

Envisaging India
—A Essay on Zimmer, Eliade and Dumont*

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Abstract

In this paper, three Western scholars, namely, Heinrich Zimmer (1890-1943), Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) and Louis Dumont (1911-1998), whose works on Indian religious culture had far-reaching influence in the second half of the last century, are discussed and evaluated. Zimmer's works on Hindu *Geistesleben*, especially esoteric imagination, form a new point of departure in terms of Indian studies in the States after World War II. Mircea Eliade's idea of *homo religiosus*, which became the dominant theme in the studies of religion after 1960 in the States, as he stated, is from his Indian experience. Louis Dumont's bold idea of *homo hierarchicus* on explicating the ideological configuration of caste system begins a new era in the studies of Indian society. The three scholars are all European origin

* I am profoundly grateful to the reviewers for their perceptive comments. In revising this essay, I have taken their stimulating observations into full consideration. However, It has to be noted hat some issues raised are too complex that I might not be able to do justice to them.

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who grew up at the heyday of Orientalism and colonialism. They either chose deliberately to stay in the States or kept close contact with Anglo-Saxon academe. Oriental encounter brought them to India and they were captivated by what they had envisioned and pursued it with fervent ardor to make explicit what is distinctive Hindu religious life. In the process of questing for the Hindu religious truth, they redefined or reexamined their own cultural roots.

Keywords: Orientalism, Hindu wisdom, homo religisous, homo hierarchicus

I. Introduction.

The expansion of Western imperialism since the fifteenth century brought together the East and the West willy-nilly. This encounter later also initiated the so-called “Oriental Studies” in modern era starting from the 18th century. It is undeniable that this new “Oriental” awareness goes hand in hand with the aggrandizement of colonialism. Thus, the cultural position of the colonial power of the West-especially the French and the British toward their colonized East is termed by E.Said as “Orientalism”. His explication of this cultural phenomenon is as the following:

The Oriental is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of Europe *material* civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrine, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles. (Said,1979:1-2)

The political overtones of Orientalism here could easily be detected. Said suggests that the relationship between the colonizer Occident and the colonized Oriental “is of power, of domination, of varying degree of a complex hegemony.” (op. cit.: 5) Indeed, as

argued forcefully by Cohen, the connection between power and knowledge as the formation of colonial construction of what constitutes the colonized is clearly marked in British colonialism in India. (Cohen, 1996) He argued:

To the educated Englishman of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century...[This] world was generally believed to be divinely created, knowable in an empirical fashion, and constitutive of the sciences through which would be revealed the laws of Nature that governed the world and all that was in it. In coming to India, they unknowingly and unwittingly invaded and conquered not only a territory but an epistemological space as well...the British believed they could explore and conquer this space through translation: establishing correspondence could make the unknown and the strange knowable.

The first step was evidently to learn the local language... [The] knowledge of language was necessary to issue commands, collect taxes, maintain law and order-and to create other forms of knowledge about the people they were ruling. *The knowledge was to enable the British to classify, categorize, and bound vast social world that was India so that it could be controlled.* (Cohen, 1996: 4-5; italics mine)

The interest of modern West in the religious life of the Hindus is also inextricably connected with aggrandizement of Christianity. For the powers of the West, Christianity obviously represents the apex of human religious experience. The missionaries, for the sake of converting the Hindus from their idolatry, were the important

authors to give detailed accounts of the Hindu life and Hinduism to the Church. Their position is complementary to the colonizer as they represent the superiority of their religious civilization in terms of the evolution of human society. Therefore, in the writing of French Jesuit missionary Abbé Dubois in the early nineteenth century, we read:

The Hindus, like all idolatrous nations, originally possessed a conception, imperfect though it was, of the true God; but this knowledge, deprived of the light of Revelation, grew more and more dim, until at last it became extinguished in the darkness of error, of ignorance, and of corruption. Confounding the Creator with His creatures, they set up gods who were merely myths and monstrosities, and to them they addressed their prayers and directed their worship, both of which were as false as the attributes which they assigned to these divinities. (Dubois, 1906: 609)

Dubois' version of the Hinduism is nothing surprising, as the colonialism of the West is the combination of mundane as well as spiritual domination. That the religion of the West is superior to the East was greatly reinforced by the material wealth and political hegemony of the colonizer. However, the attempt of religious colonization, besides the effort of grasping of "the other" in order to rule efficiently, also brought constructive imagination of the Oriental by the Occidental, especially things considered to be "spiritual". The establishment of Theosophical Society by Blavatsky and Olcott in 1875 is one of the examples of searching

for the wisdom of the East.¹ Historically, it is through philology and colonialism that link Europe and India together. Sanskrit, as a member of Indo-European linguistic family, helps the Europeans to construct what is the “Aryan”. Nonetheless, it is through religion-Hindu beliefs as well as caste system that India distinguishes itself as the land of difference and otherness for the European colonizers.

On the other hand, Hinduism as a religion is clearly not confined to the belief in or worship of supernatural powers considered having control of human destiny. For a Hindu, religion actually encompasses his or her life, from birth to death, and from to whom should one get married to with whom one may dine together. Broadly termed as “*dharma*”, Hindu religious experience denotes what is sacred for a person to follow within proper human context, be it divine incarnation or social formation. However, even the term *dharma* may involve complicated hermeneutic issues and Hinduism may not be a self-explanatory religious tradition. Fuller argues:

Nowadays, of course, the term “Hinduism” belongs to contemporary Indian discourse along the term *dharma*, stripped of its more complex connotations of socioreligious

¹ Theosophical Society regards Hinduism and Buddhism as prototypes of true religion. In 1880 Olcott and Madame Blavatsky went together to Sri Lanka to support emerging Buddhist revival movement there. The so-called “Protestant Buddhism” in Sri Lanka was inspired by their vision of what modern Buddhism should be. (cf. Bond, 1988) The young Gandhi was also influenced by the Theosophists who initiated him into the journey of rediscovering Hinduism. See, Gandhi’s *An Autobiography*, pp. 76-78.

moral order, law, and duty to mean much the same thing, especially in the neologism *sanatana dharma*, “eternal religion.” That linguistic development significantly reflects the impact of modern Hindu reformist thought and the Hindus’ own search for an identifiable, unitary system of religious belief and practice. Nonetheless, “Hinduism” does not translate any premodern Indian word without serious distortion, and it still does not correspond to any concept or category that belongs to the thinking of a large proportion of the ordinary people... (Fuller, 1992:10)

It seems that the complexity of Hindu religious culture is extremely formidable. Still, it is a fascinating field of research for the ambitious scholars to develop grand theories of human culture. In this paper, three Western scholars, namely, Heinrich Zimmer (1890-1943), Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) and Louis Dumont (1911-1998), whose works on Indian religious culture had far-reaching influence in the second half of the last century, will be discussed and evaluated. Indeed, they also made a significant contribution to our appreciation of Hindu religious culture. Zimmer’s works on Hindu *Geistesleben*, especially esoteric imagination, form a new point of departure in terms of Indian studies in the States after World War II. ² Mircea Eliade’s idea of

² “An irrepressible romantic and dreamy idealist, Heinrich Zimmer remains to this day one of the widely read, even if not always the most reliable, Indologists of the twenty-th century. His version of Tantra-which he conceived as both the most profound aspect of Indian thought and the most sophisticated aesthetic tradition-has been formative in contemporary Indology.” (Urban, 2003:169)

homo religiosus, which became the dominant theme in the studies of religion after 1960 in the States, as he stated, is from his Indian experience (to be discussed). Louis Dumont's bold idea on the ideological configuration of caste system begins a new era in the studies of Indian society. It has to be noted here that this does not imply that other scholars are less important. Incidentally, the three scholars that I choose are all European origin who grew up at the heyday of Orientalism and colonialism. They either chose deliberately to stay in the States or kept close contact with Anglo-Saxon academe. Oriental encounter brought them to India and they were captivated by what they had envisioned and pursued it with fervent ardor to make explicit what is distinctive Hindu religious life. In the process of questing for the Hindu religious truth, they redefined or reexamined their own cultural roots. This process is endlessly fascinating to me as I am doing something similar, though from an Eastern viewpoint.³

³ The investigation of Zimmer, Eliade and Dumont in this essay is to explore the intellectual movement against the current. While the modern Western colonialism was still in triumph, the scholars that I discuss in this essay were learning lessons from the East. They approached India with an idealistic version of humanity. This is well exemplified in Zimmer who revolted against the main Indological trend of his age. Eliade is influenced by Zimmer in terms of religious studies. It is argued by Urban: "While Zimmer may have been the most poetic of Tantric scholars in twentieth century...Mircea Eliade was surely among the most influential. We might say that tantra...provided both the ideal object and the hermeneutic *method* for Eliade's "history of religion" as a whole...[I]nfluenced by both Zimmer and Evola, Eliade seems to embody the *coincidentia oppositorum* of their interpretation of Tantra..." (Urban, 2003: 179) Dumont also acknowledged his indebtedness to Zimmer as indicated by Galey: "Dumont's interest in India grew professionally under the influence of Mauss, but was philosophically and aesthetically awakened by the works of René Guénon and Heinrich Zimmer." (Galey, 1982: 6)

II. Heinrich Zimmer and Hindu wisdom

Heinrich Zimmer (1890-1943) was the German Indologist who immigrated to the States from Germany in 1939 because of his political position against Nazi.⁴ Although he stayed in the States only for few years, through the effort of his devoted disciple-friend, Joseph Campbell, his posthumous works in English awoke a popular interest in Hinduism and exerted a deep influence on the study of Hinduism from late forties of the last century.

Zimmer's case is of immense interest to us because of his intellectual journey. He started his carrier as a philologist but was disenchanted with it and ended his life as an important exponent of esoteric wisdom and philosophy. He made some poignant remarks on German (or rather Prussian) academe of his time:

My teacher in Sanskrit, Heinrich Lueders, was an arch-craftsman in philology, in deciphering manuscripts, inscriptions, a skilled super-mechanic, one of the past masters of philological craft in the field of Indic studies. But he was not interested in Indian thought, a plain liberal citizen from the republic Luebeck, anti-philosophic,

⁴ “[I]n February 1938, the Ministry of Education of the *Reich* withdrew his right to teach, in effect expelling him from the university. The police in Heidelberg had been keeping an eye on the outspoken Professor Zimmer since August 1933 for political reasons. When the Ministry of Education pressed Zimmer's dean on the matter of politics, he reported that Zimmer had been keeping to himself, although “he had doubtless been close to the leftist circles earlier.” He was still to travel within Europe, but in 1936 the ministry refused to allow him to lead an academic tour to India because of his wife's Jewish ancestry-and it was the Nazi racial laws as well that caused him to lose his academic post.” Chapple, 1994: 72-73.

indifferent to mysticism, and with a meager sense for artistic qualities and implications. I was brought up on a wholesome diet of stones instead of bread, but my generation could take it, thanks to a Prussian Spartan high school training. We were strictly pre-progressive in our upbringing, trained to ascetic hardship with Thucydides, Demosthenes, under philologist who scorned to be teachers and were, in part, original scholars. (Zimmer, 1984:247)

German tradition of comparative philological studies reached its height in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁵ In the field of Sanskrit philology, this Zietgeist manifests itself in the seven-volume's *Sanskrit Wörterbuch* (1852-75) by Otto Böthingk and Rudolf von Roth. Heinrich Lüders (1869-1943)⁶ as a formidable *Philologe* of this tradition had made immense contributions to broaden our knowledge on Sanskrit and Pali philology. However, as Zimmer pointed out here that philology, in dealing with grammatical as well as syntactical problems, is probably a beginning, but not the end for us to comprehend meaning and truth of Hindu culture. He argued:

I had faith. Not the faith, ever to understand or to decipher the characters of the strange other script. But the faith that they contained as much truth, no more and no less, than the

⁵ For a survey of German comparative philological studies at this period, see McGetchin, D., Park, P. and SarDesai, D. 2004

⁶ His major philological works include *Philologica Indica* (1940), two-volume *Varuḷa* (1951, 1959), *Beobachtungen über die Sprache des buddhistischen Urkanons* (1953) and many others.

familiar script in which I was brought up and which was taken for the *script* of knowledge and reality all around me. (op. cit:249)

Evidently, Zimmer is not content with philological truth. He is questing truth beyond philological boundary—fanciful or visionary. For him philological investigation can only tell us something within the proper context of the words and sentences—things in letter but not in spirit; external knowledge, but not inside understanding. Philology stops before something like “life of the mind” and “life of the soul”. In case of India, religious culture is predominating, and art, literature mythology, philosophy and other human intellectual creation pertain to this axis. He said:

The attitude of the great majority, the typical representative of philological skill under the deadening spell of the logic of positivistic sciences, ultimately remained unrelated to the content of the material they handed all their lives. Their only link was their impersonal method. They posited and answered the question: What is the meaning of these terms, texts, doctrines, etc.? What are their interrelations, chronology, origin, migration? But they never asked the question: Are their sayings valid-valid for us, valid for ever and apart from the context in which they figure? While the others stopped at a analyzing...the stuff, I accompanied, inwardly, whatever I read and fancied to understand, at least to some extent, with the refrain: “This is the meanings, and –what is more; it is the truth. I believe it to be a most

significant aspect of truth, even though I am not capable, as yet, of merging it into the context of Western accepted aspects of reality or truth. It may be that I shall never be capable of achieving this on a major scale, yet I fully believe in the intrinsic validity of this secret script.” (op. cit. 265-7)

For Zimmer, the secret of Sanskrit lies not in the language per se, but a *Weltanschauung* impregnated with revealed truth within and without language. He does not perceive trees here and there whose connections needs to be closely scrutinized, but an enchanted forest with mysterious landscape which needs to be penetrated. What is to be emphasized here is that words for Zimmer are not confined to something written down as a document to be investigated. Mythological language has logic behind the stories narrated, but it cannot be ascertained by philological inquiry. Mythological account rather than historicized thinking is the core of the “Hindu mind” and its truth is silent before scientific analysis of written words. Also, pictorial languages by means of various artistic expressions, as well as acoustic signs are vital in uttering religious truth. In case of Hinduism, *mantra*, *dhāraṇī*, sacred imagine (*pratimā*) of deities, the charmed circle (*maṅḍala*), mystical diagram (*yantra*), gesticulation (*mudrā*) and other visual objects are crucial in esoteric teachings. He described his personal experience in quest of Hindu spirituality:

The current representation of India lacked color, depth, intensity, consistency, life. For years I was in search of the “real” India, of “my” India, of Schopenhauer’s India.

I first gained access to it through the magnificent lifework of Arthur Avalon⁷: the huge series of Tantric texts, and his most adequate introductions to their contents. At the same time the monuments, terrible and charming, and magnificent beyond words, began to speak to me.

Then I gained my first access to Hindu myth. I always had suffered under common almost total lack of understanding prevailing in my field with regard to this foremost of all expressions of the Hindu genius. I felt that nothing, so to speak, was achieved, nothing availed, as long as the seals of this book of revelation were unbroken. (op.cit. 258-259)

Zimmer's search for the understanding of Hindu wisdom outside philology brought him in touch with mythology and symbols of Hindu art. Discursive thinking stops and intuitive realization, individual consciousness and religious devotion prevail. Mythological way of thinking has prevailed "Hindu mentality" since the Vedic time. However, in Tantrism, we find the unfolding of mythology is intimately connected with various ways of visualization of the divine presence. In Tantric practice, the worship of the sacred images of deities and other esoteric

⁷ In other place of the same essay, Zimmer refers more on Arthur Avalon: "The values of Hindu tradition were disclosed to me through the enormous life-work of Sir John Woodroffe [1865-1936], alias Arthur Avalon, a pioneer and a classic author in Indic studies, second to none, who, for the first time, by many publications and books made available the extensive and complex treasure of late Hindu tradition: Tantras, a period as grand and rich as the Vedas, the Epic and Purānas, etc.; the latest crystallization of Indian wisdom, the indispensable closing link of a luminous chain, affording keys to countless problems in the history of Buddhism and Hinduism, in mythology and symbolism." (op.cit.: 254)

implements render the outward sight into inner vision to attain the union of disparate phenomena. To know this Tantric landscape of divine manifestations requires intimate acquaintance with the secret of esoteric language. Zimmer eloquently elucidates intricate world of Tantric practice, which is inaccessible to the positivist minds like philologist:

Owing to the symbolic value of the mantras' phonetic signs, the mantras are composite concentrated expressions of essence; their substance - *śakti* - is not discernable through discursive reasoning, but instead through the power of the believer's mind when it is successfully focused on them in meditation, thereby expanding their meaning to fill totally his mind, to permeate his consciousness. Similarly, the sacred image's mystery is revealed only to the fixed gaze of contemplation, which keeps to the path of traditional techniques and knowledge concerning the importance of the pictorial, spatial complex forms..."To the eyes of the uninitiated, it is merely an image that is being worshiped; but the true devotee sees...the bodily manifestation of the divine energy which is spirit." (Zimmer, 1984: 34)

Zimmer's influence loomed large after his death when his books in English started to circulate in the late fifties. His works on Hindu religion, art and mythology have enjoyed public acclaim ever since. People who are enthusiastic in searching for the wisdom of the East will find his gripping narration excellent introduction to India. In terms of postwar Indology, although the traditional philological

studies continue, more and more people study Sanskrit not because they desire to engage in the study of comparative philology, but to explore Hindu philosophy, religion, literature, mythology and so forth.

We would say that Zimmer is a powerful and idiosyncratic interpreter rather than a textual and bibliographical scholar of Indian art and thought. He envisages an ideal India and has a style all his own. We should evaluate his intellectual achievement from this angle. In a volume (Case, 1994) commemorating his hundredth anniversary, scholars from different points of view review his intellectual legacy. Although they tend to regard him as an incurably romantic proponent of Hindu *Geistesgeschichte*, but in general agree that Zimmer's works provides inspiration to readers interested in Indian religious culture. For example, Mathew Kapstein contends that Zimmer's *Philosophies of India* is more like Will Dorant's *The Story of Philosophy* rather than a philosophical treatise with intellectual rigor. Zimmer is not a philosopher by profession. However, Kapstein argues that though Zimmer was fairly familiar with contemporary philosophy⁸ has his own intellectual concerns. He points out fundamental message that Zimmer endeavors to convey in his "philosophical" writings:

⁸ "Zimmer in fact knew quite a lot of philosophy. A philosophical layman to be sure, he was nevertheless broadly conversant with the Western philosophical tradition and deeply knowledgeable about nineteenth century German philosophy in particular, so that his relationship with academic philosophy must be regarded as a considered one, rather than as the product sheer ignorance and misinformation." (Kapstein, 1994: 108)

Zimmer, to be sure, was not primarily in one-line affirmations He is concerned with the delineation of world-views, rather than rational arguments advanced with those worldviews. And he was profoundly concerned with the possibilities for human transformation disclosed in connection with the great worldviews of ancient India.” (Kapstein, 1994: 107) ⁹

In view of what is indicated here, it is not surprise for us to find that Zimmer deliberately shuns comparative philology because flesh and blood of Indian religious culture are conspicuously lacking in such kind of investigation. Being not contented with philologist mainstream, he devotes much of his energy to the exploration of Indian culture from a different perspective. His

⁹ It has to be pointed out that the field of Indian philosophy certainly is not a dilettante dabbling but specialists' endeavor. Zimmer's exposé of Indian philosophy is a kind of "Schopenhauer's shakti" as phased by Kapstein. Indeed, this has much to do with his personal interest in *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophies of life) as exemplified by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dilthey and Deussen. It was a matter of overriding concern to him. However, this kind of *Lebensphilosophie* definitely is not what a specialist's notion of Indian philosophy in a rigorous sense. Matilal points out: "A considerable portion of Indian philosophy consists of a number of rigorous systems which are most concerned with logic and epistemology than they are with transcendent states of euphoria. Verifications and rational procedures are as much as essential part of Indian philosophical thinking. Thus, neglect of the study of Indian philosophy in modern philosophical circles is obviously self-perpetuating, for no one but the analytical philosophers will be able to recognize and make known in Western languages the counterpart to their own discipline." (Matilal, 1971, 11-12; quoted in Kapstein, 1994: 106) He certainly has Zimmer in his mind when he criticizes non-philosophical approach from a professional viewpoint: "'Indian philosophy' has unfortunately come to denote a group of occult religious cults, a system of dogmas, and an odd assortment of spirituality, mysticism, and imprecise thinking, concerned almost exclusively with spiritual liberation." (Matilal, *ibid*:10; quoted in Kapstein, 1994: 108)

portrayal of India shows his personal predilection for the matters that are perennially interesting to people on the side of *Geisteswissenschaft*. In assessing Zimmer's legacy to Indologists, Doniger points out his unique position regarding the subject matter:

The most important contribution of Zimmer's Indology was his choice of offbeat stories to tell. Here his creativity is immediately and stunningly apparent. In choosing his sources, he preferred to ignore the usual star players: the *Rigveda*, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and the much overcited and overrated *Bhagavad Gita*, or even the slightly less clichéd Brahmanas and Upanishads. Instead, indulging in a kind of literary affirmative action, he rescued from academic obscurity the Puranas, more particularly, the late (and therefore devalued) Puranas. (Doniger, 1994: 55)

Again, the quest that Zimmer pursues is not objective knowledge but symbolic meanings embodied in religion, art, literature and so forth. Personally, Zimmer never had a chance to pay India a visit in his lifetime and India thus became his dreamland. (The book that he published in 1930 was entitled "Ewiges Indien") No wonder that Inden would consider him to be a Romantic-cum-Idealist. (Inden, 1990: 80, 104n) Indian thought and culture eventually became his quest. The India envisaged by him as the land of eternity is deeply engraved on his research. Nevertheless, in an age of colonialism and orientalism in which power and knowledge are inextricably intertwined, Zimmer's effort represents a new point of departure: to connect East and West through cultural

understanding and to define the West through the appreciation of the East. Zimmer's attempt to go beyond what philologist can do for Indian culture is extremely worthy of consideration. After all, India is the land of religious imagination.

III. Mercia Eliade and *Homo Religiosus*.

Mercia Eliade (1907-1986), the Romanian scholar of comparative religion who went to India in 1928 for three years to study Sanskrit, Indian philosophy and became an apprentice yogi in the Himalayas. As a versatile author, he wrote popular novels, journal, memoirs, and scholarly works with vast and curious erudition in the history of religion. He moved to the States in 1956 to embark on a brilliant career at the University of Chicago. At Chicago, he worked with Kitagawa founding the influential journal- *History of Religions* in 1961. His *opus magnum*, three-volume *A History of Religious Idea* is the crowning achievement of history of religion. Elide's remarks on the intellectual climate of his youth lends a hand for us to understand his entrance of groves of academe as a historian of religions:

We felt that purely Romanian creations would be difficult to achieve with the climate and forms of Western culture that our fathers have loved... We felt that what we had to say required a different language from that of the great authors and thinkers and grandfathers had thrilled to. We are attracted by the Upanishads, by Mirarepa, even by Tagore and Gandhi, by the ancient culture of the East.
And

we thought that by assimilating the message of those archaic, non-European cultures we might find ways of expressing our own spiritual heritage, a heritage part Thracian, part Slav, part Romanian, and at the same time, protohistorical and Oriental. We are very much aware of our position between East and West. (Eliade, 1982: 15-16)

The quest for Romanian Renaissance had brought Eliade to India. Though he never returned to India ever since his first voyage, Indian lesson became an important rite de passage for a promising young intellectual to embark on later venture a propos human religiosity. He did express his grateful acknowledgement of Indian contribution to his “romantic” visions of spiritual life (op. cit.: 54ff). While what Eliade deals with in his later works is on general thesis in the study of religions, we find that his Indian sojourn left an indelible mark on his vision of comparative religion. Themes related to Hindu religious life like archaic humanity, hierophany, *imitatio dei*, regeneration of time, symbolism and so forth are constantly reiterated themes in his works. (cf. Eliade, 1959; 1965) To conclude, it is in India that he found out the epitome of *homo religiosus*:

In India I discovered what I later came to refer to as “cosmic religious feeling.” That is to say, the manifestation of the sacred in objects or in cosmic rhythms: in a spring of water, in a tree, in the springtime of the year. This religion, still a living thing in India...this type of cosmic religion, which we call “polytheism” or “paganism,” was being treated with scant respect when I was a young man...But now I had lived

among pagans-among people who were able to participate in the sacred through the mediation of their gods. And those gods are figurations or expressions of the mystery of the universe, of that inexhaustible source of creation, of life, and of sacred joy. That gave me a starting point, so that I was then able to grasp their importance for the general history of religions. (1982: 56-7)

Hindu religious experience provides Eliade key thrust in determining the nature of religion through its diverse manifestations. It is interesting for us to note that even though he is a historian of religions and his last monumental work on the history of religious ideas, Eliade's main concern lies somewhere else. Patterns or archetypes of religious symbols, or phenomenology of religion is his real focus. Historical or chronological scrutiny of religious ideas within proper intellectual context, as it deals with matter outside religious consciousness is not his approach to the problem. He is looking for the fundamental nature which constitutes the mystery of religion stretching across lands and ages (cf. for example Eliade, 1958):

I was fortunate enough shortly before I left the country [India], to spend a few weeks in central India-the occasion being a sort of crocodile hunt-among the Snatali aborigines; in other words, among pre-Āryans. And I was deeply struck by the realization that India still has roots going down very deep, not just into its Āryan or Dravidian culture, but also into the very subsoil of Asian culture, into aboriginal culture. It was Neolithic civilization, based on agriculture;

in other words, on the religion and culture that accompanied the discovery of agriculture, particularly the vision of the world of nature as unbroken cycle of life, death and rebirth: a cycle specific to vegetable life but one that also governs life and at the same time constitutes a model for the spiritual life. So then I recognized the importance of Romanian and Balkan folk life. Like that of India, it was a folk culture based on the mystery of agriculture...all such symbols have a very archaic, Neolithic foundation. (op. cit.: 55-56)

As mentioned above, in India, mythical narrative has predominated since the Vedic time and the representation of time in terms of lineal progression never became the mode of discourse. According to Eliade's thesis, archaic personality participates the celestial archetypes *axis mundi* like sacred temple or city and celebrates the eternal recurrence of time in New Year, in different festivals to feel to be real and to become a part of cosmogony to regenerate oneself. He or she is not alienated from nature or cosmic time. In Judaeo-Christian tradition, Eliade argues, archetypes and repetitions have been replaced by the idea of God and history. The paradise is eternally lost.

It is undeniably that the quest for prototype of pristine religious formation underlines Eliade's edifice of scholarship on human existence. Owing to his quest for *homo religiosus* in its spotless purity, we find that what is primordial and what is degenerated are clearly demarcated in Eliade's thesis of humanity. Accordingly, the contrast between Judaeo-Christian tradition and Paganism, myth and history, archaic and modern and so forth serve

as model of reference. His elaboration can be summarized in the following passage:

We may say...that Christianity is the “religion” of modern mind and historical man, of the man

who simultaneously discovered personal freedom and continuous time (in place of cyclical time). It is even interesting to note that the existence of God forced itself far more urgently upon modern man, for whom history exists as such, as history and not as repetition, than upon the man of the archaic and traditional cultures, who, to defend himself from the terror of history, had at his disposition all the myths, rites, and customs...Moreover, the idea of God and the religious experience...could be, and were, replaced by other religious “forms” (totemism, cult of ancestors, Great Goddess of fecundity, and so on) that more promptly answered the religious needs of primitive humanity. (Eliade, 1965:161)

Eliade’s ideas are irritating to modern progressive mind but they offer us chance to step back to reconsider human situation. To be sure, we modern man (or woman) live in an alienated society (not community) without concerns for the mystery of life or nature. Mythology is probably a rather “archaic” product of “primitive” mind that cannot incite the curiosity of a positivistic intellect to add any new meanings on it. In a sense, as pointed out by Eliade that sanctified feeling which constitutes human existential search is no longer there when we live in an age of the profane. Mythical time of eternal return has been replaced by historical progression

and religious consciousness has receded from memory. (Eliade, 1959: 201-213)

Eliade's general theme on the polarity of human condition serves better as point of departure for us to understand religious phenomena in general than as a way to access to the distinctiveness of different religious traditions of the world. His way of placing similar phenomenon into the same box to make generalization without discerning their distinct cultural contexts could easily lead to an over-simplified categorization. Two related symbols in China and India do not necessary mean the same thing for the people concerned. We probably have to dig the diversity first in order to find what could possibly be universal. For me, Eliade is more like a philosopher questing for the all-purpose essentials than a historian looking for the diversity in context.

Indeed, scholars of history of religions post-Eliadian era are critical about his essentialist approach. His idea of *homo religiosus* which smacks strongly of reductionism is under mounting criticism in postmodern age. In a volume arguing for a new approach to the studies of comparative religion, scholars who are not satisfied with Eliade's way of investigating human religious cultures and experience, raise many related issues concerning the proper ways of doing religion:

Postmodernism represents a variegated critique of the Enlightenment humanism that undergirds modernism with its totalizing, rationalist gaze. The substantial and often well-founded charges brought against the comparative method are many; intellectual imperialism, universalism, theological

foundationism, and anti-contextualism. In particular, the work of Mircea Eliade, the late doyen of the history of religions, is held to be unredeemable, based as it is on the vision of a universal, transcendent “sacred” refracted in the ritual and mythic behavior of a cross-cultural human archetype called *Homo Religiosus*. (Patton and Ray, 2000: 1-2)

Among his many critiques, Jonathan Smith’s position is well worth noting here. In his many books and essays, Smith contends that comparative religion is to make sense the genuine difference rather than assemble superficial similarity. In order to avoid shallow generalization, philological capacity in one particular tradition is a *sine qua non* so that examples can be verified by literature and their loci in religious map can be pinpointed accurately. (Smith, 1982, 1993, 2004) Smith suggests that first of all, “the requirement that we locate a given example within the rich texture of its social, historical and cultural environments that invest its local significance.” (Smith, 2000: 239) Here, the shift of paradigm is distinctly visible. The intellectual climate after Eliade is to go beyond general phenomenological studies of religion and start with a particular tradition within definable context. Other general themes explored by Eliade are also seriously disputed by specialists from the perspective of area studies. For example, in the realm of Indian rituals, Flood argues against the theory of hierophany:

But the theory of hierophany is itself questionable from a cultural materialist perspective and based on an implicit theological and ahistorical understanding of religion; and

understanding that sees religion as transcending history, Eliade's statements about ritual in the Indian context are particularly open to criticism, for example from Staal's perspective of Vedic ritual as having syntax but no semantics, structure but no meaning... That every ritual 'has a divine model' is far from clear and is unreflexively assumed. (Flood, 1999: 5-6)

Even the very idea of *homo religiosus* is under critical evaluation by the scholars from a radical viewpoint. To be sure, *homo religiosus* as a universal concept has much to do with Western hegemonic intellectual perception of other cultures. It is an all-inclusive attempt to subjugate other traditions into religious spectrum of the West without differentiating indigenous context. In the final analysis, as pointed out by Dubuisson, the Western cultural tradition contributes substantially to the construction of *homo religiosus*:

The idea of a universal timeless *Homo religiosus* is a creation that has meaning only in the eyes of the West; it would have been inconceivable elsewhere, in any other culture. This figure summarizes most of the elevated conceptions that are found at the base of Christian and European anthropologies. This *Homo religiosus* is simultaneously a synthesis of the most idealist Western metaphysical points of view and a collocation of our keenest ethnocentric prejudices. (Dubuisson, 2003: 184)

In general, Eliade's concept of *homo religiosus* is seriously challenged in the postmodern era. It has been argued that in the

studies of history of religions points should be explicated in proper context rather than assembled indiscriminately. (cf. Patton and Ray, 2000) The intricacies of the examples should be untangled scrupulously so that the indigenous viewpoint can be significantly appreciated. Above all, *la différence*, not similarity or contiguity, is what to be taken into serious account.

IV. Louis Dumont and *Homo Hierarchicus*

Louis Dumont (1911-1998), the French anthropologist whose work on caste system--*Homo Hierarchicus* has set up the paradigm for the study of Hindu society. He demonstrates the craftsmanship of deciphering the formidable human socio-religious formations like caste system. For him, the modern Western secular, egalitarian and individualistic mind simply ignores the religious ideology underlying a hierarchical society. If this is the situation, how can one possibly appreciate peculiar traditional Hindu society? How do we make sense of practices totally alien to one's society? Exotic curiosity probably will be satiated with esoteric religious practice like Tantrism. Nonetheless, caste system does not sound exotic at all. Dumont's remarks on the comparative methods are worth mentioning here:

Comparison had always been there, in intention: to learn something about ourselves while studying other people. Then comparison developed, on the explicit level, from within a small region...to comparison between north and south, and finally between India and the West. Perhaps

to understand fully the book on caste, the appendices are first to be read and understood, on order to follow the successive generalizations or abstractions. In retrospect, there is something mysterious about the process, and yet I am sure that the same thing will happen to any one who commits himself to the job as unreservedly as I did. Something like a snowball effect takes place. The principle is simply that all human institutions are meaningful. So is caste. (Galey, 1982: 21-22)

Caste system as one of important human institutions is meaningful in itself and its implications will be revealed to us through a coherent, meticulous and assiduous comparison. Moreover, in the process of seriously studying others, what we discover is not only truth of others but also the authenticity of our distinctiveness. Dumont's endeavor to study others in order to know ourselves reminds us a story told by Zimmer. This story is about rabbi Eisik who dreamed of treasure under the bridge leading to Prague. The bridge is well guarded and he found no chance to testify his dreams as he went there day by day. Finally, the guard, while being informed by the rabbi his dreams, told him not to believe in any fanciful dreams and informed him that he had similar dream: treasure behind stove in the house of a rabbi called Eisik. The rabbi immediately went back home and found the treasure in the aforesaid place. Zimmer reflected on the significance of this story:

Now the real treasure, to end our misery and trials, is never far away; it is not to be sought in any distant region, it lies buried in the innermost recess of our own home, that is to

say, our own being. And it lies behind the stove, the life-and-warmth giving center of the structure of our existence, our heart of hearts-if we could only dig. But there is the odd and persistent fact that it is only after journey to a distant region, a foreign country, a strange land, that the meaning of the inner voice that is to guide our quest can be revealed to us. And together with this odd and persistent fact there goes another, namely, that the one who reveals to us the meaning of our cryptic inner message, must be a stranger, of another creed and a foreign race. (Zimmer, 1946:221)

The message disclosed here is that through the exploration of “the far other” we will find our true identity. Paradoxically, we will not appreciate the values of our culture when we consider ourselves to be far away from the center of the discourse. However, modern West, with the expansion of knowledge and power, has become the symbol of universal culture. Civilizations in other lands and of other people are considered to be parochial. For Dumont, this is misleading in terms of human values. Great civilizations like India, because it is so genuinely different from modern West and intrinsically unique, can teach us meaningful lessons concerning what is universal. People in the West tend to think that characteristics of their own culture should be universal to all human societies. Dumont considers Western individualistic, egalitarian society and hierarchical society in India represent two different ways of representing humanity:

Lorsque nous écrivons «Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité» aux frontons de nos édifices publics, cela n'a de sens que parce qu'il est bien entendu que la réalité humaine véritable, ce sont les individus, des êtres indépendents et se suffisant à eux-mêmes dans le principe, existant en soi et pour soi. De même mais inversement, dans l'inde, la séparation et la hiérarchie des castes n'ont de sens que parce que tout le monde sait sans avoir besoin de le dire que la société est fondée sur l'*interdépendance* des castes. Et par conséquent des homes particuliers, à l'intérieur d'un ordre qui constitue, lui, la réalité humaine véritable. ¹⁰ (Dumont, 1975:17-8)

As an implicit critic of individualistic society, Dumont considers modern Western society a great transformation in which the sense of human community has been replaced by the sense of collective individuals. Indeed, in modern West, individuality, considered to be inviolable end in itself, has become the core of humanity since Kant declared it as the agent of moral autonomy. Caste is at the other side of the spectrum in which the formation of society is rigidly structured according to religious ideology of pure and impure, which seems to be utterly abhorrent to modern mind.

¹⁰“As far as we write ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’ on the pediments of public buildings, the reality of true humanity is individuals. That is to say, the individuals are independent, self-sufficient in principle, existing in themselves and for themselves. This is well understood. Similarly yet conversely, in India, so far as the separation and the hierarchy of the castes are concerned, society is founded on the *interdependence* of the castes. Consequently, the particular persons are within an order which sets up the reality of true humanity. This is so well-known that we do not need to say about it.”

Nonetheless, to arrange society in the proper order of things is to consider social nature of human existence. When global order is to be secured first and foremost, then a differentiation of one social group from another is foreseeable. In other words, hierarchy is inevitable if overall order is deemed to be the primacy of humanity and each person must contribute to sustain this order.

This sense of global, well-defined order is replaced by the sense of open order in modern society. It is a society with monads interacting one another freely without mediation of any social intermediaries. Accordingly, the idea of humanity has also undergone great transformation:

In modern society...the Human Being is regarded as the indivisible, 'elementary' man, both a biological being and a thinking subject. Each particular man in a sense incarnates the whole of mankind. He is the measure of all things (in a full and novel sense). The kingdom of ends coincides with each man's legitimate ends, and so the values are turned upside down. What is still called 'society' is the means, the life of each man is the end. Ontologically, the society no longer exists. (Dumont, 1980: 9)¹¹

¹¹The Hindu society provides a point of departure for Dumont's comparative studies of traditional and modern societies. His perspicacious reflections on modern individualism are benefited from his observations of the Hindu society. In the final analysis his critique of Western society has much to do with his profound concern of human society as a community (*Gemeinschaft*) For him, the modern individualistic society has become an association of citizens (*Gesellschaft*). Concerning the emergence of modern individualism, Kant's concept of moral autonomy is relevant in a sense that it provides a powerful ethical foundation. Undoubtedly, as an epoch-making philosophical discourse, Kant's argumentation for moral autonomy left an indelible mark on

In India, society is not considered simply to be residuum of individuals, but the embodiment of social justice. In other words, the society is arranged in such a way that group but not individual, identity instead of equality, social order rather than personal freedom are matters of major concern. Moreover, it is a representation of socio-religious order which is sacred in its constitution. In Hinduism (if this term is veritable) the realm of *religion* is noticeable not only in so-called religious matters like worshipping deities and ritual practices, but also other formations understood to be part of human experience of participating sanctified existence. Indeed, the idea of pure and impure which is religious originally, has become the ideological basis for the ordering of caste society:

The opposition of pure and impure appears to us the very principle of hierarchy, to such a degree that it merges with the opposition of superior and inferior; moreover, it also governs separation... The preoccupation with purity leads to the getting rid of the recurrent personal impurities of organic life, to organizing contact with purificatory agents and abolishing it with external agents of impurity, whether social or other. The ban on certain contact corresponds to the idea of untouchability, and all sorts of rules govern food and marriage. (op.cit. 59-60)

modern thought. Dumont's purpose here is to contrast two presuppositions of human existence. While the modern perception of human person has much to do with the emergence of individualism, the traditional society exemplified by caste system represents the social sanctification of human existence.

In traditional Hindu world, we find that the term “religion” is a holistic concept, including private and public, social as well as familial. For example, political order is considered subjugated to religious order, yet the king has duty to maintain the order of caste well. This implies that although king is secularized so far as his ritual status concerned, he nonetheless has to subject himself to *rājadharmā* which is sacred in itself. To be a secular individual Hindu is self-contradicting in the traditional sense of the word. One has to lead a sanctified life to be a Hindu; otherwise he or she is a *mlecchā*, a barbarian. Without entering Hindu communal life, one remains an outsider.

Is caste system a construction of modern West, namely, the British colonizer? Dirks argues that colonialism contributes to make the caste system all-encompassing from a postcolonial critique. It is through colonialism that caste was made to become the central symbol of India society:

[It] was under British that “caste” became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all ‘systematizing’ India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization. This was achieved through an identifiable (if contested) ideological canon as the result of a concrete encounter with colonial modernity during two hundred years of British domination. In short, colonialism made caste what it is today. (Dirks: 2001: 5)

While one cannot deny the role that British colonizer plays in shaping modern caste system through political means like the census for the colonial rule, caste as a major Hindu ideology of

hierarchy was already found definitive expression in many sacred scriptures. In fact, as Hsüan-tsang in the seventh century already pointed out, India as a “concept of integrated kingdom” was realized not by political dominion but through the symbol of caste system. It is said:

The families of India are divided into castes, the Brāhmaṅs particularly (*are noted*) on account of their purity and nobility. Tradition has hallowed the name of this tribe that there is no difference of place, but the people generally speak of India as the country of the Brāhmaṅs (Po-lo-men). (Hsüan-tsang. 1914: 69)¹²

Dumont’s contrast of modern West and traditional Hindu, as a mode of comparison may generalize too much about what should be modern and traditional. Besides, Hindu society is not typical of traditional societies in having such a rigid caste system. Traditional Chinese society is intrinsically different from that of the Hindu yet it is also time-honored. However, his assessment of modern Western cultural formation is deeply reflective. To be sure, the emergence of individualistic society brings about a great transformation in our vision of humanity. By employing Hindu

¹²Van der Veer ‘s on the British contribution to the formation of modern caste is worth mentioning here: “ The [British] census operations, began in 1872 to collect data about the population of India, made use of classification of endogamous groups-castes-ranked in a hierarchical order. This classification was derived from classical Hindu texts, but the census operations succeeded in making it a contemporary reality. They established an official discourse of caste that enabled officials to rule Indian society but that also had a deep impact on the way that Indians came to perceive their relations with one another on an all-India basis.” (Van der Veer, 1994: 19)

society as the point of comparison, Dumont skillfully demonstrates the idiosyncrasy of ideological configuration in modern West and the characteristics of hierarchy which are distinctive of human societies.

In spite of all vicissitudes, the caste as a vital Hindu concept remains central to the understanding of Hinduism. Dumont's exploration of the caste system provides a fascinating new perspective on this time-honored Hindu way of life.

Conclusion:

How possibly can one image India? Is a discourse necessary burdened with ideological camouflage especially at the age of postcolonialism and postmodernism? Personally, I think Hinduism with its complexity and intricacy has to be dealt with guardedly. In this paper, I discuss three major scholars in the field of Hinduism, evaluating their intellectual quest and achievements from their works and personal remarks. They have their visions of Hinduism, which has much to do with their intellectual concerns. These concerns, from my viewpoint are different from the general interest of colonialist discourse. I confine myself to what I find in their writings to make sure that it is not courting controversy of Orientalism.

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凝想印度 - 試論欽繆、伊利亞德 與杜蒙

黃柏棋*

摘要

本文討論影響二十世紀後半期印度教思想研究方向相當重要的三位學者，他們分別是：欽繆（Heinrich Zimmer, 1890-1943）、伊利亞德（Mircea Eliade, 1907-1986）與杜蒙（Louis Dumont, 1911-1998）。此三位學者在印度宗教文化相關領域上-即宗教思想與藝術，宗教人（*homo religiosus*）與階序人（*homo hierarchicus*）的論述上具有極重要的指標意義。也由於他們的研究，我們對印度的宗教生活有了進一步地認識。這三位學者，都是出身歐洲而成長於東方學與殖民主義全盛時期的學界。他們最後不是有意地選擇留在美國，就是與英美學界保持密切的互動。在與東方的邂逅中，引領了他們進入印度這個國度。於其時，他們凝想印度所代表的另一個思想世界，在滿腔熱忱的追尋下，探索印度獨樹一格的宗教生活。然在此尋覓的過程中，也促使他們重新解釋或再定

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位自身文化的根源。此一過程中代表著一種探討他人文化思想以了解自我的絕佳例子。文中闡釋三人重要學術觀點，並評論與檢視其中所代表的思想意義。

關鍵詞：東方主義、印度教的智慧、宗教人、階序人