

Spiritual Asia: An Anthropological Review

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ABSTRACT

Asia is the largest and most densely inhabited continent in the world, comprising a wide variety of ethnic groups and races, each of which following a diversity of different religions, beliefs, and rituals. Asia is regarded as the origin of the world's mainstream religions including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, among others. This paper discusses from an anthropological perspective the major Far Eastern religions in relation to each other, shedding the light on their origins and histories, their different religious beliefs and doctrines, their sacred rituals, and their practices across cultures. The East Asian religions tackled are respectively Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Jainism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism.

Keywords: *Anthropology of Religion, Religions in Asia, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Jainism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Jainism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism are all prevailing religions, mostly found in the eastern countries of Asia [1]. Some of them are rooted in the culture of ancient philosophies and beliefs; while, others evolved with the manifestation of societies and civilizations. This study is an anthropological comparative review of the various religions in Asia that examines the heritage of these religions together with their cultural histories, their different beliefs and rituals, their customs and sacred practices. This paper first starts by discussing one of the oldest religions, namely Hinduism, shedding the light on its beliefs, doctrines, and rituals. Then, it continues investigating Buddhism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Jainism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism using a comprehensive and comparative method.

2. HINDUISM

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions of the world that is still practiced. It originated in the Indus civilization with the first manifestation of Indian culture that appeared around the third millennium BC. With almost a billion followers, Hinduism is presently the third most prevalent religion in the world after Christianity and Islam. The Hindus believe in the authority of the Veda, which, according to rituals, was exposed by Brahma to men through the vision of the Rishis [2].

Today, there is noteworthy Hindu minorities in the following countries: Bangladesh (15 million), Indonesia (more than 5 million), Sri Lanka (2.5 million), Myanmar (2 million), the United States (1.7 million), Malaysia (1.5 million), South Africa (1.2 million), Pakistan (1.3 million), the UK (1.2 million), Canada (0.7 million), Fiji (0.5 million), Trinidad and Tobago (0.5 million), Guyana (0.4 million), the Netherlands (0.4 million), Suriname (0.2 million), and France (0.15 million).

2.1 Beliefs

The Hindus believe that there are four goals to the existence. They can be summarized by the following:

- a. **Kâma** or desire: It is the desire and pleasure of love. In mythology, the god of love, Kama is the source of creation. The Kâmasûtra describes the means to elevate the senses and achieve a married life. The man and woman meet together to recreate the divine unity. The pleasure is to be directed for the purpose of knowledge and should not become a routine that would lead to immoral behavior.
- b. **Artha** or material prosperity: The man must contribute to his society by creating wealth and relationships that are the results of his labor. He must be cautious not to be misled by the charm of a life of ease; on the contrary, he must derive an education.
- c. **Dharma** or duty: The Dharma should direct all four periods of Hindu life. The task allows man to continue his life on the right pathway, in accordance with law and morality.
- d. **Moksha**: Moksha is more related to reincarnation. As said by Hindu tradition, the man who missed the Moksha must complete a cycle of around 8 million rebirths.

2.2 Rituals

Hinduism is essentially based on two kinds of rituals: The simplified domestic rituals, which anyone can do at home and the solemn rites which require specialized class Brahmin.

Domestic rituals include the daily offerings of grains (rice, wheat, barley) in honor of various deities like Agni, Prajapati, and Surya. During these rituals, there are five great rites practiced every day early in the morning

and evening. All special events are subject to special rituals, events such as festivals, farming, building a house, buying a car, a change of address, examination, and opening a trade. The rituals have an important place in the practice of Hinduism. They are integrated into the daily lives of practitioners, from dawn to sunset.

As for the solemn rituals, it is opened with purification rituals through ash, water or products of the cow, then continue with recitations of mantras (formulas that become instruments of thought and meditation) and invocations to the sun. In temples the puja is explained, it is a ritual during which they venerate an image of the deity with symbolic offerings. The morning, evening, and often at noon, the idol statue between the sound of bells and drums, is washed, coated with ointment and dressed with colored tissues. Follow the ceremonies of the offering of barley, rice, milk and melted butter, perfume, flowers, incense, betel, a libation, and finally a deep inclination.

3. BUDDHISM

Buddhism is, according to traditional views, a philosophy, spirituality, and religion that appeared in India in the fifth century BC. Buddhists in 2005 were around 250 million, making it the fourth world religion behind Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. It is approximated that the number of Buddhists are in China 102,000,000, Japan 89,650,000, Thailand 55,480,000, Vietnam 49,690,000, Myanmar 41,610,000, Sri Lanka 12,540,000, South Korea 10,920,000, Taiwan 9,150,000, Cambodia 9,130,000, and in India 7,000,000

3.1 Beliefs

Though Buddhism is commonly perceived as a religion without God (the concept of a creator god is absent from most forms of Buddhism), the veneration and worship of the Buddha history (Siddhārtha Gautama) plays an important role in the Theravada and Mahayana by giving it a quasi-god nature. Buddhism believes in four truths [3]:

- a. The truth of the pain - because everything is suffering: death, disease, poverty.
- b. The truth of the cause of pain - which is the desire: we do not always get what you want.
- c. The truth of the cessation of pain - the suppression of desire: it is enough to desire nothing.
- d. The truth of the path that led to this realization: the method to desire nothing.

3.2 Rituals

The rituals of the Buddhism are the prostration and the offerings. The prostration is linked to four provisions of mind governing the perfection of the rite:

- a. Absolute purity of heart. The follower kneeling before the altar must be satisfied that he is entirely detached from the surrounding world and currently reaching the realm of perfect serenity and the bliss of the Buddha.
- b. Possession of perfect truths of the Dharma. The follower is in the world of reality, which is the opposite of the world of illusions
- c. Realization of the true nature of his ego. The follower is aware of the exact identity of his real 'I' with the Buddha who should always remain in his heart.
- d. Total Liberation of any dualistic conception of the self and the outside world. The follower must realize that the whole world is void and perishable, and that there is only one entity that is eternal, it is the Sunyata.

On the other hand, the offerings are about three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma (doctrine) and the Sangha (the community).

- a. The offerings to the Buddha: The purpose of the offerings is for the Buddha's followers to keep Buddha's image alive before their eyes. The deposit of offerings on the altar is a symbol intended to further strengthen ties between the Venerable Master of all time and the present generation. It is advisable to offer to the Buddha: incense, flowers, fruit, light, a bowl of clear water, and, occasionally, boiled rice with no dish of accompaniment.
- b. The offerings to the Dharma: They reside in the study of sutras, rules, and discipline of the comments which are made by the sages of Buddhism, so eventually to contribute in publication and dissemination of all writings on Buddhism.
- c. The offerings to the Sangha: The veneration of the Buddha implies respect and confidence due to the Sangha, which represents all the loyal and perfect disciples in Buddha's life.

4. SIKHISM

Sikhism is a monistic religion founded in northern India in the fifteenth century by Guru Nanak. The word Sikh comes from the Sanskrit word (sisya) meaning student or disciple. The doctrine of Sikhism is based on the spiritual teachings of the Ten Gurus, collected in the Siri Guru Granth Sahib. A Sikh believes in one God and the teachings of the Ten Masters (Gurus) collected in the

"Guru Granth Sahib", the holy book of Sikhs. In addition, men and women should receive Sikh baptism [4].

4.1 Beliefs

The Sikh religion is strictly monotheistic, believing in one Supreme God, Absolute, Infinite, the Eternal, the Creator, the Cause of causes without enmity, without hate, both immanent and transcendent. This is not the God of a nation, but the grace of god. Also, he created man, not as a punishment for his sins, but as his true destiny in the cosmos.

The basic hypothesis of Sikhism is that there is no original sin, but life has originated from a clean source, and the Lord of Truth resides in her. Obviously, personal wealth and possessions are not obstacles to the achievement of spiritual ideals. The Sikh does not believe in the sentence: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God".

4.2 Rituals

Rituals are important in Sikhism, they are those associated with the birth of a person, the granting of a name to the child at baptism, the marriage, and the death. The most important ritual is the one related to Baptism. The dead are cremated and their ashes are thrown into the nearest river. No river is considered particularly sacred. It is forbidden to erect a monument over the remains of the dead. All these ceremonies have one common goal: to remind the relationship with God.

Amrit, commonly known as the Sikh baptism, is a must for every Sikh. No age, maximum or minimum, is required to receive baptism. Every man and woman, of any nationality, race, social status, which adheres to the principles of the Sikh faith, has the right to receive baptism and join the Sikh community.

As for marriage, the Sikh believes that the bond of marriage is a sacrament, a sacred union and not a contract. Sikhism does not believe in celibacy. Marriage and family life are considered good, natural, and perfect. A couple Sikh gets married and celebrates four times around the Guru Granth Sahib statue. A Sikh priest says to the couple to comply with the model provided by the four hymns. The same ceremony is repeated at the marriage of a widower or a widow.

5. CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism is the oldest religion of China, based on the teachings of Confucius, about 2500 years ago. He lived with Taoism and Buddhism. This is the philosophical system which was the most watched in China. About 150 million believers are counted.

5.1 Beliefs

The original doctrine is contained in the sacred texts of Confucianism, the classic books, and what is

known as interviews. The basis of the doctrine is the moral guide of life, and rules of behavior. Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, did not claim novelty, but replaced all the existing rules by shaping a remarkable philosophical system that filled China for long. The logic of this system is: Knowledge development → Sincerity in thought → Reform of the heart → Culture Personality → Regulation of families → State Government just → Empire happy and quiet. The human ethics and the social policies are based on respect of a moral code with Li or guidelines, which define the right attitude and the acceptable limits in all types of situations. These rules are part of a framework in which men can express their personality, which must be respected. The best known of these rules is: "Do unto others as you would not want him unto you" [5].

5.2 Rituals

Confucius considered life as a procedure of alteration that cycle through different developmental stages. Confucians created numerous rituals of Li (a proper behavior in a certain situation) that requires special behaviors to achieve the projected goal. Li ranges from a bow to an elder, taking off shoes before entering the house, being silent and respectful to elders, bringing a gift to the host, and writing thank you notes to a helper. The aim of Li is to help people express their ways of building and preserving caring relationships.

Confucianism considers the person as a connection that links him with his ancestors in the chain of existence from the past to the future. Everyone should have ancestors and decedents to fulfill the family tree. It is a sin of not having children. Having a child, mainly a boy, is very significant to carry on the family tree. Therefore, when a new child is born to a family, a celebration is held to announce and rejoice the arrival of the new family member. Egg is served as a symbol of life, and the noodle as a symbol of permanence; hence, the longer the better. Many families also offer various gifts to the new born during the party to test his talents and whether he is gifted or not.

The various development stages in Confucianism are:

Children: At home, children are taught to honor the ethical code (Li), such as venerating the father and mother, loving sisters and brothers, valuing elders, helping friends, and holding loyalty to the family and to the country. It means that life is a creative force because it is connected with the Ultimate.

Young adulthood: At fifteen years of age, a child becomes adult and starts to dress differently, known as the Adulthood Li. Adults start to participate in social activities and undertake related responsibilities such as self-seeking, self-awareness, self-reception, development of identity, and accepting the others.

Age of independence: At age thirty, with life established, a person should become an independent professional and have his or her own family and career established. A wedding ceremony often called Wedding Li, is given by both families to announce the marriage of the new couple. During the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom have to pay their honor to Heaven, Earth, their ancestors, and their parents, with family and friends as witnesses. The third day after the wedding, another wedding party is held with the bride's family.

Age of mental maturity: At age forty, a person should have matured well enough. At this stage, the person is self-defined, well-placed in the environment, and well-aware of his life and the life of his children.

6. JAINISM

Jainism is a religion that first and last emphasizes on the respect of ahimsa (nonviolence), based on the theory of karma, reincarnation, ecology, and asceticism. It is one of the oldest religions in the world, which comes from the very earliest times under the influence of Mahavira. Jainism currently has twelve million followers worldwide, ascetics and laity alike, mostly in India (30000 in Europe and 50000 in the U.S.).

6.1 Beliefs

The Jains are the followers of the Jinas. Jina means literally the Conqueror, who has conquered love and hate, pleasure and pain, attachment and aversion. Thus, he is considered that he freed his soul of karmas, unleashed knowledge and perception, and started seeking the truth of life. The Jains refers to God as Jina.

Jain doctrine is based on a rigorous cosmological system governed by numbers. The individual soul Jains has to follow the disciplines taught by Tirthankaras to achieve its ultimate goal. The way to get out of the Karma and follow these teachings lies in the practice of asceticism. The meaning of Karma is here considered the physical nature of the universe. Jains do not count on divine assistance, but only on the teaching of perfect beings that are the Tirthankaras [6].

The teaching of Jainism consists primarily of five major vows (Mahāvratā) to be followed by ascetics.

- Do not harm the living, sentient beings;
- Do not lie;
- Do not steal;
- Not engage in sexual acts;
- Do not focus on material goods.

6.2 Rituals

The rituals of the Jainism are connected to the daily life of pious Jain. It is about spreading the grain for the birds in the morning, and performing ritual acts of charity and non-violence. The practice of equanimity meditation (sāmāyika) is a ritual performed early in the

morning, and perhaps also at noon and at night. It lasts forty-eight minutes and it is usually not only a quiet meditation but the repetition of customary prayers for the occasion. Identification and request for forgiveness of sins (pratikramana) must also be practiced in the morning, for the violence committed during the night, the evening for those of the day and some days in the year. On this occasion, the Jain expresses remorse for the harm that he has caused, for his evil deeds and duties that he has not yet done.

Reverence before the statues of Jina by bowing to greet them and by lighting lamps before them, is an ideal way to start the day for many Jains. More elaborate forms of worship (puja) are rituals which are performed in the temple on a daily basis. The devotee enters the shrine, saying "Namō Jinanam" (I bow with respect before the Jina) and repeating three times "Nisihi" to abandon all thoughts on world affairs. The simplest round around the chapel of the house can also form a suitable setting. Members of certain sections of Jainism do not practice the veneration of statues of Jina; they prefer meditation and silent prayers.

Worship (puja) can take different forms. The ritual bathing of the statue (snatra puja) is the symbol of that made by the gods (celestial beings) in Tirthankar at its birth. A simple symbolic act is to touch the forehead of the statue with the liquid used for bathing. This bath also takes place during the "pancakalyanaka puja", which is a rite that commemorates the five major events of life as taught by the Tirthankara, and they are: conception, birth, renunciation, omniscience, and liberation. The "Antaray karma puja" has a series of prayers to remove the karmas that obstruct the power of the soul to ascend spiritually.

7. TAOISM

Taoism is both a philosophy and a Chinese religion, bringing together twenty million followers. Rooted in the ancient culture, Taoism is based on texts such as the Tao Te King by Lao Tzu, and is expressed through sacred practices, which influenced the Far East [7].

7.1 Beliefs

Taoists are always in quest for immortality as eternal life depends on the way men treat the body's organs. A Taoist person who is by nature condemned to death has to maintain and treat his organs beautifully so that he can achieve immortality. It is by destroying the causes of death that the embryo of an immortal body is produced. Alchemical processes are the most powerful tools to acquire a long life and immortality. They consist essentially of the absorption of cinnabar, a mercuric sulfide. But before that, it should be carefully prepared by submitting to a technique, probably very complicated, as it is not reported in the books but often transmitted orally from the master to his disciple as a closely guarded secret of the transmutation of cinnabar.

7.2 Rituals

The Taoists are in a continuous search of immortality. They have several methods to do so. The Buddhism brought the Samsara (the cycle of rebirth) which nirvana frees. The first translations of Buddhist texts are just indicative, because due to lack of appropriate vocabulary, they borrow words Taoists. Reincarnation is ignored, but the Buddha's message is included because it saves everyone from eternal death. Nirvana is interpreted as immortality, and Buddhism is considered as a set of Taoist rituals: food supply and proper moral meditation. The quest for immortality transcends the variety of Taoist practices as there is no unity of religions in Taoism, even for the same group of people living in the same area. Breathing, for example, is detectable in several social strata, but with a different meaning.

8. ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion founded during the first millennium BC which Ahura Mazda is the god, solely responsible for the collation of the original chaos, the creator of heaven and earth. Zoroastrianism is a reform prophesied by Zarathustra whose name was transcribed Zoroaster by the Greeks. It is in the current Iranian Kurdistan (western Iran), that Zoroastrianism became the official religion of the Iranians under the Sassanid dynasty (224-651), until Islam arrived. Indeed, the Iranians regardless of their beliefs, place great importance on Zoroastrian festivals [8].

8.1 Beliefs

Zoroastrians respect fire as a divine symbol. Zoroaster preaches a dualism based on the battle between Good and evil, and light and darkness. The principle of Zoroaster is a Holy Spirit (Spenta Mainyu), son of Ahura Mazda and an evil spirit (AngraMainyu) (Pahlavi Ahriman), uncreated spirit, as opposed to representing the day and night, life and death. These two spirits coexist in each of the living beings.

8.2 Rituals

In Zoroastrian rituals are light enough; they are not mentioned in the Gathas and are not mandatory, some of them are: pray five times a day to remember that righteousness is good, and that good is a good thing; have a party once a month, plus five days to prepare for the New Year; purify yourself by taking the meal with water, food, bread, and flowers.

Marriage is compulsory in Zoroastrian and is intended for sterility as a curse. Some rituals date back to the distant past Indo-European, such as bathing of the bride. The Parsis do not marry among themselves (endogamy). This is not a new custom as in Sassanid Persia, it was forbidden to marry a non-Zoroastrian. Moreover, contact with infidels is a source of defilement. If you ate food prepared by a non-Zoroastrian, it is necessary to perform purification rites.

Life is conceived as a gift of Ahura Mazda, the death may be observed with fear. It is believed that the decay of the body is the work of the devil. Nasālāsar is responsible to bring the dead in the Towers of Silence, called dakhmā by the Parsis. The soul of the dead is three days left in the tower. The fourth day she leaves her, but she must cross a bridge. At this point occurs a way of judgment: the soul of the just crosses over the bridge and goes to the House of Chants; while, that of the wicked shall fall into the House of Druj. The House of Druj is a purgatory where one could expect his resurrection. However, all souls will enjoy creating a paradise on earth following the victory of Ahura Mazda on the spirit of evil.

9. CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the different beliefs and rituals of some religions that exist in Asia. It revealed some the dogmas and sacred rites practiced by the devoted followers of these religions. This paper also examined backgrounds where religious practice looks very dissimilar. In many cultures and civilizations, the notion of a sole God may not be present, and the idea of reading a holy book like the Bible or the Koran would appear very odd. Likewise, some cultures have bizarre rituals surrounded with mysteries; whereas, others have non-compulsory liabilities which the general population may or may not subscribe to. In brief, whether it is true or false, whether one is with or against, every religion has its own spiritual philosophy that expresses its believers' behaviors and their roles within the world and for which it deserves respect and admiration.

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