 49, 202–212; J. STRACHEY, *India*, pp. 328–330.

15   David O. ALLEN, *India: Ancient and Modern. Geographical, Historical, Political, Social, and Religious*, Boston 1856, pp. 35–36; Henry Sumner MAINE, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and Its Relation to Modern Ideas*, London 1908, p. 15. For comments on this Indological view, see Ronald INDEN, *Orientalist Constructions of India*, Modern Asian Studies 20.3, 1986, p. 428.

16   Harold J. BERMAN, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Cambridge: Mass. 1985.

nightmares to childhood trauma and economic theories relate inflation to the quantity of money.

Since the claim that the caste system is rooted in Hindu religion has been the subject of debate for more than two centuries, some background framework must have made this connection significant. But no such theory appears to be available today. Under which conditions, then, did this issue arise and how could it become so significant? Answering this question is doubly important, given the fact that the alleged connection between caste and religion sustains the contemporary normative judgements about Hinduism and Indian culture in general. If there is no coherent foundation for this damning moral assessment, what could have made it cogent in the first place?

Crafting the Connection

"*Which practices in the pagan Indian society are religious?*" From the seventeenth century, this had been a central concern of Christian missionaries active in India. Long before there was any talk of "the caste system", they wondered to what extent certain customs and practices of the Indian population were rooted in its religion. They had discovered that the population appeared to be divided into several communities based on birth, which often had their own customs. Certain issues bothered the missionaries: the fact that only some groups wore the so-called "sacred thread"; the particular dress and other markers that distinguished groups from each other; the central role of the Brahmins in Indian society. Strikingly, many of these practices and customs would later be described as elements of the caste system.

Caste as a Civil Institution

The concerns about the religiosity of such practices had a long history. When early Christianity had become dominant in the Roman Empire, the church fathers began to worry about the scope of "pagan idolatry". The worship of false gods did not limit itself to the Greco-Roman cults, they said, but had ramifications across social life. Any practice could be examined in terms of its potential connection to idolatry, from attending games to wearing a white toga during festivities. Whenever a practice turned out to be related to pagan religion in some way or the other, Christians had to renounce this sin, if they wished to remain followers of the true God.[17]

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17 For illustrations, see TERTULLIAN's *De Idololatria*, eds. and trans. J. H. Waszink – J. C. M. van Winden, Leiden & New York 1987 and *The Shows or De Spectaculis*, in: Rev. Alexander Roberts – Sir James Donaldson (eds.), The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325,

More than a millennium later, Jesuit missionary reports sent from India to Rome caused a resurgence of this concern in the Church. The fact that some Jesuits had adopted local customs and allowed Christian neophytes to retain these gave rise to a dispute known as the Malabar Rites controversy. At the centre of this dispute stood one question: Did usages like wearing a cotton thread slung over one's shoulder, carrying a tuft of hair on an otherwise shaven head, or applying sandalwood paste to one's face count as manifestations of superstition or merely as civil observances?

The seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary Roberto De Nobili had initiated this controversy. Calling himself "*a Brahmin*", he famously adopted the dress of a Hindu ascetic and allowed his converts to keep their "*national customs, in as far as these contained nothing wrong and referred to merely political or civil usages*".[18] For instance, each convert could continue wearing the markers proper to his or her caste. When challenged by the Church, De Nobili insisted that these customs had no religious import but had to be regarded as social custom. As evidence, he produced citation after citation from Sanskrit texts and Brahmin testimonies confirming his interpretation of these practices.[19]

De Nobili viewed caste as a civil institution that divided Indian society into "*four grades of civil functions to which there corresponds a similar gradation in nobility*" and that enforced profession by law.[20] He looked for the rules of caste in the "*Laws of Manu*", a civil law book of the highest authority according to him. However, when some of his opponents argued that the Brahmins were the priests of superstition and idolatry who kept this system in place, De Nobili strongly disagreed. Brahmins, he said, were not priests but wise men that studied and taught the different sciences. They commanded the highest esteem because of their learning and not because of some special religious status. Consequently, the ranking of citizens and the privileges of some groups derived from civil status and not from religion.[21]

The significance of De Nobili's position in these debates does not lie in its impact on the general European understanding of India (which appears to have been very limited in scope) but elsewhere. Even among the Jesuit missionaries, who were

vol. 3, Grand Rapids 1989, pp. 79–91; see also R. A. MARKUS, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 16, 226.

18 Joseph BRUCKER, *Malabar Rites*, in: The Catholic Encyclopedia, New York 1910, pp. 558–562.

19 Roberto DE NOBILI, *Report Concerning Certain Customs of the Indian Nation*, in: Anand Amaladass – Francis X. Clooney (eds.), Preaching Wisdom to the Wise: Three Treatises by Roberto de Nobili, S.J., Missionary and Scholar in 17th Century India, St. Louis 2000.

20 *Ibidem*, pp. 57–61.

21 *Ibidem*, pp. 63–76.

known for their tendency to accommodate local practices, he was an exceptional figure. Still, his standpoint reveals a significant fact about the moral judgements that European observers made concerning the Brahmins and their status in India. Consider the contrast between De Nobili's account and that of his fellow Jesuit Francis Xavier, who wrote the following in a report about his travels in India:

> "*Among the pagans here, there is a particular kind of men, called Brachmanes, who are the guardians of paganism, for they stay in the Temple and take care of the Idols: they are the most perverse and evil of men, and to them the verses of David readily apply:* "*Deliver me from this profane race and from the evil and deceitful man.*" *They are the greatest liars and impostors that ever existed: their profession is to deceive the poor and take advantage of the weakness and simplicity of an ignorant mass, making them believe that the Gods command the sacrifice of all kinds of things, while they desire these things for themselves to maintain their families.*"[22]

What accounts for the rift between these two Jesuits' judgement of the Brahmins? In Francis Xavier's case, the Brahmins are clearly identified as the deceitful and evil priests of idolatry, whose special status depends on false religion. For De Nobili, they are not priests at all, but wise men carrying a special civil status because of their learning. In one case, they are the central characters of false religion in India; in the other case, they are not. This played a decisive role in coming to a moral judgement about the Brahmins. If they are the guardians of idolatry, then they are evil, and so is the institution that gives them their status. If they are simply wise men with knowledge of the sciences, then they are not and, again, this also goes for the civil institution that assigns gradations in nobility.

The controversy about the Malabar rites and the status of caste erupted once again in a conflict between Capuchins and Jesuits in early eighteenth-century Pondicherry. In 1732, the Curia insisted that "*the missionaries should make every effort to propagate everywhere the idea of the equality of all men before God*" and thus insinuated that the ranking of groups violated true religion. The Holy See denounced certain practices as infractions on the purity of the Christian faith. However, Pope Benedict XIV declared on 2 July 1741 that converts could be allowed to retain them for "*the rites in question had not been used, as among the Gentiles, with religious significance, but merely as civil observances*".[23]

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22   Francis XAVIER, *Lettres de S. Francois Xavier, de la Compagnie de Iesus, Apostre du Iapon*, transl. Louis Abelly, Paris 1660, p. 62.

23   J. BRUCKER, *Malabar Rites*; Duncan B. FORRESTER, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missionaries in India*, London – Dublin 1979, p. 16.

The Malabar Rites controversy reveals how the question about the religious roots of certain Indian practices emerged within a framework of Christian ideas and attitudes. To answer this question, European observers took recourse to a theological framework that divided the world of human practice into three spheres: the sphere of true religion, that of false religion and idolatry, and that of practices indifferent to religion. True religion embodies the will of God and pure revelation; false religion reflects Satan's interventions and human fabrication. All of humanity ought to obey one and renounce the other, but many practices also fall outside of this bifurcation: they are religiously indifferent. Consequently, when Christian authorities determined that a practice or custom was not religious, this not only implied that it concerned a civil observance or institution, but also that it was indifferent to religion and hence permitted. If it was, the same practice was idolatrous and off limits: it became a violation of God's will.[24]

Caste as a Religious Institution?

In the course of the nineteenth century, so Duncan Forrester shows in his work *Caste and Christianity*, Protestant missionaries in India concluded that caste practices were founded in religion: caste was a "*sacred institution*" and an integral part of "*the whole system of idolatry*". While some missionaries initially insisted that it concerned a civil institution, a consensus gradually consolidated that caste was the main obstacle standing in the way of the Indian heathen's conversion. It was "*the most cursed invention of the devil that ever existed, the masterpiece of hell*", as one missionary put it.[25] Converts to Christianity now had to renounce caste as a sign of their embracing of Christ, for it was not a mere civil distinction but an institution to which the Hindus attributed a divine origin. Thus, the impact of the Protestant Reformation appears to have caused a major shift that would determine the future conception of the caste system.

To show the importance of this shift, we turn to a hypothesis about Hinduism and the caste system developed by S. N. Balagangadhara. He argues that terms like "Hindu religion" and "the caste system" do not refer to any institutions or entities present in Indian society, but only to conceptual entities that ordered the Western cultural experience of India.[26] What does this mean? While there exists a variety of *jātis* and traditions in Indian society, Balagangadhara suggests, the conception of "the caste

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24 S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *On the Dark Side of the 'Secular': Is the Religious-Secular Distinction a Binary?*, Numen: International Review for the History of Religions 61.1, 2014, pp. 33–52.

25 John Fountain cited in D. B. FORRESTER, *Caste and Christianity*, pp. 27, 33.

26 S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *Reconceptualizing India Studies*, Delhi 2012, pp. 34–59.

system" and "Hinduism" is not a factual description of this society, but rather describes how Europeans systematically made sense of their experience of Indian society.

The notion of a caste hierarchy with certain distinct properties came into being in a process of systematic analysis of the observations about Indian society reported by Europeans. By drawing on common-sense ideas that circulated in the intellectual world of modern Europe, scholars created a fairly coherent pattern in their descriptions of Indian culture and society. They translated texts and terms along the lines of this conceptual pattern and fit in the facts reported by their fellow Europeans. In the process, they also ignored or distorted many other textual passages and empirical findings that refuted their account. Thus, the conceptual pattern of "the caste system" could emerge. However, this pattern is not present in the way Indians experience their own society and practices.

In this sense, "the caste system" is an experiential entity internal to the cultural world of the West. British colonials and European travellers acted as though this entity exists and they also taught Indians to talk and sometimes act in this way. Of course, this does not mean that injustice, violence, or discrimination between and among different *jati's* did not exist in Indian society before missionaries and colonial officials began to talk about the caste system. But it does imply that these phenomena did not embody the form and pattern attributed to them by the dominant conception of 'the caste hierarchy'. The caste system never existed (and still does not exist) as an actual social structure or system in the social world of the Indian subcontinent. Instead, it is a conceptual and experiential entity present in the Western culture's discourse about India.

Building on Balagangadhara's account, we want to present the following tentative hypothesis: the conclusion that caste was a religious institution constituted a decisive step in the formation of this experiential entity of "the caste system". It did so by bringing apparent coherence into the European descriptions of Indian culture and society. In 1840, for instance, the important Scottish missionary Alexander Duff wrote that the sacred texts of the Hindus claimed that through "*a species of emanation or successive eduction from the substance of his own body, Brahma gave origin to the human race, consisting originally of four distinct genera, classes, or castes*". From this he concluded the following: "*According to this rigid and unmodified account of the origin of man, it must at once appear that* caste *is not a* civil *but a* sacred *institution, – not an ordinance of* human *but of* divine *appointment.*"[27] Therefore, to destroy false religion and idolatry, one would have to abolish caste and demolish the belief in its divine origin:

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27   Alexander DUFF, *India and India Missions: Including Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism, Both in Theory and Practice*, Edinburgh 1840, pp. 123–124.

"*Simultaneous with the destruction of idolatry and superstition, will be the abolition of* Caste. *When the reign of the gods is at an end, the divine origin of caste is no longer held as a sacred verity; and disbelief in its divinity must break the sinew of its strength. … When we hear the assertion made and reiterated, that we must annihilate caste ere we can expect to sap the foundations of idolatry, we suspect that it is dictated by the same wisdom which would direct us carefully to separate the cement from the walls of a building about to be levelled with the ground. Idolatry and superstition are like the stones and brick of a huge fabric, and caste is the cement which pervades and closely binds the whole. Let us, then, undermine the common foundation, and both tumble at once, and form a common ruin.*"[28]

Duff's claims indicate the importance of the shift towards understanding caste as religious. Europeans had long been convinced that Indian culture was constituted by religion, since Christianity had predicted that all nations knew some form of religion.[29] However, throughout the centuries, they also regularly noted how chaotic and diverse the religion of the Indian people was. In fact, it was often said that it did not appear to be a religion at all but a conglomerate of traditions, customs, sects, and rites without any unifying doctrines or institutions.[30] What then held it together as the religion of the Indian nation?

Once European observers concluded that caste was founded in the Hindu religion, this appeared to provide a solution to this problem. In the perception of many, "*the caste system*" now became the structure that held Hinduism together: because of the divine origin the Hindus supposedly attributed to caste, it formed the cement of the fabric of false religion – "*the sinew of the strength of idolatry*" – which pervaded and closely bound the whole. Thus, when European missionaries and scholars attributed this religious status to caste, this allowed them to see "*the Hindu religion*" and "*its caste system*" as a coherent whole. Seemingly, they could now fit any factual finding or textual passage into this well-cemented building. Little did they realize that the cement held together *their* experience of Indian society, rather than any institution found in this society.

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28 *Ibidem*, pp. 616–617.

29 S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, "*The Heathen in His Blindness …*": *Asia, the West, and the Dynamic of Religion*, second edition, New Delhi 2005; Jakob DE ROOVER, *Incurably Religious? Consensus Gentium and the Cultural Universality of Religion*, Numen: International Review for the History of Religions 61.1, 2014, pp. 5–32.

30 Such comments about the chaotic nature of Hinduism would return again and again from the eighteenth to the twentieth century: see H. HARCOURT, *Sidelights on the Crisis in India: Being the Letters of an Indian Civilian and Some Replies of an Indian Friend*, London 1924, p. 28; Sir Alfred LYALL, *Asiatic Studies: Religious and Social*, London 1884, pp. 1–2; Robert ORME, *Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire, of the Morattoes, and of the English Concerns in Indostan*, London 1805, p. 437; J. STRACHEY, *India*, pp. 315–317; Henry WHITEHEAD, *Indian Problems in Religion, Education, Politics*, London 1924, p. 4; H. H. WILSON, *Works by the Late Horace Hayman Wilson, vol. 1*, London 1862, p. 1.

How could the Protestants' conclusion that caste was *religious* have this impact? From the Christian perspective, the distinction between a religious and a civil institution revolves around the fact that the former has to embody the purpose of God, whereas the latter is merely human. Thus, Roman-Catholic Christendom viewed the Church as a religious institution, simultaneously divine and human. Even though manned by human beings, the Church represented the purpose of God on earth.[31] However, according to the Protestant Reformers, the Church and its priestly hierarchy did not at all represent God's purpose on earth. It was a purely human institution that had *falsely* presented itself as religious and imposed human inventions onto the believers in the name of divine commandment.

From this perspective, if caste was part of false religion, it had to function in a similar way: the Hindu religion enforced caste practices by falsely claiming that the system was rooted in a divine origin or of divine appointment. As the Madras Missionary Conference put it in 1850 in a declaration that concluded decades of dispute about the religious or civil status of caste:

> "*Caste, which is a distinction among the Hindoos, founded upon supposed birth-purity and impurity, is in its nature essentially a religious institution, and not a mere civil distinction. The Institutes of Menu and other Shastras regard the division of the people into four castes, as of Divine appointment. We find, also, that stringent laws were enacted for upholding this important part of the Hindoo religion. Future rewards are decreed to those who retain it, and future punishments to those who violate it. The Hindoos of the present day believe, that the preservation – or loss of caste deeply affects their future destiny.*"[32]

An earlier text, the Madras Memorial to the Supreme Government of 2 April 1845, had already declared that caste depended on ceremonial pollution and was thus connected with the vitality of the Hindu religion: "*Such an institution, therefore, can never be called a mere civil distinction; for whatever it may have been in its origin, it is now adopted as an essential part of the Hindoo religion.*"[33] To break the hold of the false religion of the Hindus, one had to break caste, the missionaries argued.

Our hypothesis is that this shift towards the conception of caste as a religious institution gradually made it obvious where the unity of Hindu religion and the caste

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31   *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 760, § 778; URL: <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__ P27.HTM>; consulted on 11 February 2015.

32   Cited in Benjamin C. MEIGS, *Caste in the Island of Ceylon*, in: Bibliotheca Sacra, vol. 11, no. 43, July 1854, p. 471.

33   Cited ibidem. For a series of documents conveying similar standpoints in the caste controversy in the Madras Presidency, see Joseph ROBERTS (ed.), *Caste, in Its Religious and Civil Character, Opposed to Christianity: Being a Series of Documents by the Right Reverend Bishops Heber, Wilson, Corrie, and Spencer, and by Eminent Ministers of Other Denominations*, London 1847.

system was to be found. On the one hand, the Brahmin priesthood supposedly held the two together by imposing caste practices as commandments of divine origin. Caste became "*the Hindu system*" created by its clergy. In the words of another Protestant missionary, the Reverend William Ward: "*Every person at all acquainted with the Hindoo system, must have been forcibly struck with the idea that it is wholly the work of brahmŭns; who have here placed themselves above kings in honour, and laid the whole nation prostrate at their feet.*"[34] On the other hand, it appeared to missionaries and scholars alike that they had to look for the core of the Hindu religion and its caste system in the beliefs about caste, purity, and the future rewards or punishments that came along with its rules.

Initially, some European observers had viewed the practices of "castes" in India merely as a set of customs and communities; others characterized it as a civil institution; and yet others concluded that it was an institution founded in religion. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the verdict that it was a sacred institution effected a major revision: "caste" customs and practices came to be seen as a coherent system at the heart of the Hindu religion, imposed by its Brahmin priesthood. By studying Sanskrit scriptures and legal codes, this perspective suggested, one should look for the basic structure and rules of this caste hierarchy. This is what orientalist scholars set out to do from the late eighteenth century.

The conditions that generated the question of the connection between Hinduism and caste must be clear by now. European authors relied on a background framework that offered the conceptual apparatus to raise and settle this question: a framework constituted by concerns and concepts deriving from debates internal to Western Christendom. Eventually, a basic cluster of Protestant-Christian ideas made it appear obvious that caste was a social system built on a foundation of sacred law.

It is not that the dispute about the link between caste and religion had now been settled once and for all, or that the problem of the apparently chaotic nature of Hinduism had dissolved. Disagreement would continue, but the Protestant conception of the caste system had become the reference point. In 1869, for instance, Friedrich Max Müller argued that caste was not part of the most ancient religious teachings of the Veda and that it was "*a human law, a law fixed by those who were most benefited by it themselves*". But Müller's argument that caste is no religious institution depended on the Protestant story about Hinduism and the caste system. He suggested that European scholars had produced "*a nearly complete collection of the religious and legal works of the Brahmans*" and could now consult the very authorities to which the Hindus appeal and "*form an

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34 William WARD, *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the Hindoos; including a minute description of their manners and customs, and translations from their principal works*, London 1822, p. 65.

opinion with greater impartiality than the Brahmans themselves". His point was that it has "*no authority in the sacred writings of the Brahmans*" and that the missionaries should show to the natives of India "*that the religion which the Brahmans teach is no longer the religion of the Veda, though the Veda alone is acknowledge by all Brahmans as the only divine source of faith*".[35] In other words, the caste system was a human invention, which the Brahmins had added to religion and falsely presented as though it was rooted in the divine source of faith. This was precisely the connection that the Protestant theology of false religion had established between Hinduism and the caste system.

Similarly, in the Census Report of 1881, Sir Denzil Ibbetson claimed that caste is far more a social than a religious institution and had no necessary connection with the Hindu religion.[36] However, the idea that the caste system was the central social structure of Hinduism became more and more self-evident in the general literature on India. Often, Western authors admitted that caste had played no such role in the philosophical Hinduism of the Brahmanical sacred texts, but it was a different matter altogether for the popular Hinduism of the masses. In 1908, an overview of *India, Its Life and Thought* discussed the question "*What, then, is Popular Hinduism?*": "*That which obtrudes itself upon all sides and which is, perhaps, its most determining factor is its caste system. In other lands, mean social distinctions obtain and divide the people. In India only, Caste is a religious institution, founded by the authority of Heaven, penetrating every department and entering into every detail of life, and enforced by strictly religious penalties.* One has well said that Hinduism and caste are convertible terms."[37]

Thus, the growing dominance of a generic Protestant framework did fix the standard image of a caste hierarchy as the reference point for future debates: the 'priests', 'scriptures', 'religious penalties', and forms of 'worship' of 'Hindu religion' all became central concepts in the analyses of caste. From the nineteenth century onwards, we appear to have inherited this debate about the Hindu foundations of the caste system without the background that made it significant and without the conceptual apparatus necessary to understand this issue.

The Immorality of Caste

The belief that the caste system is rooted in religion not only drives the diatribes against Hinduism and Brahmanism in contemporary public debate in India, but also sustains

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35   F. M. MÜLLER, *Chips*, pp. 299, 305–306, 316.
36   John P. JONES, *India, Its Life and Thought*, New York 1908, pp. 97–98.
37   *Ibidem*, pp. 198–199, emphasis added.

pejorative judgements about Indian culture in general. In fact, one of the most striking dimensions of the contemporary discourse on the caste system is its shrill moral tone. The system appears to be the very embodiment of immorality and injustice.[38]

Often the scholarly literature reproduces the same normative discourse. Writing about "*the Hindu social order*", Klaus Klostermaier puts it as follows in his *Survey of Hinduism*:

> "*Theoretical and theological, the caturvarṇāśrama scheme may have been. But it also translated into Indian reality, so that socially, and quite often also economically and physically, nobody could survive outside caste. The Brahmins did not articulate "human rights" but "caste rights", which had the side effect that, in the course of time, about one-fifth of the total population, as "outcastes", had virtually no rights. They were treated worse than cattle, which even in legal theory ranked above them. People became casteless by violating the rules of their castes, either by marrying contrary to the caste regulations, by following professions not allowed by caste rules, or by committing other acts that were punished by expulsion from the caste.*"[39]

Originally, Klostermaier suggests, the hierarchy of four *varṇas* was a theoretical and theological scheme. Broadly defined, theology amounts to the systematic study of religious beliefs, particularly those about God. It is obvious to him, then, that the caste hierarchy reflects such a systematic body of religious beliefs.

The theoretical and theological scheme also "translated" into social reality. This cannot happen by itself: theological tracts cannot magically transform social structures. Some institution or group must have actively taken up this task. It must have been powerful, for it was able to give the caste hierarchy a stranglehold on Indian society so strong that *nobody could survive outside caste, not only socially but quite often also economically and physically*. If nobody could escape from caste, observance of "theological" caste rules must have been monitored across Indian society. But only a wide-ranging authority could do that. In other words, it would have taken an extremely powerful institution to transform Indian society along the lines of the *caturvarṇāśrama* scheme.

Who was responsible for this transformation? *The Brahmins*, the author suggests: they substituted "*caste rights*" for "*human rights*" and reduced one-fifth of the population to a status worse than cattle. Violating caste rules now made people casteless: expulsion was the punishment for taking up the wrong profession, marrying the wrong person,

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38   For recent examples, see Narendra JADHAV, *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Escape from India's Caste System*, Berkeley – Los Angeles 2005, pp. 1–2; Anand TELTUMBDE, *Ghar Wapsi: Welcome to the Hellhole of Hinduism*, Economic and Political Weekly 50.1, 2015, pp. 10–11 and the interventions by Kancha Ilaiah and others in the 2005 hearing before a Subcommittee of the United States Congress: *India's Unfinished Agenda: Equality and Justice for 200 Million Victims of the Caste System*, pp. 10–11, 14, 16–18, 29–31.

39   K. KLOSTERMAIER, *Survey of Hinduism*, pp. 296–297.

and other infractions. Presumably, the other members of a caste expelled the violators of its rules. Still, the author connects these practices to the societal translation of the *varṇa* scheme, which was the work of the Brahmins. To realize all of this, these Brahmins should have possessed extraordinary powers. They not only compelled a variety of communities to follow the caste rules, but must also have cast a spell on the Indian mind in general, since *nobody* could survive outside caste.

This story about the emergence of Indian society is both implausible and incoherent. As said, there is no evidence for the existence of any Brahmanical institution with the authority required for making the "theoretical and theological" caste hierarchy into a social reality. Sociologically, it is impossible that the variegated groups of Brahmins present in Indian society could somehow transform social structures by imposing caste rules and thus "translating" their theology into reality. Besides, if nobody could survive outside caste ("*socially, and quite often also economically and physically*"), how is it possible that one fifth of the Indian population survived as outcastes, that is, outside caste? In spite of such empirical and conceptual shortcomings, from Klostermaier's perspective, this account not only counts as an explanation of the causes and consequences of the "*Hindu social order*", but also as a justification for a biting moral judgement about the Brahmins.

The above passage is not particular to Klostermaier's work but representative of the standard textbook story about the caste system. This story is deeply normative: it explains Indian society in terms of a rigid hierarchy rooted in religion and blames the Brahmins for instating this immoral and inhumane system. Thus, it appears to reproduce the Protestant discourse that connected caste to false religion. Given its conceptual and sociological flaws, how could this conception of caste emerge and survive unto this day?

Idolatry and Immorality

The normative discourse that emerged from the verdict that caste was founded in false religion had deep roots in the Protestant Reformation. Much like their Christian predecessors, the Reformers divided the world of human practice into three spheres: the realm of true religion and worship; that of false religion and idolatry; and that of practices indifferent to religion. The first is the realm of practices commanded by God; the second is that of practices that are prohibited to the true believer; the third is that of practices that are permitted. The conclusion that caste was based on false religion relegated it to the second realm and thus made it into a deeply immoral system. To understand this, we need to delve deeper into the Protestant Reformation and its conflict with the Roman-Catholic Church. We will look at three closely interrelated components: the immorality of idolatry, the priesthood, and the hierarchy.

Firstly, the Reformation drew upon a general Christian view of idolatry as human fabrications inspired by the devil. However, they applied this to the Roman-Catholic Church in a particular way: they accused the Church of falsely presenting human works and laws as indispensable to salvation, while only faith in Christ and the grace of God were necessary. False religion demanded that the believer would worship human inventions, obey human laws, and endorse human doctrines, as though all of these come from God.

As a consequence, idolatry always went together with *immorality*. The believer sinned by following human precepts that went against God's will, all the while claiming that these represented His will. This corruption of religion, the Reformers insisted, caused the rise of immorality. The heart of moral corruption may have been the Church, but from this source it flowed far into the arteries of society. Much like early Christianity, the Reformation rejected all kinds of customs and practices as ramifications of idolatry. This could go from celebrating festivals, playing music or cards, or donning costumes to worrying about money or food and being subject to emotions like sadness. Participation in these practices was considered sinful and immoral. This critique of the Roman-Catholic world as a hothouse of idolatry generated the Protestant image of medieval society as a den of corruption and injustice, which still survives in popular opinion.[40]

Secondly, the Reformers also related this immorality to the doctrine of priesthood. During the Papal Revolution of the eleventh century, the Church had consolidated the central role of the priest in the Christian religion. The priesthood constituted a distinct *clerical or spiritual estate* as opposed to the estate of the laity. Because priests went through a process of conversion to God and purification of the soul, so the Church's theologians argued, they were the truly religious. Hence, the clerical hierarchy gained spiritual authority over the lay believers. Much as a shepherd guided his flock, they should help the believers to turn away from sin and guide them to salvation.[41]

From the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformers rejected the claim that the clergy constituted a separate spiritual estate, with the authority to mediate the laity to God. These men, they argued, could not have any such authority over the soul and its salvation, for only the Lord Himself possessed this. The clergy merely aimed to enrich itself and satisfy its base desires, while transforming the laity into slaves of a system of laws falsely presented as divine commandments. But the lay believers were complicit, as long as they accepted this tyranny.

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40   Jakob DE ROOVER, *Secular Law and the Realm of False Religion*, in: Winnifred F. Sullivan – Robert Yelle – Mateo Taussig–Rubo (eds.), After Secular Law, Palo Alto 2011, pp. 46–49.

41   Gerd TELLENBACH, *Church, State and Christian Society at the Time of the Investiture Contest*, trans. R. F. Bennett, Toronto 1991.

One could not become a genuine Christian by succumbing to the priestly hierarchy. Instead, the Reformation insisted, all believers ought to go through an individual process of conversion to God and purification of the soul, which made the sinner into "a new man". In this sense, each believer was a priest, for all had to be subject to the same process that transformed men into priests. This process of conversion and purification did not originate in the clergy or in any other human source but in God's free mercy and grace. Only by letting the Spirit work unfettered, true faith in Christ could grow in the believer's soul.[42]

Wherever the priestly estate prevented the instilling of true faith and the purification of the soul, iniquity ruled supreme. Instead of turning towards God, the believers remained in the devil's grasp and, like the clerics, became slaves to their own selfish wills. As Luther put it, in the genuine believer or "the new man", faith in Christ generated love for one's neighbour. In the absence of true faith, human beings are not guided towards love for one's fellow human being and good works, but driven by base desires, love of the self, and indifference towards the other's suffering. Thus, the Reformers saw an intimate relation between the false religion of the priests and societal problems such as the loose mores and general immorality of the masses.[43]

Thirdly, the Reformation connected idolatry and immorality to the sacred hierarchy and its roots in the notion of vocation. In the Roman Catholic Church, "vocation" referred primarily to being called by God to follow "*the ecclesiastical profession of the evangelical counsels*".[44] The Church maintained a distinction between "*the precepts of the Gospel, which are binding on all, and the counsels, which are the subject of the vocation of the comparatively few*". Its theologians said that Christ had "*taught certain principles which He expressly stated were not to be considered as binding upon all, or as necessary conditions without which heaven could not be attained, but rather as counsels for those who desired to do more than the minimum and to aim at Christian perfection, so far as that can be obtained here upon earth*".[45] These counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience covered only those who freely chose to become monks and priests and thus perform special works and gain spiritual merit.

This understanding of vocation buttressed a hierarchical ordering of society. Medieval and early modern European societies consisted of a large variety of groups, called "orders"

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42   Martin LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian*, in: Timothy F. Lull (ed.), Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings, Minneapolis 1989, pp. 585-629.

43   Steven OZMENT, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution*, New York 1992, pp. 75–76; Gustaf WINGREN, *The Christian's Calling: Luther on Vocation*, Edinburgh – London 1957, pp. 37–50.

44   Arthur VERMEERSCH, *Ecclesiastical and Religious Vocation*, in: The Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. 15, New York 1912, pp. 498-501.

45   Arthur BARNES, *Evangelical Counsels*, in: The Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. 4, New York 1908, pp. 435-436

or "estates", made up of people with the same occupation, function, ethnic customs, or manners of life.[46] As Georges Duby has shown, from the eleventh century onwards, Catholic theologians began to argue that each functional order or occupation had its own duties and depended on the other, but that they should form one hierarchically ordered community with the clergy as the supreme estate. The classical scheme was tri-functional: the hierarchy of those who pray (*oratores*), those who fight (*bellatores*), and those who labour (*laboratores*) or the clerics, knights and rulers, and farmers and artisans. This normative theological model now had to be institutionalized in society.[47]

Reformation theology undercut both the conception of an ecclesiastic vocation to be esteemed above all others and the accompanying model of a hierarchy of occupations or orders. The idea that one gained exceptional spiritual merit by following evangelical counsels presupposed that human works could contribute to salvation. But this was a false and evil idea, according to the Reformers, for it ascribed to human beings what belonged to the Sovereign Creator alone. No order of people had special spiritual merit. Therefore, trying to cast the relations among groups in society into the mould of a religiously sanctioned hierarchy was to abuse religion for worldly purposes. It was but an attempt of the clergy to pursue its material interests in the name of God.

Luther argued that truly good works flow only from faith, which could emerge in any occupation: "*The works of monks and priests, be they never so holy and arduous, differ no whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic toiling in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but … all works are measured before Him by faith alone.*" Calvin also maintained that there is "*no employment so mean and sordid (provided we follow our vocation) as not to appear truly respectable, and be deemed highly important in the sight of God*".[48] All believers were priests no matter what occupation they were called to. As Luther wrote in his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520):

> "*Therefore, just as those who are now called "spiritual", that is, priests, bishops, or popes, are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the word of God and the sacraments, which is their work and office, so it is with the temporal authorities. They bear the sword and rod in their hand to punish the wicked and*

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46 Peter BURKE, *The Language of Orders in Early Modern Europe*, in: M. L. Bush (ed.), Social Orders & Social Classes in Europe Since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification, Abingdon – New York 2013, pp. 1–13; R. R. PALMER, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800, vol. 1: The Challenge*, Princeton, NJ 1959, pp. 28–29.

47 Georges DUBY, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, Chicago 1980.

48 Cited in Robert S. MICHAELSEN, *Changes in the Puritan Concept of Calling or Vocation*, The New England Quarterly 26.3, 1953, p. 318. See G. WINGREN, *The Christian's Calling* and Karlfried FROEHLICH, *Luther on Vocation*, Lutheran Quarterly 13, 1999, pp. 195–207.

protect the good. A cobbler, a smith, a peasant – each has the work and office of his trade, and yet
they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops. Further, everyone must benefit and serve every
other by means of his own work or office so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for
the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one
another [I Cor. 12:14–26]."[49]

According to medieval Catholic theologians, the different orders depended on each other and each had to perform its duties for the welfare of a hierarchically ordered community, where the clergy played the topmost role of mediating the others to God. Now, each individual believer had to serve the community by means of his own work and office, all of which were equally valuable before God. We can serve God and our fellow men in any station, so long as we have experienced our calling. The Christian station is free and cannot be tied to any special orders, but is "*above all orders, in all orders, and through all orders*".[50] Luther's conception of vocation also implied a new understanding of the dignity and meaning of work:

"*The teacher has a vocation, the physician, the plumber, the farmer, the housewife, the maid*
who sweeps the room or washes the dishes … This idea has the further advantage of giving a new
dignity and meaning to work, of putting it in a new dimension and under new criteria, so that
even those in the lowliest positions in the Church or the world can have a true sense of calling
and worth."[51]

As Protestant theologians would later put it, every man had a personal or particular calling, which could be ordained and imposed on him by God in any office or station. Therefore, each should be free to follow this calling rather than bound by a "religious" hierarchy of occupations.[52]

These three components of Protestant theology, we suggest, played a central role in the crystallization of the normative discourse on "the caste system". They were reflected in the account about the Brahmin priesthood and its instituting of an immoral social structure, which rigidly links occupational status and other privileges to a caste's location in the hierarchy. Yet, it is not as though every intellectual endorsing the normative discourse about caste and Hinduism has been a Protestant-Christian believer. How could they then reproduce a discourse built around a set of Protestant religious ideas, even when they did not endorse this religion and its doctrines?

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49   Martin LUTHER, *Three Treatises*, Philadelphia 1970, p. 15.
50   G. WINGREN, *The Christian's Calling*, pp. 11–12.
51   G. W. BROMILEY (1979–1988), *Vocation*, in: G. W. Bromiley (ed.), The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised, vol. 4, Grand Rapids, p. 996.
52   R. S. MICHAELSEN, *Changes*, pp. 319–320.

The Norms of Caste

To account for this state of affairs, we will draw upon a hypothesis concerning the role played by Christianity in the shaping of the western intellectual world. Proposed by Balagangadhara, this hypothesis theorizes secularization as a process whereby recurring patterns in a religion's traditions of reasoning are secularized into the clusters of commonplace ideas that constitute the social theorizing of a culture or society. We use the term 'tropes' to refer to these recurring theological patterns and the term 'topoi' to refer to the clusters of commonplace ideas. Secularization then is the process whereby tropes originally embedded in a particular theological framework are transformed into topoi of a culture or society.

In a series of essays, our research group has shown how core conceptual structures of modern European thinking about human culture and society emerged from this process of secularization. The dominant western descriptions of India crystallized around topoi inherited from the Reformation's theological reflections. But the same also goes for the general theorizing about the nature and origins of social, political, and religious institutions. The topoi could either function as heuristics for developing new speculations about human society in general or they served as conceptual building blocks for the descriptions of particular societies.[53]

Importantly, such topoi do not consist of isolated ideas but of clusters of interlinked ideas. This has a major consequence: more often than not, one cannot understand one set of ideas without drawing on other related sets of ideas. Because of this, topoi often continue to depend in some way or the other on the theological concepts and patterns of reasoning from which they emerged. Accordingly as these conceptual patterns remain present in the background of a culture's intellectual world, they continue to give coherence to the 'secular' clusters of ideas and provide significance to the underlying concerns and questions.

As a final step in our attempt to throw new light onto the currently dominant discourse about Hinduism and the caste system, we shall briefly trace some of the topoi located at its heart. Reconsider our earlier questions: How could the connection between the Hindu religion and the caste system become a bone of contention in the absence of any conceptual apparatus to establish the existence of this connection? Given this

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53 S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *On the Dark Side of 'the Secular'*, pp. 33–52; J. DE ROOVER, *Incurably Religious?*, pp. 5–32; Jakob DE ROOVER – S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *John Locke, Christian Liberty, and the Predicament of Liberal Toleration*, Political Theory 36.4, 2008, pp. 523–549; Jakob DE ROOVER – Sarah CLAERHOUT – S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *Liberal Political Theory and the Cultural Migration of Ideas: The Case of Secularism in India*, Political Theory 39.5, 2011, pp. 571–599.

conceptual lacuna, what made this issue so decisive in forming a moral judgement about Hinduism?

In the process of secularization, generations of European thinkers translated the common patterns of the Protestant theology of false religion into basic clusters of ideas about the relationship between religion and society. When educated Europeans travelled to other parts of the world and tried to make sense of these alien societies, they drew upon this body of ideas circulating in the intellectual circles of the home continent. We can now return to what we hypothesize is the decisive moment in the emergence of the modern critique of "the caste system". It appears that once the conclusion crystallized that caste was founded in false religion, European accounts of Indian society were re-organized around a specific set of normative ideas popular in Europe at the time.

Take the stories about the Brahmin priesthood. Orientalists and missionaries agreed that the Brahmins had falsely represented a social hierarchy as sacred and divine. For those with a Protestant background, this illustrated how crafty priests had usurped the authority to mediate the believers to God and invented doctrines and rites to keep the populace in check, much as had happened in the medieval ecclesiastic hierarchy. For Catholics, it proved how the priests of false religion were unlike the truly spiritual priesthood of the Church. For many Enlightenment thinkers, it confirmed how all forms of "organized religion" revolved around despotic figures that built religiously sanctioned socio-political structures in order to obtain and retain the worldly power they craved so much.[54]

Generally, these authors conceptualized the relationship between Hinduism and caste in terms of Christian ideas about the priesthood and its authority. Their claims about the religious foundation of caste reproduced earlier theological attacks on the Church's attempt to fix a societal hierarchy in Europe. In India, European commentators assumed, the local religion and its clerical estate must have performed some similar role in constituting the hierarchical structure of society. The priesthood had made the caste system into a normative model of obligations and principles, which allegedly had divine sanction. In his remarks on the effects of caste, William Ward wrote that "*the founders of this system must have been men who designed to deify themselves*":

"*… [I]t could only spring from a number of proud ascetics, who, however, were far from being sincere in their rejection of secular affairs, as they secured to their own order all the wealth and honours of the country, together with the service of the other three orders. Agreeably to this plan, the persons of the first order were to be worshipped as gods; all the duties of the second concentrated in this, they were to protect the bramhŭns; the third was to acquire wealth for them, and the fourth*

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54   S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *Heathen in His Blindness*, pp. 65–95.

to perform their menial service: the rules for these orders were so fixed, that though the higher orders might sink into the lower, the latter could never rise, except in another birth."

The distinctions of rank in Europe, Ward continued, are founded upon civic merit or learning and answer very important ends in the social union. In contrast, the institution of caste had been one of the greatest scourges of society:

"*It is the formation of artificial orders, independently of merit or demerit, dooming nine tenths of the people, even before birth, to a state of mental and bodily degradation, in which they are for ever shut out from all the learning and honours of the country.*"[55]

This normative conception of "the caste system" mirrored the Reformation critique of the medieval hierarchy of orders in Europe. Protestants had charged the Catholic clergy with enslaving the other functional orders by presenting its "divine hierarchy" as a set of obligations imposed by God's will on the Christian believer. Thus, Ward's hypothesis about "*a number of proud ascetics*" drew from this understanding of the Catholic clergy, which 'falsely' claimed a special spiritual status and authority based on its asceticism. Both Protestant and Enlightenment thinkers rejected the Church's hierarchical order as an illegitimate straitjacket that prevented the large majority of the population from rising in society regardless of merit. Now, this was transposed to the criticism of "the Hindu system" and its supposed stranglehold on societal relations.

Generally, the view that caste was founded in false religion went together with a picture of Hinduism as a restrictive religion of rules and rites presented as the revelation of the divine will. To find out to which particular set of rules the Hindus attributed a divine origin and religious sanction, one had to turn to their sacred scriptures and law books. By translating texts like the *Mānavadharmaśāstra*, the Orientalists believed they were disclosing the "*Institutes of Hindu Law*".[56]

The structure that defined Hindu society had now been discovered, or so the orientalists and their readers in Europe believed. When they translated more Sanskrit texts, they integrated the appropriate excerpts into the basic pattern attributed to this caste system. For instance, the *Puruṣa-sūkta* hymn from the Rigveda – which recounts

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55 W. WARD, *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the Hindoos*, pp. 143–144; see also F. M. MÜLLER, *Chips*, pp. 343–344.

56 ANONYMOUS, *The History of British India*, in: The Asiatic Annual Register… For the Year 1799, London 1800, pp. 5–6; R. CHATFIELD, *An Historical Review*, p. 211; Sir William JONES, *Institutes of Hindu Law or, the Ordinances of Menu* (1796), in: Michael J. Franklin (ed.), Representing India: Indian Culture and Imperial Control in Eighteenth-Century British Orientalist Discourse, vol. 9, London – New York 2000, pp. iii–iv; Luke SCRAFTON, *Reflections on the Government of Indostan and A short Sketch of the History of Bengal*, Edinburgh 1761, p. 4.

how the four *varṇas* emerged from different body parts of the cosmic being during its sacrifice – counted as "the creation myth" behind the caste hierarchy. Scholars also interpreted the empirical observations reported by colonial officials and travellers in these terms. They filtered out certain practices and customs and conceptualized these so as to fit them into the descriptive framework. Thus, over time, a large variety of facts and textual passages began to serve as confirmations of the existence of an evil caste system rooted in religion.

Whenever practices came to the surface that did not fit into the model of the caste system, the dominant framework could easily explain these away. The fact that many Hindus did not act according to the so-called "rules of the caste system" merely proved their immorality. From this perspective, the Hindus were triply immoral: they violate the moral laws of God's revealed will, such as the equality of all believers before God; they dishonour God by following the immoral rules of the caste hierarchy as though these are of divine origin; they keep violating even these rules because of their moral laxity. Generally, European observers did not perceive the conflicts between their account of the caste system and their empirical findings as problematic. They understood them as inconsistencies between the rules of the Hindu religion and the actual behaviour of the Hindus, attributed to the latter's iniquity. This shows how normative the conception of caste had become and how it could accommodate any fact by re-describing it in moral terms.[57]

Conclusion

Today, the conviction that Hinduism sustains the caste hierarchy continues to generate strong moral judgements about Indian culture. From the local newspaper to the international journal, from the UN conference to the NGO pamphlet, all agree that Hindu society is suffused with immorality and injustice. They argue that it denies "the dignity of labour" and prevents people from choosing their own profession. These commentators ignore the fact that both their descriptions of "the facts" and their normative judgements rely on a background cluster of ideas deeply rooted in Christian doctrine.

By conceptualizing caste as an institution founded in false religion, the Protestant Reformation established our current notion of "the caste system" as an immoral social institution rooted in Hindu religion. The dynamic of secularization discarded the condemnation of Hinduism as "false religion" but kept intact most of the moral ideas

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57   W. Ward's *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the Hindoos* (1822) is an illustrative
      example, see especially pp. 65–92, 145–154, 288–289.

involved in this judgement. The contemporary discourse about Indian society may no longer say explicitly that the caste system is an invention of the devil and his priests, which institutes morally corrupt practices and principles. Yet, it does reproduce this conceptual structure by endlessly implying that the caste system perversely prescribes immoral principles in the name of morality – that it compels the Hindus to discriminate, dehumanize, and deny the dignity of their fellow human beings as though such acts constitute their moral duties.[58]

Drawing on Balagangadhara's ideas, our hypothesis is that the components of the contemporary conception of "the caste system" derive from clusters of ideas inherited from the Reformation and its theological reflections on the relation between religion and social order. Protestant concepts and moral judgements entered the intellectual world of early modern Europe and circulated there as commonplaces soon considered self-evident. These conceptual clusters gave shape to the European observations about caste in India. The resulting conceptions of "Hinduism" and "the caste system" did not disappear when the social sciences developed but instead live on to this day. This indicates that the same topoi continue to constrain our contemporary reasoning about religion and society.

That is why the question as to the connection between religion and caste is still alive today. From the sixteenth century onwards, this framework of topoi drew a series of links between certain practices, texts, Brahmins, temples, stories, and other phenomena. Western scholars found it evident that these connections existed and together constituted a coherent social system sanctioned by religion. In reality, the connections they established existed only in their experiential and intellectual world. There, they resulted in a conceptual pattern and experiential entity built around clusters of secularized theological ideas: the modern conception of the caste system. It is only against this background that the question as to the connection between religion and caste is a significant one. It is only in this context that the correct reply is of supreme import to the moral status of Hinduism. Some authors continued to challenge the idea that caste was religious. However, they could now do so only by throwing doubt on certain dimensions of the normative conception of the caste system; the belief that such a system existed in Indian society had been placed beyond all doubt.

This article leaves many questions unanswered. Why did Indian intellectuals adopt the normative conception of the caste system, if it embodies clusters of topoi inherited from Christian-theological reflection? In the twenty-first century, the Indian secularists or self-styled "progressive" intellectuals count as the most vociferous critics of caste and

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58   See S. N. BALAGANGADHARA, *Reconceptualizing India Studies*, pp. 102–111.

Hinduism, with a passion perhaps matched only by American evangelical missionaries. But how could they come to embrace a story that presupposes a series of culture-specific ideas of the modern West, which in turn derive from the secularization of Protestant doctrines?

Another set of questions emerges when we explore the suggestion that the modern conception of "the caste system" mirrors internal developments of Western culture. Is the European understanding of caste in India an oblique reflection upon the process whereby the Christian religion shaped the social structures of modern Europe? Did the orientalist accounts indirectly reveal a genuine understanding of how religion had re-structured social life in western culture? If this is the case, a closer examination of the emergence of the conception of "the caste system" would produce insights into the mechanisms whereby religion structured the class society of the western world.

In one sense, then, the debate about the caste connection should come to an end. From the perspective of India studies, it brings no insights into the societal problems of the Subcontinent. It is only for the theologian and the missionary that this issue remains important; it is only they who possess the conceptual apparatus required to address this issue. In another sense, the debate should continue. In the study of Western culture, it may provide us with an access point to uncover the relation between the Christian religion and the crystallization of a culture-specific social system. In that case, examining the historical accounts of the connection between Hinduism and caste will increase and improve our understanding of European society and its cultural constraints.

Resumé

Propojení kast s náboženstvím: o posvátných základech společenské hierarchie

V dnešní době někteří komentátoři prohlašují, že indický kastovní systém vychází z hinduismu, jiní to však odmítají. V tomto článku autoři rozvíjejí argumentaci ve prospěch tvrzení, že na tuto otázku dnes nemůžeme dost dobře odpovědět. Důvodem je pro ně absence vhodného konceptuálního aparátu. Tento problém byl totiž původně formulován a také vyřešen v křesťanském teologickém kontextu. Evropský koncept "kastovního systému" jako nemorální sociální hierarchie byl vytvořen vlivem sekularizace protestantského pojetí falešného náboženství. Základní teologické myšlenky o propojení falešné víry a společenských praktik se tehdy transformovaly v topoi teoretizování o společnosti, které v západní kulturní zkušenosti ustavilo kastovní systém jako zkušenostní entitu a konceptuální jednotku vnímání Indie.