



## **THE EVOLUTION OF INDIA HISTORY AND RELIGION THROUGH THE YEARS**

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### **Abstract**

The article contributes to a theoretical framework for a theory that describes and explains the distribution and development of the various religions from a genetical and historical point of view. While religious evolution until now has been understood as a process of progress, the theory outlined in this paper focuses on the biological Theory of Evolution in order to direct the attention to the main characteristics of natural evolutionary processes. By drawing parallels between biological and religious evolution the evolution of religions is described as the adaptive modification of religions throughout history. After discussing the question of a natural systematic unit in the world of religions, the different means of evolutionary processes are investigated. As a result, a theory is presented that understands the development of religions in a way which explains their recent phenotype as well as their modifications during history.

**Keywords:** *Evolution, Religion*

### **1. Introduction**

Hardly any scientific theory had such an impact on the worldview of the nineteenth and twentieth century as Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution. In 1859 Darwin's famous book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* overthrew the traditional religious and philosophical interpretations of life. The former theologian and naturalist, who had circumnavigated the globe on the *Beagle*, established that the existence of the many recent species and the different faunas of the geological record were neither the result of one or several acts of creation nor of various catastrophes, but of a natural process lasting millions of years. Since Darwin had created a sensation with his thesis, his evolutionary sequence at once started to capture the imagination of his contemporaries. Great minds began exploring the world from the new evolutionary point of view, busy organising the facts that were being turned up in every field of research into the new scheme of scientific interpretation. Crucial points of the new theory were still not understood, however. Darwin, and together with him the highly gifted Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913), had found out that variability and natural selection were the main causes of the changes occurring in organisms; therefore, evolution had to be seen as a process of adaptation to a certain environment. Their contemporaries, however, focussed on explaining cultural and sociological change as a process of continual progress. (Cf. Bowler 2000.)

In this scientific atmosphere, scholars of the humanities such as Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer assimilated the new direction of research into their work and tried to find evolutionary sequences in the vast field of anthropology. Their theoretical approach, however, remained bound to the ideas of unilinear and progressive development as exemplified by the British philosopher Herbert Spencer and others. Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), one of the founders of anthropology as the science of man and his culture, developed a theory of the evolution of civilisation in which primitive man had chronological priority and was considered to be close to prehistoric man. The evolution not only of civilisation, but also of religion was seen as a process involving three successive stages, one arising from the other. The first stage of savagery was characterised by a still primitive form of religion, which consisted in the belief in spirits (animism) and developed into ancestor worship (Tylor 1970:425). At the second stage polytheism is the dominant belief, and the third stage was a highly developed monotheism, as exemplified in the British protestant churches (*ibid.* 432–433). While Tylor used myth, religious practice, folklore and custom as evidence for the acquired stage of civilisation, it was ultimately the technical and economical superiority of a few European and North-American nations and its striking contrast to the material culture of primitive man which led him to look for a theory that would explain civilisation in contrast to savagery and barbarism as the last and most developed one in a succession of different stages (Tylor 1866:2).

After a short climax in the last decades of the nineteenth century evolutionary ideas have had their days in the humanities (Rensch 1972:836). The First World War belied the optimistic prognoses of their advocates, and the results of ethnographic research ultimately did not fit the simple scheme of primitive savages or barbarians on the one hand and highly civilised races on the other. The study of religions in particular provided data regarding the religions of traditional peoples which had hardly anything to do with animism or ancestor-worship (Waardenburg 1999:220–243). As a result, other theories such as functionalism or structuralism dominated the discussion among scholars of religion (Kohl 1997:58; Stolz 1988:201–206). Only the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century gave rise again to evolutionary theories, ostensibly less ethnocentric than the classical evolutionary theories and taking several limiting factors into consideration (Stolz 1988:206). They describe, as Fritz Stolz emphasises, a development in accordance with that of biological evolution. The essential qualities of these new evolutionary theories in the study of religion were especially apparent in the well-known and widely discussed classification system of Robert Bellah (Bellah 1970:20–50).

In his research Bellah focussed mainly on contemporary problems of religious development in highly industrialised nations such as the United States or modern Asia, which he wanted to comprehend and integrate into a developmental scheme. Hence he referred to a generally accepted typology of societies and their accompanying religions, relying on the work of the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Bellah's classification of religions includes all recent religions as well as the religions of the societies of the past and is therefore assumed to describe a religious development from low to high variety and complexity. This is, as Bellah emphasises, a development in accordance with that of biological evolution (Bellah 1970:21). Religious evolution, as Bellah sees it, has direction and purpose. It is understood as a process of

increasing complexity and independence from the environment, leading from the stage of primitive religion to those of archaic religion, classical religion, early-modern religion, and modern religion, the latter being the typical form of religion in the most industrialised countries of today. According to Bellah, the causes of evolution are processes of diversification, which finally lead to greater complexity and independence of the evolving entities.

Bellah's opinion is shared by many sociologists and scholars in the history of religions even today. In Germany, for example, the sociologist Günter Dux understands evolution as a progressive process leading from protozoa to more complicated organisms, then to primitive man and finally to the most developed humans of the highly civilised nations. This ascending process is characterised by increasing knowledge and personal freedom of decision (Dux 1982).

The idea of religious and social evolution as an ascending process of increasing perfection hardly differs from the common views of nineteenth century evolutionary biology. Biology itself was reluctant to dispense with ideas originating in the philosophy of the enlightenment and granted evolution a certain direction. Ernst Haeckel's (1834–1919) reconstruction of a phylogenetic tree of the animal kingdom emphasises the single phylogenetic line that leads from reptiles to mammals and then directly to primates and man. Other biological orders are included only as a kind of side-branches, so that evolution ultimately seems to aim at the emergence of man.<sup>1</sup> Even after the Darwinian Theory of Evolution had finally prevailed, ideas of alleged evolutionary tendencies were introduced again and became known as so-called orthogenesis (cf., e.g. Rensch 1991). In contrast to all those various theories that want to impute a certain direction on evolutionary development, however, evolution has to be seen as an undirected process mainly controlled by mere chance. One of the most influential evolutionary biologists of today, Ernst Mayr, characterises evolution as a two-step process: „The first step consists of the production of variation in every generation, that is, of suitable genetic or phenotypic variants that can serve as the material of selection, and this will then be exposed to the process of selection. The first step of variation is completely independent of the actual selection process, and yet selection would not be possible without the continuous restoration of variability. “

Therefore, the crucial difference between recent biological and non-biological theories can be described as follows: in biology, evolution is defined as the adaptive modification of organisms through time by means of natural variability and selection. In the study of religion, however, as well as in other disciplines of the humanities, the term evolution is still understood as a process of progressive development. The idea of progress and improvement throughout history leads to the ascription of certain attributes to the described religion, which is then classified as primitive, archaic or advanced. Such a procedure can only lead to classifying religions according to a theory of gradual stages. Only a precise consideration of historical sequences in religion and their unique attributes may, however, result in a true evolutionary theory in the study of religion, whereby religions are classified according to how they are related to other religions, and not according to their assumed stage of progress. The term religious evolution, therefore, cannot

define stages of development or complexity; however, in accordance with a biological understanding of evolution, it may describe the adaptive modification of religion(s) throughout history.

***Do religions change during history, and are there any related religions?***

No religion appeared suddenly without precedents. On the contrary, religion develops and changes during history according to its economical, sociological and natural environment. Religions adopt foreign customs and assimilate proven and successful symbols. The Christian religion may serve as an example for both the continuity and change of mentality. Christianity originated in Judaism, integrated Greek philosophy and religious thought, and developed these ideas into an independent and successful religion.

This example—and many more can be easily found—may serve as evidence that religions do in fact change over time. The second question has already been answered. Religions are related to each other. Christianity, for example, is closely related to Judaism and Islam. Also the religions of the Indian subcontinent mostly share a common origin and therefore are related to each other.

Naturally there is much more evidence of evolutionary sequences in the history of religions. The examples mentioned above and below are only meant to illustrate the theory. It is important, however, not to confuse the theory of religious evolution with evolutionary classification. An evolutionary classification of the various religions only comes as a second step and has to be based on the evolutionary theory, which I will outline in this paper. A new classification, however, will not be the work of only a few weeks. In biology, scholars needed more than 200 years to classify the known species and have not finished their task until now.

It should be added that the origin of a new religion has nothing to do with the question of the beginning of religion. The appearance of a new religion only means that a mother-religion underwent fundamental changes, so that it finally splits up in two or more different and distinct religions (Judaism and Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism).

***Religion in India***

Religion in India is characterized by a diversity of religious beliefs and practices. The Indian subcontinent is the birthplace of four of the world's major religions: namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Religious diversity and religious tolerance are established by the law; the Constitution of India defines freedom of religion a fundamental right and holds India to be a secular state.

According to the 2011 census, 79.8% of the population of India practices Hinduism, 14.2% adheres to Islam, 2.3% adheres to Christianity, 1.7% adheres to Sikhism, 0.7% adheres to Buddhism, and 0.4% adheres to Jainism. Zoroastrianism, Yungdrung Bon, the Bahá'í Faith, Sanamahism, and Judaism also have a history in India, and each has at least several thousand adherents in India.

India has given refuge to followers of persecuted religions across its history. In the post-classical period, sanctuary was granted to Hebrew Jews who fled captivity in Babylonia, Aramaic Christians who fled the Islamic invasion of Syria in the 7th century, and Persian Zoroastrians who fled persecution in Persia in the 9th century following the Muslim conquest of Persia, as a result, India has the largest population of people adhering to Zoroastrianism (i.e. Parsis or Iranis) in the world.<sup>[6]</sup> In the 20th to 21st centuries, sanctuary was granted to Russian, Persian and Afghan Jews,<sup>[7]</sup> Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Hindus, and Ahmadiyyas who fled persecution in Pakistan. When the Dalai Lama fled Tibet and took refuge in India after it was invaded by China, many Tibetans followed his example and continue to seek refuge in India.

Today, India is home to around 94%<sup>[8]</sup> of the global population of Hindus. Most Hindu shrines and temples are located in India, as are the birthplaces of most Hindu saints. Prayagraj hosts the world's largest religious pilgrimage, Prayag Kumbh Mela, where Hindus from across the world come together to bathe in the confluence of three sacred rivers of India: the Ganga, the Yamuna, and the Saraswati. The Indian diaspora in the West has popularized many aspects of Hindu philosophy such as yoga, meditation, Ayurvedic medicine, divination, karma, and reincarnation.

The influence of Indian religions has been significant all over the world. Several Hindu-based organizations, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Brahma Kumaris, the Ananda Marga, and others have spread Hindu spiritual beliefs and practices. The Indian subcontinent also contains the largest population of Muslims in the world, with about one-third of all Muslims being from South Asia.<sup>[11][12][13]</sup> By 2050, the Muslim population of India is projected to grow to 311 million and surpass Indonesia to become the world's largest Muslim population, although India will retain a Hindu majority (about 77%).<sup>[14]</sup> India is also the cradle of Ahmadiyya Islam. The shrines of some of the most famous saints of Sufism, like Moinuddin Chishti and Nizamuddin Auliya, are found in India, and attract visitors from all over the world.

Before the Mughal Empire and Delhi Sultanate, as much as 90% of the population may have fallen under the Hindu umbrella,<sup>[16][failed verification][dubious – discuss]</sup> although demographic information on pre-modern polities is scarce. The elites of those empires came from historically Muslim ethnicities, and many sought to harmonize their personal religion with the Hinduism of their subjects. Nevertheless, a backlash during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries reestablished confessional boundaries and genealogical evidence suggests that many modern-day Muslims have some Hindu ancestors.

### *Secularism*

**India** is a secular state by the Forty-second Amendment of the Constitution of India enacted in 1976, asserting Preamble to the Constitution of India as **Secular** by Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed who was pressured by Indira Gandhi, during the leadup to Emergency. However, the Supreme Court of India in the 1994 case *S. R. Bommai v. Union of India* established the fact that India had been secular since the formation of the republic on 26 January 1950. Secularism in India is

understood to mean not a separation of religion from state, but a state that supports or participates in a neutral manner in the affairs of all religious groups and as well as atheism.

The monument built in the 20th century. Overlooking the Arabian Sea this monument was built for the welcoming of George V and Queen Mary when they visited India in the year 1911. Since then it has served as an entry point to India as an acceptance of diversity

Secularism is defined as a basic structure doctrine of the constitution that cannot be removed or amended by any means.

The particular provisions regarding secularism and freedom of religion in India in the constitution are:

- 1.) "(Article 14)": grants equality before the law and equal protection of the laws to all.
- 2.) "(Article 15)": enlarges the concept of secularism to the widest possible extent by prohibiting discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.
- 3.) "(Article 25)": Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of any religion.
- 4.) "(Article 26)": Freedom to manage religious affairs.
- 5.) "(Article 27)": Freedom as to payment of taxes for promotion of any particular religion.
- 6.) "(Article 28)": Freedom as to attendance at religious instruction or religious worship in certain educational institutions.
- 7.) "(Article 29)" and "(Article 30)": provides cultural and educational rights to the minorities.
- 8.) "(Article 51A)": i.e. Fundamental Duties obliges all the citizens to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood and to value and preserve the heritage of the country's composite diverse culture.

## ***History***

### ***Pre-historic religion***

Evidence attesting to prehistoric religion in the Indian "subcontinent" derives from scattered Mesolithic rock paintings depicting dances and rituals.<sup>[35]</sup> Neolithic pastoralists inhabiting the Indus Valley buried their dead in a manner suggestive of spiritual practices that incorporated notions of an afterlife. Other South Asian Stone Age sites, such as the Bhimbetka rock shelters in central Madhya Pradesh and the Kupgal petroglyphs of eastern Karnataka, contain rock art portraying religious rites and evidence of possible ritualised music.<sup>[37]</sup>

### ***Indus Valley Civilization***

The Harappan people of the Indus Valley Civilisation, which lasted from 3300 to 1400 BCE and was centered on the Indus and Ghaggar-Hakra river valleys, may have worshiped an important mother goddess symbolising fertility. Excavations of Indus Valley Civilisation sites show seals with animals and "fire-altars", indicating rituals associated with fire. A Shivlinga of a type similar to that which is now worshiped by Hindus has also been found.

### ***Evolution of Hinduism***

Hinduism, known endonymically as Sanatan Dharm, is often regarded as the oldest religion in the world,<sup>[40]</sup> with roots tracing back to prehistoric times, over 5,000 years ago.<sup>[41]</sup> Hinduism spread through parts of Southeastern Asia, China, and Afghanistan. Hindus worship a single divine entity (paramatma, lit. "first-soul") with different forms.

Hinduism was practised more as the culture of the land, and dominated Indian society until the colonial era. Hinduism as a culture had always been traditionally practised where spirituality and science are embraced in conjunction. And in Hinduism, Sanatan Dharm is considered the grandmother of all philosophies. Post western influence, Hinduism, over years has been type-cast as a religion. Hinduism's origins include the cultural elements of the Indus Valley Civilisation along with other Indian civilisations.<sup>[43]</sup> The oldest surviving text of Hinduism is the Rigveda, produced during the Vedic period and dating to 1700–1100 BCE. During the Epic and Puranic periods, the earliest versions of the epic poems, in their current form including Ramayana and Mahabharata were written roughly from 500–100 BCE, although these were orally transmitted through families for centuries prior to this period.

After 200 BCE, several schools of thought were formally codified in the Indian philosophy, including Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Purva-Mimamsa, and Vedanta. Hinduism, otherwise a highly theistic religion, hosted atheistic schools and atheistic philosophies Other Indian philosophies generally regarded as orthodox include Samkhya and Mimamsa.

### ***Conclusion***

I conclude with some remarks. This article is intended to be a contribution to a theoretical framework for the history of religions. While religious evolution until now has been understood as a process of progress, I have focussed on the biological Theory of Evolution as exemplified by great evolutionists such as Ernst Mayr in order to direct the attention to the main characteristics of natural evolutionary processes. In biology, the Theory of Evolution is accepted. By drawing parallels between biological and religious evolution this article has explored the implications of a correct understanding of this theory for the history religions.

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