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Ancient Hindu Society and Eliot's Ideal Christian Society

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Abstract: In her article "Ancient Hindu Society and Eliot's Ideal Christian Society" Anita Bhela examines the influence of Hindu thought and Hindu philosophy on T.S. Eliot's critical writings. In *The Idea of a Christian Society* Eliot gives a hypothetical account of an ideal society that would contribute towards the well-being of all its members, while in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* he enumerates the essential conditions needed for the growth and survival of culture. Bhela argues that religion and culture were inseparably interrelated in Eliot's mind. She then traces similarities in the concepts of family, culture, and religion as expressed in Eliot's account of his hypothetical Christian society and ancient Hindu society to show that Eliot's concept of an ideal Christian society comes astonishingly close to the ideal of Hindu society as it existed in ancient times.

Anita BHELA

Ancient Hindu Society and Eliot's Ideal Christian Society

In a radio broadcast to Germany in 1946 on "The Unity of European Culture," T.S. Eliot said that "In the literature of Asia is great poetry. There is also profound wisdom and some very difficult metaphysics … Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages, and while I was interested at that time in Philosophy, I read a little poetry too; and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility" (Eliot, *Notes* 113). In the fall of 1911, while at Harvard University, Eliot deepened his reading in anthropology and religion and took "almost as many courses in Sanskrit and Hindu thought" as he did in philosophy (Bush 7 405-10). Among Indian religious books, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* impressed him the most (for the influence of these books on Eliot's thought see Kearns McNelly 30-66). Although their philosophy of non-attachment to the fruits of action appealed to Eliot as it did to E.M. Forster, for Eliot, their essential value rested in the fact that they showed "that without spiritual knowledge man is an incomplete being" (Shahani 134). Religion was of fundamental importance to Eliot not because of its utilitarian aspect — the logic that upholds religion on the plea that it must be encouraged because it is beneficial in keeping in check the greed and rapacious tendencies in human beings — but because the religious experience, the perception of and existence of the divine is a part of the reality of life and if mankind is to progress it must recognize its dependence upon the divine. Besides this, Eliot also believed that religion "gives an apparent meaning to life, provides the frame-work for a culture, and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair" (Eliot, *Notes* 34).

Religion and culture were related inseparably in Eliot's mind. According to him, one could not exist without the other (*Notes* 29-34). In *The Idea of a Christian Society* Eliot gives a hypothetical account of an ideal society which would contribute towards the well-being of all its members and thereby afford the maximum freedom to all. While in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* he enumerates the essential conditions needed for the growth and survival of culture. In *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* Eliot used and adopted certain concepts and ideas taken from Hindu religion and philosophy and it is remarkable that Eliot's concept of an ideal Christian society in which the highest culture will prevail comes astonishingly close to the ideal of Hindu society as it existed in ancient times (for the Hindu way of life see, e.g., Chaudhuri; Doniger; Lingat; Lipner). Kearns McNelly observes that the "matrix of myth provided by the Vedas and the philosophical richness and diversity of the Upanishads repeatedly claimed [Eliot's] attention, and the brilliance of the orthodox Hindu systems … formed an important part of his philosophical training" and the effect of these traditions on Eliot was not merely theoretical and they influenced and shaped his "stance toward his material, even when the material itself seems quite different in origin and intent" (30). Thus various parallels, conscious or unconscious, can be drawn between the essential features of Eliot's hypothetical ideal society and ancient Hindu society.

Eliot as a thinker possessed not only the ability to go to the fundamental roots of every problem but also to see each problem in relation to an individual's life and his/her place in the scheme of the universe, i.e., in the light of the Platonic ideal of all time and all existence. In *The Idea of a Christian Society* Eliot states that his aim is not to focus on the specific defects or abuses of modern society but to examine the "idea" of the society in which we live and to see "to what end is it arranged?" (8). This examination leads him to the conclusion that the values of "Democracy" and "Liberalism" which Western society has stood by can only help to destroy: "traditional social habits of the people, by dissolving their natural collective consciousness into individual constituents, by licensing the opinions of the most foolish, by substituting instruction for education, by encouraging cleverness rather than wisdom, the upstart rather than the qualified, by fostering a notion of *getting on* to which the alternative is a hopeless apathy, Liberalism can prepare the way for that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanised or brutalised control which is a desperate remedy for its chaos. (Eliot, *The Idea* 16; emphasis in the original).

Eliot's need or desire for the establishment of a Christian society stems from his realization that the alternative to a Christian society is a lapse into apathy of a people living without faith and the

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establishment of a "totalitarian democracy" which shall have "regimentation and conformity, without respect for the needs of the individual soul" (*The Idea* 23). Eliot acknowledges that he is not aware of the means by which the ideal society that he envisages can come into being, hence, he aims only at pointing out certain essential features of this Christian society. The three chief elements of the society would be "the Christian State, the Christian Community, and the Community of Christians" (*The Idea* 26) and the connection between these three would be in relation to the problem of belief: "Among the men of state, you would have as a minimum, conscious conformity of behaviour. In the Christian Community that they ruled, the Christian faith would be ingrained, but it requires, as a minimum, only a largely unconscious behaviour; and it is only from the much smaller number of conscious human beings, the Community of Christians, that one would expect a conscious Christian life on its highest social level" (*The Idea* 28). Eliot's quarrel with the doctrine of "humanism" of Irving Babbitt, with its emphasis on "inner check" is three-fold. First, that it is a doctrine which by focusing on human reason disassociates itself from the religious and the supernatural and hence can be only of temporary value. Second, that it cannot persist for more than two or three generations, for while humanism has been sporadic, Christianity has been continuous and third, and most importantly, that it is an individualistic doctrine and has nothing to offer the mob (Eliot*, Selected* 471-80). Eliot believed that when humanism is associated with religion then, unlike in the humanism of Irving Babbitt, the appeal for "*inner* control" is made not to "a man's behaviour but to his soul" (476; emphasis in the original). Eliot felt that: "For the great mass of humanity whose attention is occupied mostly by their direct relation to the soil, or the sea, or the machine… As their capacity for *thinking* about the objects of faith is small, their Christianity may be almost wholly realized in behaviour: both in their customary and periodic religious observances, and in a traditional code of behaviour … Religion must be primarily a matter of behaviour and habit, must be integrated with its social life, with its business and its pleasures; and the specifically religious emotions must be a kind of extension and sanctification of the domestic and social emotions" (Eliot, *The Idea* 28-29; emphasis in the original). Eliot meant that for the common mass of population to be "conscious, without remission, of a Christian and a non-Christian alternative at moments of choice, imposes a very great strain" (*The Idea* 30), hence in his Christian society there would not be "too sharp and frequent a conflict between what is easy for them or what their circumstances dictate and what is Christian" (30). The second important thing that Eliot has to say is that "the traditional way of life of the community would not be imposed by law, would have no sense of outward constraint, and would not be the result merely of the sum of individual belief and understanding" (34).

Ancient Hindu society functioned exactly on these principles and according to the law of *Dharma.* In the old Sanskrit texts *Dharma* is identified with that which is firm and durable, that which maintains, supports, sustains, and prevents falling. When applied to the universe it signifies the eternal laws which maintain the world and the *Upanishads* contain numerous precepts which propound rules governing behavior. Robert Lingat in the preface to *The Classical Law of India* makes the following observation:

> In building up their law the Hindus have not taken as their starting point that element which has served in the West as a foundation for a specific discipline namely the coercive element, which characterizes legal rule and distinguishes it from other rules which also control human activity. They have derived it from a more general notion which exceeds the domain of law in many respects without actually comprehending it entirely: duty. They did not attempt specially to define rules which people may be constrained by an external or physical sanction to observe and which amount to specifically judicial duties. They relied on religious concepts peculiar to the Hindu world, and they taught people the rule of conduct, which they ought to observe by reason of their condition in society. (xii-xiii)

Besides granting religious sanction to social duties, the ancient *Dharma-Shastras* visualized social order as being one with the natural order and hence saw the welfare of humanity in its work. But this was meant essentially for the common person: for those who possessed greater awareness there was the path of salvation which lay in their communication with the divine. Similarly, Eliot's ideal society "would be a society in which the natural end of man — virtue and well-being in community — is acknowledged for all, and the supernatural end — beatitude — for those who have the eyes to see it" (*The Idea* 37). In order to prevent the people from falling into "intellectual lethargy and superstition" (35) and the state into a position where it becomes an instrument of "cynical manipulation" (35), Eliot

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emphasizes the need for the community of Christians who would be consciously and thoughtfully practicing Christians composed of the clergy, the laity, and people of intellectual and spiritual superiority who would have control over the community and try to keep their downward tendencies in control and it would be their "identity of belief and aspiration, their background of a common system of education and a common culture" that would enable them to do this" (42). The manner in which this common culture and common belief is to be acquired Eliot enumerated in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*: "no culture can appear or develop except in relation to a religion" (27) and that if culture is to be not merely planned but growing then there must be "a hereditary transmission of culture" which he feels requires "the persistence of social classes" (15). He shatters the favorite myth of people that culture and equalitarianism can co-exist. He also categorically states that if culture of a high order is to prevail then certain people must enjoy advantages of birth. Eliot considers the family (comprising the living members of two or more generations) as the "primary channel of transmission of culture" (43). For, according to him, no individual can wholly escape from the influence of his early environment. Hence, the transmission of a high culture would require the persistence of groups of families from generation to generation. However, Eliot states that in modernistic terms "family" refers to "living members" — generally parents and children and not to a large family of three generations and he feels that the relationship between members of this family is one of affection (43), but he says that when he speaks of family he has in mind "a bond which embraces a longer period of time than this: a piety towards the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote. Unless this reverence for past and future is cultivated in the home, it can never be more than a verbal convention in the community" (44).

In India, respect for the dead and "solicitude" for the unborn is customary. During *Pitr paksha* (fortnight of the ancestors), a sixteen-day lunar period, Hindus perform a ceremony called *Shradh* to pay homage to their dead ancestors (*Pitrs*) and to pray for the peace of the departed souls. During this ceremony, the names of three generations of the dead ancestors are taken in ascending order — father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. As the performer of the ceremonies, the performer, a father himself, has sons and grandsons, so in all the grandson becomes aware of the lineage of six generations from himself upwards (Gnanambal 72-73). Thus through the ritual of *shradh*, the past, the present, and the future are interlinked. The birth of a child, too, is considered an important occasion and is marked by rituals and performance of special ceremonies before and after the birth of the child. During pregnancy certain ceremonies are performed to ensure the health of the mother and the unborn child while the *jatakarma* ceremony welcomes the newborn baby into the world.

To return to the idea of the community of Christians, Eliot felt that it would be the function of the class as a whole "to preserve and communicate standards of *manners*": these superior members and superior families would preserve the group culture (Eliot, *Notes* 42; emphasis in the original). Now, it is possible to see the similarity of this group of superior persons, enjoying advantages of birth, to the Brahmin class in ancient India. In the post-Vedic epoch, the supremacy of the Brahmin class was tantamount and among the Brahmins there was a "*corps d'élite*, the pundits" (Chaudhuri 137) and the role of the preceptor devolved upon them. These Brahmins were considered even superior to the king, who had only a temporal authority and if a Brahmin met a king on the road, then it was the king who had to give way. And at royal courts the Brahmin played the role of confessor, of keeper of the royal consciences, of counselor, and judge: "The Brahmins are the depositories and guardians of the sacred learning. Their families (*gotras*) have eponymous ancestors who were *risis* that actually received revelation personally. Consequently, the duty to preserve the sacred word falls upon them, as lies the duty to teach Veda and its ancillary sciences" (Lingat 31).Besides this, the duty of the Brahmins was to teach other classes (*Varnas*) — the warrior class (*Ksatriyas*), the merchant class (*Vaisyas*), and the working class (*Sudras*) their duties. The three other *Varnas* had to live according to the teaching of the Brahmin. While amongst the duties assigned to the four *Varnas*, there were certain duties that were common to the three higher *Varnas* there were also certain duties that were peculiar to each *Varna*. Moreover, these *Varnas* were hereditary. However, the occupations assigned to the various *Varnas* were not professions but social functions: the Brahmin was to teach the others their duty and preserve religion, the *Ksatriya* was to protect his subjects, the *Vaisya* was to cultivate the soil or do business, and the *Sudra* was to work for the above-mentioned classes. Eliot too, felt that the well-being of a modern industrialized society is "the product of a variety of more or less harmonious

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activities, each pursued for its own sake: the artist must concentrate upon his canvas, the poet upon his typewriter, the civil servant upon the just settlement of particular problems as they present themselves upon his desk, each according to the situation in which he finds himself" (Eliot, *Notes* 29).

Eliot's plea is on behalf of a form of society in which "an aristocracy should have a peculiar and essential function, as peculiar and essential as the function of any other part of society" (*Notes* 48). In his structure of society there would be from "'top to bottom,' a continuous gradation of cultural levels but no one class would be considered as possessing *more* culture than the lower, but would represent a more conscious specialization of culture" (48; emphasis in the original). The various levels of culture visualized by Eliot also existed in ancient India. As observed earlier, the Brahmins were the highest class, but even among the Brahmins, there were those whose observance of the rules as laid down in the scriptures was "less vigorous and elaborate than among Brahmin pundits" (Chaudhuri 138). In fact, their "religiosity was worldly" — they performed temple duties and celebrated seasonal festivals with a great deal of pomp and in their way of life "the social and religious elements were so intermingled that the two could hardly be separated" (Chaudhuri 138). In comparison to the Brahmin way of life, common people practiced their own form of Hinduism which was termed "Popular Hinduism" by the British and which was "in many ways very different from the Hinduism of the scriptures and tradition" (Chaudhuri 140). But even popular Hinduism was not all uniform and was practiced in different ways. The religion of traders, artisans and prosperous agriculturalists was "nourished not only by the spoken word, but also by the written word, embodied in vernacular renderings of the old Hindu myths, legends and spiritual teachings (141). On the other hand, the peasantry had full freedom to practice their religion in their own way and what they got from this religion was what they were "capable by their mental development of receiving. No upper class put any religious pressure on them" (141).

Eliot felt that without levels of culture in which each class would have different responsibilities true democracy cannot flourish. He thought that a democracy in which all individuals have equal responsibility would be "oppressive for the conscientious and licentious for the rest" (*Notes* 48). As in ancient India, for Eliot the primary vehicle for the transmission of culture is the family and if various levels of culture must be maintained then it logically follows that as in Hindu society "there should be groups of families persisting, from generation to generation, each in the same way of life" (*Notes* 48). According to Eliot, the whole population should actively participate in cultural activities, but not all in the same activities or on the same level. It is interesting to compare this with Lingat's comment that

> In the vast subcontinent of India, where all levels of culture are represented and where the most diverse human types co-exist, customs are of an infinite variety … And yet the moment that these peoples, the most disparate inter se in the world, proclaim themselves to be Hindus, they have all some point in common with Brahmanical orthodoxy. However low they may be in the social scale they are not barbarians, *mlecchas.* They participate at least to a humble degree in the maintenance of the eternal order, of *dharma.* They have their functions and duties to perform …. Though venerated everywhere, the rules of the *dharma-sastras* are not obeyed as a whole except in the higher classes of society. In the lower classes, their field of action diminishes as one descends, and custom becomes more and more supreme. (205-06)

Hindu religion and Hindu society made its appeal to Forster on similar grounds:

> It is true that Hinduism emphasizes the fact that we are all different. But it also emphasizes the other side of the human paradox – the fact that we are all the same ... Stripped of its local trappings, of its hundred handed gods, and monkeys and bulls and snakes, and Twice- born, it preaches with intense conviction and passion the doctrine of unity. It believes in caste, it believes in Pantheism also, and these two contradictory beliefs do really correspond to two contradictory emotions that each of us can feel, namely, 'I am different from everybody else,' and 'I am the same as everybody else' … Hinduism … does reveal a conception of Man's nature, and in consequence always has appealed and will appeal to souls who are technically outside its pale. It may not tend to proselytize … But it gains proselytes whatever its intentions, because it can give certain types of people what they want. (Forster qtd. in Das 5)

Eliot makes a similar point when he states that if culture is to flourish then its peoples should be neither too united nor too divided and hence cultures should develop not only through class but also through region. Each area should possess its own culture, but it should "also harmonize with, and enrich, the culture" of the surrounding areas (Eliot, *Notes* 54). The reason being that each individual should feel himself to be not only the citizen of a particular country but of a particular part of his

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country, having local loyalties (52). According to Eliot, a complete uniformity of culture could only bring about a lower grade of culture. Another significant observation that Eliot makes is that "the dominant force in creating a common culture between peoples each of which has its distinct culture, is religion" (122). He emphasizes the need for the balance of unity and diversity in religion. He preaches the "universality of doctrine with particularity of cult and devotion" (15). In India, where the essential and common culture is based, as pointed out earlier, on Brahmanical orthodoxy, there exist highly developed local cultures of its various regions. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, while discussing the regional and social diversity of Hinduism, gives a comprehensive account of the "large geographical blocs of Hinduism" but is quick to add that "overdue emphasis should not be placed on the diversities" because even though Hindus follow the particular religious practices of the area where they live, they are tolerant to the beliefs and practices of other areas (135). He states that "the Hindus wherever they might live, have a uniform and coherent outlook on religion. The similarity is seen in the religious position taken by them and not in the identity of cults and rituals. While Hindu religious beliefs and practices are multiform, the Hindu religious outlook is very unitary" (135). However, in spite of the infinite number of parallels that can be drawn between Eliot's concept of an ideal society and ancient Hindu society as it existed there are certain major differences. In ancient India, although certain classes were considered higher on account of their learning, knowledge and way of life there was no institutionalization. No institution ever had precedence over individuals. Wendy Doniger observes that "there is no Hindu canon" because Hinduism has "no single founder or institution" to pronounce "what is or not a Hindu idea" (25). In this context, it is interesting to examine Eliot's attitude towards the established church. In a radio broadcast on "Church Community and State" in 1937 Eliot almost destroyed the notion of an established church: he drew a distinction between church and state and said that by church he meant "not any one communion or ecclesiastical organization but the whole number of Christians as Christians", and by state he meant "not any particular State, but the whole of society, the world over, in its secular aspect" (Eliot, *The Idea* 91), thus approaching near to the Hindu idea of not having any establishment that would have precedence over individuals. Eliot seems to favor a society without any established organization. He acknowledges that disestablishment may be good but he also sees that this might create new problems and difficulties. Hence, in view of "its tradition, its organization, and its relation in the past to the religious-social life of the people", he feels that the Church is essential (*The Idea* 47). He cannot imagine the Christianization of England taking place without it. The Church according to him must have "a hierarchical organization in direct and official relation to the State" (47).

In the last chapter of *The Idea of a Christian Society* Eliot sounds pessimistic. He states that he has tried to restrict his ambition of a Christian society to a social minimum. He has tried "to picture, not a society of saints, but of ordinary men, of men, whose Christianity is communal before being individual … I have, it is true, insisted upon the communal, rather than the individual aspect: a community of men and women, not individually better than they are now except for the capital difference of holding the Christian faith. But their holding the Christian faith would give them something else which they lack: a *respect* for the religious life, for the life of prayer and contemplation, and for those who attempt to practise it" (59-60; emphasis in original). However, he did not consider the presence of the higher forms of devotional life to be a matter of minor importance for such a society. In Hinduism the emphasis is on the individual rather than the communal. It is this emphasis on the individual as opposed to the communal that made its appeal to Forster who observed that unlike Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity which have congregations, the "Hindu temple is not for community-worship, but for the individual" (Forster qtd. in Das 112). G.K. Das in *E.M. Forster's India* observes that the Hindu temple presents the idea of a synthesis: the synthesis which Eliot wished all individuals could attain — the synthesis between the secular and the spiritual: "Its [the Hindu temple's] large and elaborately designed exterior, containing intriguing sculptures of all forms of life — gods, men, and animals — and sculptures portraying spiritual as well as erotic themes, represents the complex panorama of creation that surrounds the individual. And in contrast to the complex exterior, the small, plain dark interior of the temple signifies the individual's own inner life. In the inner cell, the individual has contact with nothing else but his god, of whom he, in his inner life, realizes himself to be a part" (111).

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Eliot's belief is that the kingdom of god can never be realized on earth and he feels that though it would be easy for him to speculate an "apocalyptic vision of a golden age of virtue" yet, in his scheme of a possible Christian order, it would only be a dream (Eliot, *The Idea* 59). He dismisses it by saying that "we must remember that whatever reform or revolution we carry out, the result will always be a sordid travesty of what human society should be—though the world is never left wholly without glory" (59). In Hinduism, on the other hand, there is no scope for total despair. It not only believes that a golden age can exist on earth as it did at the dawn of civilization but also presents the hope for the dawn of another golden age after the cycle of four epochs or ages (*Yugas*) (comprising one *Mahayuga*) comes to an end. Karel Werner in *Yoga and Indian Philosophy* gives the following account of Indian cosmology: "Each *mahayuga* consists of four ages (*yugas*) in which mankind passes the peak as well as the nadir of its history. The happiest age is *Krta Yuga* (which possibly means, 'accomplished age') with people enjoying long life, peaceful conditions and a high standard of spirituality. Next comes *Treta Yuga* and then *Dvapara yuga* and in each of them the conditions worsen in all respect mentioned, although they are still far above present conditions in the world … Last comes the *Kali Yuga* (the age of strife, or dissension; sometimes "*kali*" is interpreted as "black, dark" and one speaks of 'the dark age'). Conditions during the *Kali Yuga* correspond to those which prevail in the world at present and they are expected to deteriorate even further. After a general collapse of civilization a new *Krta Yuga* will come" (46). Eliot, in accordance with Hindu belief, believed that in any human scheme for society which has been well adapted to the mass of humanity there is an overwhelming pressure towards mediocrity and sluggishness. Therefore, his society would comprise many individuals whose Christianity would be "superstitious and feigned" and many whose motives would be "worldly and selfish" (*The Idea* 59). He felt that "it would require constant reform" (60). But unlike in Hinduism he did not believe in a cyclic process of time whereby after a general period of moral and spiritual degradation a new golden age of truth *Satya Yuga* also called *Krta Yuga* will come.

Another major difference between Eliot's and Hindu thought lies in the attitude towards skepticism. Eliot considered skepticism a highly civilized trait and saw its appearance to be one of the features of development. However, he sets a limit to skepticism and says that complete skepticism of the nature of pyrrhonism can lead to the death or end of a civilization (Eliot, *Notes* 29). Hinduism, on the other hand, maintains that the dawn of civilization was the golden age not only because man possessed infinite faith in the divine but also because he believed in a well regulated cosmic scheme of the universe. But, it was believed, that with the passage of time and especially in the *Kali Yuga* (i.e., the period in which we are living) there would be a progressive weakening of men's capacity to obey the moral law. The pursuit of pleasure and self-interest would take precedence over the acquisition of spiritual merit. Thus skepticism which Eliot considers a highly civilized trait is seen by Hindus as a trait which would bring about the end of one period of civilization i.e*.,* a *Mahayuga*.

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