

Hindu Eschatology and the Indian Caste System: An Example of Structural Reversal

MURRAY MILNER, JR.

The Question

VIRTUALLY ALL INTERPRETERS OF HINDUISM AGREE that the notions of *samsara*, *karma*, and *moksa* are central to nearly all varieties of Hinduism. That is, it is agreed that most Hindus assume continuing reincarnations (*samsara*), that a person's current incarnation and experiences are, at least in part, the fruit of past actions (*karma*), and that release or liberation (*moksa*) from this ongoing cycle is possible and desirable. As David Kinsley (1982:8) says, "certain underlying beliefs are accepted by most Hindus: *karma*, *samsara*, and *moksa*, for example." J. L. Brockington (1981:5) notes, "Doctrines concerning . . . *samsara*, *karma* and *moksa* . . . may be regarded as axiomatic by most schools of Hindu philosophy." Thomas Hopkins (1971:50) observes, "By the early sixth century B.C.E., transmigration and the "law of karma" had been generally accepted as basic facts of existence and were rarely challenged from that time on by any major Indian system of thought." According to A. L. Basham (1989:42): "These [*karma* and *samsara*] are the beliefs of nearly all Indians, other than Muslims, Christians, and Parsis, down to the present day."¹

The last two quotes do not specifically mention liberation (*moksa*); the omission indicates in part that *moksa* is a less taken-for-granted concept. This term, and to

Murray Milner, Jr., is chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of Virginia.

¹Other citations and quotes support the idea that these concepts are central to Hinduism. As Bhattacharyya (1987) says: "With the sole exception of the Carvaka school, all Indian philosophical systems, Vedic and non-Vedic, accepted certain basic ideas on which they formulated their theories: (1) the law of *karman*, (2) the belief in the process of rebirth, and (3) an emphasis on mystic experience as the panacea for all evils." While the third point mentioned by Bhattacharyya is broader than the concept of *moksa*, in many respects *moksa* can be considered both the ultimate mystical experience and the ultimate panacea. See also Zaehner (1966:4, 7-8).

²I do not mean to suggest that there is universal consensus about the content of the notions of *samsara* and *karma*. Recent scholarship has identified great variation in the indigenous understandings of these concepts (O'Flaherty 1980; Keyes and Daniel 1983). Some of these will be dealt with briefly later. To a much greater extent, however, sectarian divisions within Hinduism have centered on differences in the understanding of *moksa* and the path to liberation.

The Journal of Asian Studies 52, no. 2 (May 1993):298-319.

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some degree the concept, becomes prominent in the sacred text later than the notions of *samsara* and *karma* (Esnoul 1987). More to the point, while the notions of *samsara* and *karma* are largely assumed, what constitutes *moksa* is hotly contested.² A perennial preoccupation of Indian thought concerns the alternative paths to salvation and the nature of salvation itself. For the most part, sectarian differences center on these issues rather than on differences in the understanding of *samsara* or *karma*. Nonetheless, virtually all interpretations of Hinduism see all three of these concepts as fundamental. What virtually all interpretations of Hinduism leave unexplained is *why* these are fundamental concepts.

Previous Answers

There are two primary exceptions to this failure to explain the centrality of these concepts. The most famous attempt to draw a connection between Hindu social structure and Hindu eschatology³ is Max Weber's well-known discussion of the relationship between caste and *karma* (1946; 1968:523–26, 492–98; 1958:esp. 117–23). Weber claims the *karma* doctrine provides a theodicy that explains evil and seeming injustice and therefore transforms the world into "a strictly rational, ethically determined cosmos" (1958:121). This rationalized theodicy, he claims, provides strong legitimation for the caste system: one's present caste position is the fruit of one's past actions, and one's future position will be determined by the actions of this and other antecedent lives. Supposedly, any rejection of the caste system or failure to conform to the traditional norms associated with one's caste would condemn one to a less desirable incarnation in the future. Hence the presumed stability and legitimacy of the system. Weber's analysis has been extensively criticized.⁴

³The term eschatology is problematic. Strictly speaking, eschatology refers to the final end and hence is inappropriate for a religion such as Hinduism that conceives of sacred time as cyclical rather than linear. The word is not completely adequate for our purposes even for the discussion of Christian traditions because it tends to be limited to speculations about the "last things." The concern here will be broader than this; I will also focus on the criteria used to decide the fate of people in the next world, which are usually considered under the topic of soteriology. "Otherworld" or "afterlife" are possible alternative terms, but these, too, have semantic histories and implications that make them problematic. The term eschatology is commonly used for comparative purposes and has been used by scholars to discuss South Asian materials (Obeyesekere 1968, 1980). The focus of our concern will be the transhistorical, nonempirical features of the Hindu cosmos considered directly relevant to the individual's salvation.

A special comment is required about defining *samsara* as part of eschatology or the otherworld. From the point of view of textual discussions, *samsara* is a characteristic of this world, not a feature of the otherworld. However, from the point of view of the typical Hindu—usually preoccupied with the problems of day-to-day life—one's previous and subsequent incarnations are otherworldly concerns.

⁴Obeyesekere (1968) notes that the meaning of theodicy is ambiguous in Weber's discussion and hence the import of his argument is not always clear. Sharma (1973) points out that the problem of evil, and hence the need for a theodicy, is only acute in religions in which the goodness and omnipotence of God are both essential dogmas—and that this is not the case in Hinduism. Two important recent collections of essays on *karma* (O'Flaherty 1980; Keyes and Daniel 1983) indicate that the meaning of *karma* both in sacred texts and in popular understanding is highly variable and elastic, and hence the notion is unlikely to produce the straightforward result that Weber claimed. According to Heesterman (1985), the acceptance of one's caste position and conformity to the norms appropriate to one's caste (*svadharma*) do not offer the prospect of a better subsequent incarnation; one cannot break out of the cycle of reincarnation (*samsara*) by conventional conformity, but only by renouncing

However flawed Weber's argument, it has the virtue of raising the question of the relationship between the nature of the social structure and Hindu eschatology and soteriology.

A second exception is Gananath Obeyesekere (1980). He develops a Weberian ideal-type model to explain the evolution of what he calls Indian "karmic eschatology," that is, an eschatology built on elaborate notions of *samsara*, *karma*, and liberation.⁵ He assumes the existence of a preliterate tribal notion of rebirth in India. While there is no historical evidence for this, he points to known tribal societies that approximate this model, and from the information available about these, builds a model. His model involves two key points. First, after death some continuing identity of the individual is eventually reborn into this world of suffering. The interim may range from some brief period in a vague otherworld to an extensive period in hell or paradise, but this always comes to an end with rebirth into this world. Second, the connection between the experience in this world and one's fate in the other world is not "ethicized"; that is, the rewards and punishments of the next world are not primarily dependent on one's earlier behavior in this world. Obeyesekere hypothesizes that this tribal model becomes transformed into a model of the full karmic eschatology of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. This process of transformation comes about by "ethicization." The morality (or immorality) of one's actions in previous incarnations is seen as determining the status of subsequent rebirths and the propitiousness of one's experiences in later worldly incarnations. Following Weber, Obeyesekere suggests that such ethicization is primarily the result of the systematizing activity of specialized religious elites. Such ethicization necessarily results in at least a minimal differentiation of the otherworld into some heaven-like state from which suffering is eliminated, and a hell where sin and evil are punished. But this linking of the behavior of this world and the rewards and punishments of the next world does not eliminate the perpetual prospect of returning to this world of suffering; for sinful persons—which presumably include most people—suffering is extended into the otherworld. Hence the need for a concept of liberation or salvation from this endless process. Supposedly, this motivates religious elites to develop such concepts as *moksa* and *nirvana*.

Obeyesekere's argument is a brilliant use of Weberian ideal-types, drawing on plausible assumptions, logic, and comparative data. Yet, aside from the fact that there is no historical evidence to either support or reject its key assumption of a preliterate tribal rebirth eschatology, the model has several serious limitations. First, it seems highly unlikely that the only eschatologies available for ethicization and rationalization were those that involved rebirth. Hence the model leaves unexplained why it was that a notion of rebirth was chosen by religious elites for further elaboration. Second, there is no explanation for the extreme form that ethicization takes; even if Weber and others have exaggerated the rational ethical determinism of the *karma* doctrine—that is, the extent to which one's experience in the present is determined by the morality of one's acts in past incarnations—it is still true that this theme is stronger in Hinduism (and its offspring religions) than in most other religious traditions. Third, the model offers little predictive power about the form that liberation will take or the range of soteriologies that are likely to develop. Since, as noted

convention and becoming a *sannyasin*. Hence, *karma* cannot provide the caste system the unassailable legitimacy Weber suggests. In short, Weber's argument about the significance of *karma* for the stability of the caste system is not accepted by most contemporary scholars of South Asia.

⁵Obeyesekere uses the Buddhist concept of *nirvana* to refer to salvation or liberation, but the logic of his model works just as well for Hindu notions of *moksa*.

above, the primary variations and disagreements in Hinduism focus on the relative efficacy of different paths (*margs*) to salvation, this is a significant limitation.

This article will attempt to extend our understanding of the centrality of the concepts of *samsara*, *karma*, and *moksa*—what Obeyesekere calls the “karmic eschatology.” It will draw upon the ideal-type methodology used by Obeyesekere, and attempt to supplement it with a Lévi-Straussian-type structural analysis which focuses on structural reversals. More specifically, I will attempt to show that the key concepts of Hindu eschatology can be seen as structural reversals of the ideal-typical characteristics of the caste system. For example, *samsara*—the repeated reincarnation of the individual soul in subsequent lives—can be seen as near endless social mobility and, hence, as a structural reversal of the prohibition against mobility in the caste system. More generally, variations in the emphasis on caste will be correlated with reverse emphases on ideas about salvation. In short, the question I want to ask is this: What is the relationship between the broad structural features of the caste system and the eschatology and soteriology of Hinduism?

Structural Analyses of Hinduism

There have been, of course, previous Lévi-Straussian-type structural analyses of Hinduism. The general thrust of all of these analyses is that the whole or the system takes analytical precedent over the elements and that the crucial focus must be on the nature of the relationships between the elements rather than on the content of the elements per se.⁶

Louis Dumont's (1980) influential discussion connects Hinduism and caste through the concept of hierarchy. According to him, hierarchy is based on the relationship between the pure and the impure and is primarily a religious—rather than an economic or political—notion. The pure can only be defined in relationship to the impure; the Brahman can only be defined in relationship to the Untouchable.

Veena Das (1982) moves the categories of king, renouncer, and Brahman into the center of her analysis of the “conceptual order of Sanskrit Hinduism.” In a structural analysis of selected caste Puranas and Sutras, she argues that Dumont's contrast between Brahmans and Untouchables is inadequate. She claims that the texts she analyzes use a tripartite contrast between each of the three categories of Brahman, king, and renouncer, with a fourth category of Sudra/Vanika being implicit. That is, the nature of Brahmans cannot be understood simply by contrasting their purity with the impurity of Untouchables or by contrasting their religious responsibilities with the secular responsibilities of kings but, rather, the full set of relationships must be analyzed.

Dumont and Das are both anthropologists and their structural analyses give central attention to social organization in general and caste relations in particular. In contrast, Biardeau's (1989) structural analysis of Hinduism focuses on its more religious aspects. Instead of the usual account of the historical development of Hinduism (e.g., Hopkins 1971; Brockington 1981; Hiltebeitel 1987), she attempts to provide a synchronic account of the structural relationship between the key concepts of Hinduism. She is concerned with the implicit logical or, more accurately, structural relationship between such notions as the absolute *brahman*, Brahmans, *dharmas*, the *purusarthas*, the gods, and alternative soteriologies. At the core of her discussion is

⁶For a programmatic discussion of the relevance of structuralism for the analysis of Indian materials, see Khare 1978.

an analysis of ritual activity and liberation (*moksa*). She pictures Hinduism as a near seamless whole in which even protest and reform find their origin in Brahmanical ideas.

One thing I find striking about these analyses is the lack of any systematic attempt to connect the structures of the mundane world, and especially the caste system, with Hindu eschatology and soteriology. Biardeau (1989) is a partial exception; her discussion pays considerable attention to soteriology, but the connections it draws to the social structure mainly explicate indigenous textual understandings of these relationships rather than providing a structural analysis that adds to or goes beyond this. This is somewhat surprising, since a main thrust of structural analysis is supposedly to identify latent and unconscious general patterns that "lie behind" the indigenous understandings and surface variations. One of the classic sets of essays discussing Lévi-Strauss's approach is entitled *The Unconscious in Culture* (Rossi 1974) and this is, I believe, true to the spirit of structuralism in general. Hence, one possibility for extending structural types of analyses is to look for relationships between eschatology and caste that are latent and unconscious.

A Note on the Rationale and the Method

But why should we be particularly concerned with the relationship between caste and eschatology? Is there a theoretical reason other than the precedent established by Weber, and what some see as an "orientalist" preoccupation with caste? The answer is that both the caste system and Hindu eschatology are systems of structured inequality. Like most salvation religions, Hinduism assumes that different people will have different destinies in the world-to-come, and that some of these are clearly more desirable than others. Moreover, an individual's destiny after death is at least potentially a form of social mobility; for example, salvation can be seen as the ultimate form of upward mobility. Hence, there is a theoretical logic to asking what is the relationship between the stratification of "heaven" and the stratification of "earth"—or, more accurately, of the anticipated otherworld and the present world.

A preliminary word is required about the nature of the analysis. The theoretical model that will identify these structural relationships will necessarily be highly abstract and will omit much. But omission is not the same thing as denial. Maps provide a useful analogy: they leave out most of the features that anyone "standing on the ground" readily recognizes. Their abstractness is the source of their usefulness; we can see patterns and relationships that too much detail would obscure. Of course, maps have limitations. They can simply be wrong; no amount of abstractness justifies showing Delhi to be in Sri Lanka. Moreover, mapping techniques may introduce systematic distortions—as when we try to show the features of a round world on a flat page. Finally, these distortions can have political implications.⁷ Because of all these reasons, few would argue that an area can be understood in depth by simply looking at maps, much less one single type of map. Similarly, the type of model constructed here is not intended as a substitute for more complex and detailed knowledge. But my claim is that, like a good map, the theoretical model presented here can help us see relationships that have previously gone unnoticed.

⁷In an extended attack on "orientalism," Ronald Inden (1986) has rejected the legitimacy of "representational knowledge" that is, in revised form, implicit in my argument. While I am in sympathy with many of Inden's aims and some of his conclusions, in my opinion he overstates many of his arguments including his critique of "representational knowledge."

The first step in the analytical strategy will be to identify key features of the caste system—which is indisputably a (or even the) central institution of Hindu social structure. Next, I will attempt to show how the central concepts of “karmic eschatology” can be understood as structural reversals of the core features of the caste system.

Central Features of the Caste System

Since World War II, a number of detailed ethnographic studies (e.g., Bailey 1957; Dumont 1986; Mayer 1960; Beteille 1971; Beck 1972; Pocock 1972; Srinivas 1976; Moffatt 1979; Parry 1979; Raheja 1988; Van der Veer 1988) and synthetic works (e.g., Mandelbaum 1970; Marriott 1976, 1989; Kolenda 1984; Dumont 1980) have greatly increased our knowledge of the Indian caste system. Generally, they have shown it to be much more complex and fluid than the earlier literature indicated.

Nonetheless, when compared to other structures of inequality, three features of the Hindu caste system are particularly striking. First, a person's central social status in the community is inalienable; in principle, mobility across caste boundaries is prohibited.⁸ This involves not just one or two key boundaries—aristocracy versus commoners, blacks versus whites, or Greeks versus barbarians—but a comparatively large number of relatively discrete social boundaries. Second, caste position is in principle based solely on inheritance and ascription. Conformity, performance, and merit may affect many things, but they do not determine caste membership. Third, enormous social and individual energies are devoted to differentiating and ranking caste groups and maintaining their boundaries and identities. The norms concerning pollution are the primary, but by no means the only, mechanism for accomplishing this. As many observers have noted, there is a strong concern for keeping unlike things separate.

If our analytical strategy is correct, we should expect the key features of Hindu eschatology, at least in part, to be the opposite of these characteristics, that is, to be inversions or reversals of the worldly patterns. The essence of my argument is that the three key notions of Hindu eschatology—*samsara*, *karma*, and *moksa*—can be seen as reversals of the three characteristics of the caste system listed above.

Before this assertion is elaborated, a note is in order about the relationship between these three eschatological concepts and the concept of *dharma*. Arguably, *dharma* is Hinduism's most fundamental concept. Hinduism itself is often referred to as *sanatana dharma*, the eternal dharma. Biardeau has suggested that it is useful to think of “the levels of dharma” (1989:42–46). At its broadest level, it encompasses many other concepts including notions of salvation and liberation. But in its narrower and more concrete meanings, it refers to the rules governing day-to-day life. At the core of these are the norms that regulate a particular caste and distinguish it from other castes, that is, *svadharma*. Hence, to show the relationship between the

⁸What does “in principle” mean? It does not mean that mobility never occurs or that birth solely determines caste position. Rather, it means that people would not openly acknowledge that they had been mobile or that positions were not ascribed. No one in India who claims to be a Rajput is going to say, “My family started out as Yadavs (cowherders), but we became rich and managed to transform ourselves into Rajputs (warriors).” Those who are trying to move upward in the caste rankings nearly always argue, “We used to be Rajputs but my family came on hard times and were forced to become cowherders, but we have really always been Rajputs and now we want to reclaim our true identity.”

key features of caste and the concepts of *samsara*, *karma*, and *moksa* is to relate these concepts to *dharma*, at least in its narrower meaning. In this sense, Biardeau's discussion of Hinduism contains the rudiments of a structural analysis of the relationship between caste and eschatology, between *dharma*, on the one hand, and *samsara*, *karma*, and *moksa*, on the other. Let us now attempt to make these latent structural connections more explicit.

Samsara as Mobility

The first structural characteristic noted was the absence of legitimate social mobility. As we would expect, in the world-to-come⁹ this pattern is reversed. One moves through a long series of positions and each move can involve a substantial change in status. That is, on the cosmic level, social status is highly alienable and temporary. This is the famous notion of reincarnation and transmigration referred to in Hinduism as *samsara*. This Sanskrit word implies notions of fluidity, flow, flux, and, by implication, cycles. That is, it is the opposite of rigid boundaries or stability. Accordingly, human existence is conceived of as an endless cycle: birth, death, rebirth, etc. At each rebirth one's status can change; while most people would anticipate only minor changes, the possibility of drastic changes—especially downward mobility for reprehensible behavior—is acknowledged. Religious texts are full of warnings about how sin can lead to reincarnation as a low-caste person or even an animal (e.g., Buhler 1964, XII:9). The key principle of the worldly system is no mobility; the key principle of the otherworldly system is endless mobility.

But this mobility is not given an especially positive evaluation, at least in formal theology; the stress is not on opportunity but rather on the temporary and ephemeral nature of all worldly conditions. The soul (*atman*) is bound to the "wheel" of existence (*bhava-chakra*). In the context of endless rebirths, any given status is temporary and insecure. It can be snatched away at any moment by misfortune or death. This is, of course, in contrast to the relative inalienability of one's caste status in the context of any given life. From one perspective, status is seen as relatively immutable, while from another, even the same status is seen as ephemeral.

Karma as Merit

The second key feature of the worldly stratification system is that, in principle, caste status is completely ascribed at birth; the biological and social association with one's kin determines an individual's caste status. No amount of moral virtue or conformity to valued norms entitles a person to move into a higher caste (though grievous breaches of caste norms can result in expulsion from the present caste). From a strictly worldly point of view, not the individual's behavior, but birth and ascription determine social status.

In contrast, the status one will acquire in the next life is determined by a person's current and past behavior, by conformity (or lack of it) to the moral and cosmic law, i.e., *dharma*. So, in principle, status in subsequent lives is based solely

⁹As noted above, the textual tradition usually identifies *samsara* with this world, in contrast to the concern of *moksa* with some other world. Nonetheless, from the point of view of the mundane social structure and from the point of view of the typical individual, one's past and subsequent incarnations are certainly an otherworldly matter.

on merit and achievement. This is, of course, the famous law of *karma*. In both sacred texts and popular religious thought, the matter is considerably more complicated than this, but the basic notion is clear. As Mahony notes:

As diverse as the culture of India may be, one common assumption undergirds virtually all major systems of South Asian religious thought and practice: a person's behavior leads irrevocably to an appropriate reward or punishment commensurate with that behavior. This, briefly stated, is the law of *karman*.

(Mahony 1987:261)

The most renowned scholar of the Dharmasastras, P. V. Kane, says:

The principle of the doctrine of Karma is that every act, whether good or bad, produces a certain result or return which cannot be escaped. In the physical world there is the universal law of causation. The doctrine of Karma extends this inexorable law of causality to the mental and moral sphere. The doctrine of Karma is not a mechanical law; it is rather a moral or a spiritual necessity. . . . In the absence of the theory of karma and rebirth it would have to be assumed that the world is arbitrary. . . . Under the doctrine of Karma there is no such thing as chance or luck.

(1977:Vol V, Sect. IX, Ch. XXXV, 1560)

In other words, in its pure and most extreme form the law of *karma* produces perfect justice; sooner or later all actions produce their appropriate fruits. Hence, the worldly system seen as the epitome of ascription is linked to a cosmic system that is the ideal-type example of achievement. While *karma* is especially important as the determinant of social position in future reincarnations, its consequences are more general: all events in this life and subsequent ones are the consequence of previous actions.

In the worldly system, caste status is determined solely by association, i.e., the association with parents and relatives. In the worlds-to-come, status is determined solely by whether one did or did not conform to the norms appropriate to one's social location, i.e., *svadharma*. From one perspective, social status is completely association and ascription, from another perspective, it is determined solely by conformity and merit. Of course, the notion of *karma* was developed in a number of different directions and becomes a whole complex of religious ideas—a matter we will consider later—but, as Mahony indicates, the core idea is that of just desserts.

Here, again, we seem to have a clear structural reversal. Such a pattern could provide social legitimacy (and perhaps psychological compensations); one's present situation is the result of one's own past actions. For such an effect to occur, the actors must accept on faith that they are linked to a series of previous existences and that their present fortunes are the result of actions in these past lives. But this is, of course, precisely what cannot be known in any empirical sense. While not infrequently someone claims remembrance of past lives, for most people there is complete amnesia—they know nothing about their past existences except through inference from their present circumstances. Any real knowledge about the basis of their current status is unavailable; the connection between past actions and present status must be accepted on faith.

This suggests yet an additional structural reversal. In the village, people's claims about their caste and its status are rarely, if ever, taken for granted. Great energies are devoted to verifying the legitimacy of claims to status. When verification is not possible, claims are significantly discounted. For example, when new groups move

into a village, the legitimacy of their status claims and the basis of these claims are usually treated with great suspicion. Long-term knowledge of both ancestry and behavior is required; in contrast, knowledge of past lives is not possible. Yet, Hindus often assume that present status and circumstances are based on behavior in previous lives. Hence, there is a complete reversal of what is considered an adequate basis for determining the legitimacy of status.

Moksa as the Overcoming of Separateness

The third characteristic of the caste system mentioned earlier is the preoccupation with the creation and maintenance of differentiated, ranked social identities. Enormous efforts are invested in defining and defending the boundaries of local caste groups (*jatis*). The identity and boundaries of these local *jatis* are never completely unambiguous, and are frequently in contention. This conflict is an indication of the importance attributed to the creation and maintenance of distinctive social identities.¹⁰ Variation in purity and pollution is one central criterion and idiom of differentiation and caste identity. A central cultural preoccupation is to identify the impure, to keep it separate from the pure, and to thereby define the identity of the pure. This is not to suggest that either identities or differences—what is pure and what is impure—are completely precise or unambiguous. It is to suggest that creating differentiated social identities based on ritual status and maintaining certain kinds of social separation are primary concerns of the culture. Generally, the more orthodox and Brahmanical the actors are, the more this is so.¹¹ Given this cultural preoccupation with the differentiated identities and maintenance of social separation, we would anticipate notions of salvation that focus on overcoming differentiation and separateness.

As indicated earlier, there is within Hinduism considerable variation in the understanding of *moksa* and what is considered to be the most effective means or path to salvation. Hindu notions of salvation or release tend to vary between two ideal-type poles. One involves a complete merger of the individual and the divine. The other involves the maintenance of differentiated identities, but stresses the importance of connection with some divine being that is totally other than the historical, empirical self. In short, whatever the variations in the concept of *moksa*, they involve a concern for oneness with or connectedness to the divine other. This is a reversal of the worldly preoccupation with differentiation and separateness. Moreover, the degree of preoccupation with caste differentiation and separation in this world is typically inversely correlated with the emphasis on unity and identity in the otherworld.

Variations in the Concept of *Moksa*: Some Major Historical Traditions

Moksa as the merger of divine and human identities is the core soteriological concept of the orthodox Brahmanical tradition represented by the thought of Sankara (C.E. 788–820). His Advaita Vedanta philosophy is rooted in the Upanishad tradition

¹⁰See, e.g., Beteille (1971:chap.3) and Shah (1982) for a discussion of segmentation, fission, and fusion.

¹¹Of course, as Das (1982) and others have noted, there are additional bases of differentiation, but it is not necessary to our current purpose to discuss these.

of knowledge (*jnana*) as the means to salvation and is noted for its uncompromising monism. Its primary assertion is that salvation consists in recognizing the unity of the self (*atman*) and the ultimate reality (*brahman*). Sankara recognizes the legitimacy of other paths (*margas*) to salvation (e.g., *karma-yoga* and *bhakti-yoga*) as means to partial knowledge, but the full grasp of the oneness of the self and *brahman* requires following the path of *jnana-yoga* and becoming a wandering holy man (*sannyasin*). The very process of becoming a holy man or renouncer (*sannyasin*) involves giving up social identity and ignoring the differentiated social identities of others; in principle, although often not in practice, renouncers are beyond caste and kinship, beyond purity and pollution. So for the orthodox tradition, the elimination of differentiating social identities begins in the last stage of this life. But as we have seen, the destruction of differentiated identity does not stop here; all differentiated identities are an illusion (*maya*) due to ignorance (*ajnana* or *avidya*); there is only *brahman*. Other monistic traditions (e.g., the Vaisnava Vaikhanasa sect, or Kashmiri Saivism) are also often associated with social conservatism (Brockington 1981:116, 122). That is, they emphasize the differentiation and maintenance of social identities in this world and the unity of all identity in the world-to-come. While Sankara's monism is the ideal-type example of orthodox Hindu eschatology, other Hindu traditions are numerous. We will briefly examine two ideal-type models of such variations.

Perhaps the tradition at the other end of the continuum from Vedanta monism is *bhakti* devotionalism (*bhakti-yoga*). This tradition is made up of many sects with significant differences—as Christian Protestantism is—but they have certain commonalities. These movements began in Tamil-speaking areas of South India in the sixth century C.E. but spread rather rapidly to many parts of India. To a significant degree, these sects were protest movements that rejected Brahmanical orthodoxy—although Brahmans may have been important in many of these movements. They emphasized the availability of salvation to lower-caste groups and women. Some rejected the caste system per se. For the purposes at hand, the significant point is that most *bhakti* sects emphasize the difference between humans and gods. Gods are relatively all-powerful and pure beings; humans are relatively powerless and sinful. Salvation is not primarily the recognition that god and the self are one and the same, but rather being perpetually in the presence of one's deity as a worshiper and devotee. In fact, for some sectarian groups, the notion that the devotee is the same as the deity borders on blasphemy. The goal is not merger with *brahman*, but perpetual intimacy with Shiva, or Vishnu, or Krishna, etc. Hence, in contrast to orthodox Brahmanism, *bhakti* sects deemphasize the differentiation of worldly social identities such as caste, and place emphasis on associations (rather than identity) with the otherworldly sacred.

A third intermediate case is the theology of Ramanuja (traditionally 1017–1137 C.E.). Ramanuja's purpose was to create a synthesis between the orthodox Vedanta traditions and the *bhakti* devotionalism of the masses. While his Sri Vaishnava sect was in principle open to the lower caste, he nonetheless basically accepted the legitimacy of *varnasrama-dharma*, i.e., the traditional four stages of the life cycle and the caste system. Only the upper caste (i.e., the twice born) were capable of fully practicing his version of *bhakti-yoga*, which was rooted in the concepts of the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of Hinduism's most widely accepted religious texts. So with respect to social relationships in this world, he was reformist, not revolutionary. Accordingly, his concept of the relationship between the otherworldly identities is an intermediate one. *Brahman* and the created world have separate real identities. In Ramanuja's commentary, *Vedarthasamgraha*, he describes the nature of the Supreme Person (*Purusottama*):

His essential nature is distinct from all entities other than Himself by virtue of His opposition to all evil and His being wholly infinite perfection [kalyanata]. He has a host of such auspicious qualities [kalyanagunas], which are countless and of matchless excellence.

(quoted in Carman 1974:70)

Yet an element of monism remains; *brahman* and the individual soul are related like parts to a whole. Later in the same text he notes:

He has as instruments of his sport [*lila*] an infinite number of intelligent beings, both those bound in *samsara* and those released from it, all of whom are parts of Himself. Likewise, He possesses all material things, which are subject to infinite, wonderful, and varied changes and which form the object of enjoyment for intelligent beings. Since He is the Inner Controller of His whole creation, He has all things as His body and His modes.

(quoted in Carman 1974:70)

In sum, Ramanuja's theology combines a qualified monism with a relatively orthodox form of devotionalism rooted in the *Bhagavad Gita*. There is both an identity and a difference between the deity and the devotee. Consequently it seems accurate to conclude that Ramanuja's theology gives additional support to our hypothesis that an inverse correlation exists between the ideological emphasis on social differentiation and the degree to which *moksa* involves the unity of otherworldly identities.

Variations: Some Contemporary Religious Movements

The above comparisons involve broad streams of Indian thought that evolved over hundreds of years. Since it is usually more difficult to explain small variations rather than large ones, a more demanding test of the hypothesis would be to look at variations between very specific sect groups over a limited period of time. Lawrence Babb's book, *Redemptive Encounters* (1986), makes this possible. He examines three contemporary Indian religious movements: the movement led by the magician Sathya Sai Baba, the millenarian Brahma Kumari movement, and the Radhasoami movement based in Agra. The most famous of these movements is that led by Sathya Sai Baba. He is, among other things, a renowned magician who claims to be Shiva and Shakti in embodied form. Most Indian followers are prosperous, well educated, and speak English as a second language. While the movement sponsors a considerable amount of philanthropy and social work, it is quite conservative in most social matters and stresses a cultural nationalism. As Babb notes, "The emphasis on social service provides an opportunity for devotees to do good in the world, but Sathya Sai Baba's profound conservatism on fundamentals like caste and gender ensures that doing good is unlikely to challenge his devotees' more basic sense of propriety and order" (1986:200-1). Of the three movements, this one is the most concerned with worldly benefits and the least soteriologically oriented. Nonetheless through various meditation techniques "one realizes one's identity with God, who has been within. The final goal, therefore, is merger with God, who is in fact Baba. The result will be the eradication of harmful motives and tendencies, and feelings of deep inner peace (*prashanti*)" (Babb

1986:172). Such a view of salvation is clearly a close relative to the monistic Vedanta tradition. Hence, this first case supports our hypothesis of a correlation between the maintenance of traditional social identities and salvation conceived of as a merger of all identities.

At the other pole is the Brahma Kumari movement that initially was viewed as quite radical and highly threatening to the existing social order. In addition to an urgent millenarianism and the rejection of caste distinctions, the major thrust of the movement has been equality for women. Women not only make up the majority of the devotees, they also seem to control the movement. Because the sect expects the end of the world, all members—men and women—are urged to become celibate and concentrate their energies on preparing themselves for the world-to-come. In Hinduism celibacy has always been a respected option for men as a step toward salvation; what the Brahma Kumaris demand is soteriological equality for women. While those influenced by Western feminism may not find this strategy for gender equality very appealing, in the context of South Asia it is a radical demand, highly threatening to the traditional social and religious order. A serious pursuit of this way of life demands a strict separation from existing social relationships and a quasi-monastic life. While the movement has, to some degree, moderated its rhetoric and is hence seen as less threatening than in earlier periods, it is undoubtedly the most socially radical of the movements Babb considers. As our hypothesis would predict, it is the least monistic of the three movements. For the Brahma Kumaris, salvation is conceived of as a new world in which not only the identities of humans will be continued, but the purist devotees of the movement will serve as the elite who rule paradise. As in the Sathya Sai Baba movement, Shiva is considered to be the supreme deity, but for the Brahma Kumaris there is a radical separation of the deity from the material world and the historical process. While the theology of the Brahma Kumaris does not focus on the issue of monism versus dualism, it is clear that they fall toward the dualistic end of the continuum, which is what our hypothesis would predict.

The third case Babb describes is the Radhasoami movement headquartered in the Soami Bagh in Agra. It represents an intermediate position with respect to both social radicalism and theological monism. Most of the adherents are middle-class government and business employees, many highly successful. Yet, the movement is deeply alienated from the existing world. The alienation is, however, largely spiritual and demands little departure from traditional social patterns. While caste distinctions are rejected for spiritual purposes, the world is beyond social reform. In fact, all social relationships are a spiritual trap, escaped only by unqualified devotion to the movement's guru. In short, while the movement is highly critical of the existing world, its theology and ethics offer little threat to the existing social identities. Similarly, its theology implies a qualified monism. Salvation occurs when the devotee comes to see the world as the deity sees it. This involves union, but not complete absorption by the deity.

The three contemporary movements and the three broad traditions discussed above offer considerable opportunities for the hypothesis to be rejected, but this has not occurred. Hence, it seems reasonable to conclude that there is substantial tentative support for the theoretical argument. It is very important, however, to make clear that much of the analysis is on a high level of abstraction; hence, many exceptions and qualifications are apparent on more concrete levels. Let us now consider some of these complexities.

The Complexities of Alternative and Counterstructures

Religious concepts and doctrines deal with human dilemmas and paradoxes that are, in any final sense, insoluble within the historical empirical world. Hence, many doctrines contain ambiguities and even contradictions. One doctrinal theme may be emphasized at the expense of some other. This often results in alternative or counterdoctrines. At other times, doctrines are applied with considerable flexibility and inconsistency—giving countervalues and themes the opportunity to be expressed. Identifying some of these cultural caveats and contradictions is the task of this section.

From *Samsara* to *Moksa*

The most obvious example of a counterdoctrine is the development of the notion of *moksa*, which alleviates the fate of endless reincarnation. The counterposing of *samsara* and *moksa* creates an eschatology that emphasizes both the continual reproduction of the self (*atman*), and yet the desirability of ending individual identity or at least placing it in a fundamentally different relationship to the sacred. The notions of *samsara* and *moksa* are not logically contradictory because the one process supposedly precedes the other in sacral time. More common, however, are doctrines that are logically contradictory or paradoxical. Let us now consider such a case.

Karma and Merit Transfer

In the introduction to a landmark collection of essays on karma, Wendy O'Flaherty (1983:ix-xxv) notes that much of the debate centers around the notion of merit transfer. McKim Marriott's transactional approach to understanding Hinduism implies that karma, and hence merit, can be transferred from one person to another. This is evident in the post-funereal *śrāddha* rites in which the son transfers merit to his dead father. The idea is also central to the relationship between Brahmans and other castes (see especially Parry 1980, 1985, 1986). Buddhism, of course, elaborates the theme and some traditions make the transfer of merit from the monk to the laity a central feature of its religious life. Karl Potter claims that within Hinduism there are two traditions with respect to the legitimacy of merit transfer. While one of these allows for the transfer of karma and merit, the other tradition—what he calls the philosophical tradition—specifically rejects and denies this possibility. This is most obvious in the philosophical schools (*darsana*) of Samkhya-Yoga and Advaita Vedanta. As Potter (1983:263) says, "In either system one's bondage or liberation is something he himself has to earn; he cannot give away his karma to someone else, even to God. The texts sometimes comment on the untenability of any view which implies that one person might experience the results of another person's actions." In the broader Indian tradition, the Jains are even more adamant that karma is due solely to one's own actions and cannot in any sense be transferred.

According to O'Flaherty (1983:4), this and other ambivalences are present in the very earliest religious texts, so the question of which tradition came first is moot. Hence it is probably most accurate to treat these as dialectically related. The notion of individual responsibility without merit transfer can be seen as the primal

ideological theme, but the notion of merit transfer is quite legitimate within many traditions and, de facto, is central to Hindu life. This is not dissimilar to the relationship between grace and works in Christian theology. In virtually all Christian traditions, grace is the orthodox concept; nonetheless, conformity to what is defined as basic morality is central to the day-to-day life of active members of Christian churches. Most Christians believe "We are saved by God's grace" but "Grace without works is dead." Churches and movements vary enormously in their emphasis on "works" and moral conformity. Often the ideas of grace and works become intertwined and even confused—the latter may become a key sign or component of the former. The same seems to be true within the Hindu tradition with respect to karma and merit transfer.

Karma and Fate

Karma supposedly is a process which, in Weber's (1968:VI) and Obeyesekere's (1968, 1980) terminology, ethicized the totality of existence. In the long run, each action produces its just reward or punishment, or more accurately its appropriate fruit (*phal*). The worldly status individuals will have in future incarnations is largely determined by the actions of their past lives. In some versions of the doctrine, all aspects of good fortune and, especially, misfortune are also the result of previous actions; the law of karma provides a rigorously moralistic view of human existence that makes an individual totally responsible for his or her own destiny.

But no society attributes the individual's fortunes and misfortunes solely to his or her own actions. Outcomes in the empirical world are too complex and uncertain to make such a worldview credible. Hence, when the doctrine of karma approaches the ideal-type example of individual responsibility and free will, other concepts will be used to qualify this view. Concepts develop to give some credence to structure and contingency, that is, to the determining effects of human relationships and to what might be variously viewed as chance, luck, fate, divine providence, or the play (*lila*) of the gods. While the precise concepts used to represent these ideas in South Asia vary by region and time period, the key issues can be identified by relating the doctrine of karma to the notions of fate (*daiva*). Karma is analogous to status acquired by conformity to norms. The analogue of fate is less straightforward, for it involves elements of both contingency and determinism. The contingency element of fate is often expressed in South Asia by the concept of *lila*, the play of the gods—something beyond comprehension or prediction. The determinancy element is often expressed in South India by the notion of headwriting (*talai eruttu*).¹²

The notion of karma as freewill and ultimate justice is not only qualified by the introduction of additional concepts such as merit transfer, fate, and headwriting; the concept of karma itself has multiple meanings and interpretations, many of which significantly qualify the implication of freewill. Some, in fact, imply nearly complete determinism. O'Flaherty notes, "As is apparent from the Puranic materials, too, karma and fate (*vidhi*, *niyati*, or *daivam*) are sometimes equated and sometimes explicitly contrasted" (1983:xxiii). To complicate matters even more, the actors in a given situation often define and use these terms and ideas in significantly different ways depending on the social context. As Sheryl Daniel (1983) concludes after her

¹²The parallel notions of *takdir* (fate), and *lekh* (writing), in the north Indian village studied by Raheja (1988:96) imply a combination of the influence of fate and the will of the local goddess deity. The point holds, however, that something more than a completely moralistic concept of *karma* is involved.

exploration of the Tamil concepts related to such notions as karma, fate, and headwriting: "although I began with an apparently simple problem—to explicate the villager's beliefs concerning fate—I discovered not just one composite cultural understanding of "fate" but diverse perspectives and variations on these perspectives" (1983:60). Her informants picked and chose between the various concepts to suit the particular purposes of the moment. Equally significant, their nonchalance about consistency reflected the larger Hindu worldview and especially the concept of *lila*.

The Cost and Benefits of Abstraction and Generalization

I have discussed Hindu eschatology and soteriology in terms of generalized definitions of *samsara*, *karma*, and *moksa* and attempted to show how they could be understood as structural reversals of the central features of the caste system. The argument outlined above has necessarily involved simplification. Much has been left out; certain features have been emphasized, foregrounded, and privileged at the expense of other features. First, the key structural features of the caste system greatly simplify the nature of caste structure and relationships. Second, the concepts of *samsara*, *karma*, and *moksa* are more variable and complicated than the initial discussion indicated. Some of these complexities were briefly discussed in the section above.

Yet the crucial point is that these qualifications do not invalidate the generalizations I have outlined—for example, the general characterizations of karma cited earlier (Mahony 1987; Kane 1977). The apparent discrepancies involve different levels of analysis. In the introduction, I used the analogy of a map to illustrate the point; a more substantive analogy will now clarify the nature of the argument.

In the contemporary United States, equality of opportunity is a central ideological doctrine. Virtually no public figure would openly speak against equality of opportunity. Moreover, compared to most societies, past and present, the social structure in the United States provides a relatively high level of equality of opportunity. But to make such an argument is not to say that American social structure matches the ideology of equality of opportunity; ascribed characteristics and class structures are obviously highly significant in creating differential life chances. Nor is it to argue that "equality of opportunity" means only one thing. Different individuals and groups are often bitterly divided over what concretely constitutes equality of opportunity. In fact, the concept can be used to mean precisely opposite things for contending groups. The contemporary debates in the United States over affirmative action or in India over reserved school and government positions for disadvantaged castes are good examples; in both cases, some claim meaningful equality of opportunity requires the assignment of positions on the basis of ascribed characteristics—which traditionally has been considered the opposite of equality of opportunity. A similar example of ambiguity involves the inheritance of private property by children. Such inheritance is clearly a matter of ascription by most formal general definitions of the word, but rarely do Americans consider this a violation of equality of opportunity. Stated in general terms, ambiguities and contradictions, as well as alternative and counter-structures, are implicit in our cultural ideas about equality of opportunity.

The key point is that despite these qualifications, it is still accurate to say that, in broad historical and comparative perspective, equality of opportunity is a central ideological tenet and structural feature of the United States, and that it is much more important in the U.S. than in South Africa or seventeenth-century France. In

Louis Dumont's (1980) terminology, equality of opportunity in the United States encompasses other concepts at the ideological level. The same is true when I characterize *samsara*, *karma*, and *moksa* as central religious tenets of Hindu eschatology, summarize the central features of the caste system as prohibition of mobility, ascription, and a preoccupation with differentiating identities, or argue that these two sets of phenomena are structural reversals of one another. To use such abstractions is not to deny the complexities. Rather it is to create the intellectual tools needed to see structural patterns that are latent and unconscious. I see this process of abstraction as necessary to discerning patterns that more concrete detail would obscure.

Yet the dangers of such abstraction must be acknowledged; it is all too easy to reify our theoretical models. For example, the present analysis has focused on features of "social stratification" and features of certain "religious doctrines" reported in classical religious texts. The concepts themselves are, of course, historically contingent and hence analytically problematic, but this is true of all analytical concepts including those that are supposedly "indigenous." In addition, much about Hinduism and Indian society that is very important has been left out. Such omissions can mislead scholarship but, even worse, can lead to actions in the real world with unfortunate, and even disastrous, unintended consequences. In the recent past, this result has frequently been seen in the analyses and derived policies of both neoclassical economics and Marxism.

Some traditions of scholarship, especially forms of neo-Marxism, call for various kinds of "total," "concrete" analysis. Perhaps the "father" of such a viewpoint is Georg Lukacs. In the preface to the new edition of his most influential work, he writes, "It is undoubtedly one of the great achievements of *History and Class Consciousness* to have reinstated the category of totality in the central position it had occupied throughout Marx's works and from which it had been ousted by the 'scientism' of the social democratic opportunists" (1971:xx). Yet even Lukacs recognizes that "totality" is a goal and that various forms of selectivity and abstraction are necessary for theoretical analysis: "What is crucial is that there should be an aspiration towards totality. . . . This was made clear on the level of theory by the fact that e.g. it was possible [for Marx] to gain an understanding of the whole of bourgeois society from its commodity structure" (1967:198).¹³

I do not claim that it is possible to gain a knowledge of all of Indian society through the type of analysis I have outlined, but I do claim that these forms of abstraction are a legitimate and useful step toward the goal of a more complete understanding of Indian civilization.¹⁴

Interpreting the Observed Relationships

The next obvious question is what is the process or processes that produce the structural reversals that have been identified? Why do Hindu doctrines of salvation

¹³This comment about theory is admittedly an aside in a discussion that is primarily concerned with the relationship between concrete political action and the total historical processes in which it is enmeshed. This context, however, makes the remark even more significant in that, by implication, abstract theory cannot only be a means to a more total understanding, but also relevant for practical activities. I do not mean to imply, however, that Lukacs would be sympathetic to the epistemological position implicit in this paper. As Lukacs says, "It is evident once again we are approaching—this time from a different angle—the fundamental problem of bourgeois thought, the problem of a thing-in-itself" (1971:150). In this respect my own position is more—but not completely—realist and Kantian than would be acceptable to Lukacs.

¹⁴For a detailed history and a thoughtful, sympathetic critique of the concept of "totality," see Jay 1984.

tend to be structural reversals of the central features of the caste system? According to Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1966) the human mind operates on the basis of dualistic contrast such as structural reversals. Hence, the patterns that have been identified are simply the playing out of a kind of cultural algebra rooted in the way the human mind works. The details of what Lévi-Strauss is arguing are open to ambiguity and debate, not to speak of the validity of his arguments (see, e.g., Leach 1974; Rossi 1974). But it is clear that his notions focus on the cognitive aspects of how the human mind works. But not all religious eschatologies and soteriologies take the pattern of structural reversals (see, for example, Lang 1989). Hence, any simple form of cognitive reductionism is unconvincing.

The second and most obvious interpretation is that eschatologies provide psychic compensation for the deprivations that are experienced in this world. The interpretation is still in some respects rooted in psychological processes, but here the emphasis is on emotion rather than cognition. This is the answer suggested by a long line of thinkers, including Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud, and articulated most recently by Stark and Bainbridge (1980, 1985). This is the proposition that is implicit in Weber's argument concerning the effectiveness of karma as a theodicy and legitimating rationale for the caste system (1968:esp. 493–99, 523–26).

Despite a significant element of truth in this explanation, it also raises a number of complicated analytical problems.¹⁵ I will focus on two significant qualifications. First, not all of the otherworldly reversals are viewed as a positive outcome. For example, repeated reincarnation (*samsara*), although a reversal of a caste system with no mobility, is not viewed as a reward—at least in the writings of religious elites. Even reincarnation into a significantly improved status is still defined as being bound to the suffering inherent in worldly existence. Hence, eschatological reversals are not always compensatory in the sense that they are seen by earthly humans as a desired prospect.

Second, and more important, the direction of causation is less clear-cut than is often assumed. From Feuerbach to Stark and Bainbridge, the usual assumption is that conditions in the empirical world cause humans to create in their imagination a world-to-come that provides compensations for the frustrations and deprivations of this world. Hence, when major changes occur in this world, the image of the otherworld changes accordingly—although it may take centuries for these transformations to play themselves out. This perspective involves various degrees of materialistic or sociological reductionism: the religious ideas of a culture are ideologies or compensating psychological projections that are epiphenomenal reflections of the material and social world. This is often, and perhaps even usually, the case. The question is whether at times the direction of causation is, in part, reversed. Do the strains and contradictions that are projected into the otherworld sometimes create anxieties and frustrations, and do people seek to alleviate and compensate for these by changing their worldly behavior—and does this ever occur on a scale significant enough to produce changes in the patterns of social structure? The classic attempt to address these questions is, of course, Max Weber's (1958) argument that the theology of Calvinism played an important role in producing the motivations and

¹⁵Stark and Bainbridge's formulation of compensation theory is a definite improvement over earlier attempts and helps to resolve some of the apparent contradictions that were characteristic of other arguments (see 1985, especially pp. 10–12, and 1980). It is, however, still based on the debatable assumptions of utilitarian exchange theory. For a critique of such assumptions by a sociologist, see Etzioni 1988. For a specific critique of Stark and Bainbridge, see Wallis and Bruce 1984.

legitimations necessary for the development of bourgeois capitalism. Now I want to sketch a parallel argument concerning the development of the caste system.

While elements and rudiments of caste are reported in the earliest religious texts of India, the evidence seems to indicate that even the ideology as recorded in texts did not become fully developed until what has been called "the new Brahmanical synthesis" that gradually emerged between 200 B.C.E. and 900 C.E. (Hopkins 1971; Brockington 1981). An antecedent, and possibly a stimulus, to this elaboration of the caste system was the thought of the Upanishads and some of the religious heterodoxies such as Buddhism. Despite the enormous differences between and within these religious traditions, the essence of salvation for them is the superseding of individual identity, the merger of the divine and the profane. The key to attaining such salvation was the development of disciplined detachment from both the social and physical world. They hold up the lone renouncer as the religious ideal. Only a small elite has any possibility of attaining salvation—although because of doctrines of reincarnation others may be able eventually to become members of this elite.

It is at least conceivable that such visions of the otherworld could have created pressures for compensating patterns in this world. If the otherworld was seen as unity and nonidentity, a differentiated hierarchy might be found appealing in this world. If salvation required the destruction of social relationships, their importance might take on added significance in the profane realm. If only a small elite had any possibility of escape to the divine, a system that integrates all levels of religious status—however unequally they are treated—might be found appealing. In short, it is possible to conceive of the fully developed caste system as a reversal of the eschatologies and soteriologies that preceded it in time, as in part compensating responses to the anxieties and contradictions of the imagined otherworld. Of course, this must be considered only a tentative hypothesis at this point and undoubtedly many other factors played a role. But the mere possibility of such a relationship is an additional indication that compensation theories of religion need to be revised to take into account the possibility of causality operating in more than one direction. Accordingly, the attempt to identify relationships of structural reversal between caste and Hindu eschatology does not necessarily imply a materialistic or sociological determinism. This is not, of course, to deny that material and sociological factors may, at times, have an overwhelmingly determinant effect upon religious ideas. In short, given our present level of knowledge we are unable to definitely specify the mechanism that produces the observed structural reversal. But this is true of many observed relationships that are of interest—for example, the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism, or between advanced capitalism and political democracy. It seems likely that several, or even all, of these processes may play some role. When we consider the kinds of relationships that are being considered here, we are almost certainly not dealing with any kind of unidirectional or single-factor causation. More than likely, we are dealing with what Weber referred to as an "elective affinity." This is simply to say that there is a potential compatibility between two cultural forms that makes it more likely that they be found together than other forms. This association can, but does not necessarily, involve direct causation. This is probably the most that the present state of our knowledge will allow us to assert.

Conclusion

The substantive aim of this article has been to identify a relationship of structural reversal between the central features of the caste system—which is a central aspect

of the more concrete level of *dharmā*—and the key eschatological notions of *samsara*, *karma*, and *mokṣa*. As far as I have been able to determine, this pattern has not been systematically discussed before. The pattern of reversal is not unique to Hindu India, but neither is it universal; a preliminary analysis shows that the same pattern is found in several major Christian traditions, but not in those of Confucian imperial China. Building upon the work of Weber, Obeyesekere, and various structural analyses of Hinduism, the identification of this structural reversal contributes to our understanding of why *samsara*, *karma*, and *mokṣa* are such central concepts in Hinduism. In addition, it suggests at least a partial explanation of the key variations within Hinduism: differences in the content of and paths to liberation. This article's second purpose has been methodological and theoretical: to demonstrate that analysis on a high level of generality—while it requires that much be left out—does not necessarily cause us to overlook or deny complexities. Nor does the attempt to create theoretical models that identify structural reversals have to result in a materialistic, psychological, or sociological reductionism. The claim is not that we now know the simple causal determinant of these three concepts. Rather, the analysis suggests why, in Weber's terms, there is likely to be a strong "elective affinity" between the Indian caste system and these particular religious notions.

I do not deny that both theoretical models and maps affect social reality as well as represent it. Even more problematic, the very definition of what is real can become reified and distorted when we forget that our maps and models are not the concrete reality itself. It must be acknowledged that theoretical models, like maps, will always have their limitations—and their dangers. But social and cultural analysts, like travelers on a long and complex journey, can ill afford to do without them.

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