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Challenging Religious Issues

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Virtue Ethics in Business Organisations

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In the first part of this two-part article a brief summary of virtue ethics is provided before turning to construct a framework of practices, institutions, goods and virtues that Alasdair MacIntyre offers in his book After Virtue*. In the second part, the implications of this framework for business organisations are explored.*

Specification links:
AQA Section B: Ethics and religion: Normative ethical theories; Christianity
EDEXCEL Paper 2: Religion and Ethics: 5. Deontology, Virtue Ethics and the works of scholars
WJEC AS Unit 1, Option A: Christianity. AS Unit 2, Section A, B. Virtue Theory.
OCR Religion and ethics: Business Ethics

A brief summary of virtue ethics

Ethics tries to answer the question, 'How should I and we live?' There are a great number of possible answers to this question, but probably the two most well-known are
(a) *deontological* (duty-based) approaches drawing on the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), and
(b) *teleological* (consequences-based) approaches drawing on the work of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and often called Utilitarianism.

However, these are relatively new ethical 'theories' arising out of the 18th century Enlightenment in Europe. A much older ethical theory, known as virtue ethics, derives from ancient Greece and most notably from Aristotle (384-322 BCE). The Enlightenment theories are *principle-based* ethics which focus on the action or decision facing someone – 'What's the right thing to *do* in this situation?' The focus for virtue ethics, by contrast, is on the person, with the idea that the good or virtuous person will make a good decision, and more generally lead a good life. In other words, *character comes first*. And someone's character is developed over time, starting in childhood, and consists of the combination of virtues

and, unfortunately, vices which become ingrained in them so that they form a fundamental part of who that person is.

We will have more to say about virtues and vices below, but another important element of virtue ethics, which also differentiates it from principle-based ethics, is the idea that people are understood as having an ultimate purpose or good for their lives. Aristotle gave this the term *eudaimonia*, and, although its translation is not straightforward, Alasdair MacIntyre, who we will meet again below, offers this definition: 'blessedness, happiness, prosperity. It is the state of being well and doing well, of a man's [*sic*] being well-favoured himself and in relation to the divine' (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 148). Thus, while there is an enormously broad range to the kinds of lives and circumstances in which people live, everyone's ultimate purpose in life is to seek to become someone who achieves this state or condition.

This understanding gives us a first definition of the virtues:

> The virtues are precisely those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve *eudaimonia* and the lack of which will frustrate his [*sic*] movement toward that *telos*.[1] (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 148)

Is there a link between virtue ethics, as briefly described above, and a Christian approach to ethics? Certainly, this was thought to be the case by the very influential Catholic theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who sought to synthesise Aristotelian philosophy with Christian principles. Following this, a set of seven key virtues were proposed: the four cardinal virtues identified by the Greek philosopher Plato (roughly 427-347 BCE)

— temperance (self-control), fortitude (courage), justice and practical wisdom; coupled with the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love (see 1 Corinthians 13). These seven virtues were contrasted with the seven deadly sins or vices: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth. Thus, in times past, ethics was thought of in these terms. It was about developing a character in which the virtues (ideally all of them, operating in harmony) took precedence, and the vices were overcome — thereby enabling the person in the achievement of *eudaimonia*.

In the next section we will turn to look at the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, and how he has developed these ideas. But it is worth noting that MacIntyre regards himself as a neo-Aristotelian who also draws on the work of Thomas Aquinas. That said, the key work of MacIntyre's that we will be using is *After Virtue*, originally published in 1981 and now in its 2007 third edition. And that book owes much to Aristotle, and rather less to Aquinas.

MacIntyre's concepts of practices and institutions, and their relationship to internal, external and common goods: The role of virtues.

While *After Virtue* owes much to Aristotle, MacIntyre introduces a particular idea of his own, to which he gives the name 'practice'. While this is a common enough term, he has a much more particular meaning in mind:

> By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course

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[1] *Telos* means purpose, and is the noun associated with the adjective *teleological*.

of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 187)

This is a rather complicated definition (and all in one sentence!), so it needs some unpacking. First, some examples might help with the idea of 'any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity'. These include football, chess, architecture, farming, physics, chemistry, biology, the work of historians, painting and music (see MacIntyre, 2007, p. 187). Indeed, while not everything is a practice (see Moore, 2017, p. 142-146), and MacIntyre is clear that virtues are also exercised outside of practices (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 187), it is worth noting that, on this account, we spend most of our lives operating within various practices.

This leads to the second thing we need to note from the definition, which is that involvement in practices leads to the realisation of internal goods. This idea of internal goods links to something we noted above about people having an ultimate purpose or good for their lives. This ultimate good is always something that we need to strive to understand and achieve, but we do so by achieving more immediate goods which, in a sense, build up to and help constitute the ultimate good. Internal goods, while not the only kind of good, are key to this. Again, some examples might help. MacIntyre describes a child learning to play chess, who is bribed by candy in order to motivate her to learn the moves and tactics, but with the hope that in the end she will play not for the candy (or not only for the candy), but for the joy of playing,

thereby gaining 'the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity' (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 188). These are the *internal goods* of chess, and they are internal because they can be achieved only by playing chess, or some other equivalent activity. We will come back to internal goods below, but the third thing we should note about the definition of a practice is the pursuit of excellence that is involved. Again, this is very different from the principle-based theories summarised above. Here, the achievement of internal goods is dependent on striving for excellence, and in such a way that the very understanding of the goods themselves is further developed: try to emulate the very best chess players, and even go beyond what they have achieved in and for the game of chess.

With this idea of a practice in place, MacIntyre provides a further definition of a virtue:

A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 191)

We now need to move on from practices to consider another important, and linked, concept – that of institutions. As with practices, MacIntyre provides a rather lengthy definition:

Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with what I have called external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as

rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers. For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions. Indeed so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions—and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practices in question—that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution. In this context the essential feature of the virtues is clear. Without them, without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 194)

Again, we need to note several things about this definition. First, MacIntyre is making a distinction but also a connection between practices and institutions. He illustrates this with the following examples: 'chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions' (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 194). So practices and institutions are intimately related and could not exist without each other. But there is also a fundamental tension between them, because practices are all about internal goods, while institutions are concerned primarily with external goods. We will come back to this tension in the next section.

But this leads to the second thing we need to note, because here we meet a second type of goods—those that are external to practices. Money, power and status are the examples MacIntyre gives of these goods, and they are external

because they can be achieved in any number of ways outside of, or arising from, practices—as could obtaining candy for the chess-playing child. They are goods (not 'bads'), but it is also clear from the way MacIntyre speaks of them that, while necessary, they also carry dangers. We might link this to the observation in the Bible that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). Note that it is not money itself, but the love of it which is the problem. Similarly here, MacIntyre speaks of the acquisitiveness, competitiveness and the corrupting power of institutions that can arise in their pursuit of external goods, and he also notes the role of the virtues in resisting this.

Again, we will come back to this in the next section, but for now it is worth both exploring this relationship between internal and external goods and extending the idea of goods further. MacIntyre's point about external goods is that we need them—he says that 'no one can despise them altogether without a certain hypocrisy' (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 196). But it is also clear that they need to be subordinated to internal goods. It is internal goods that enable us in our search for our ultimate good, and external goods can therefore be regarded as *instrumental* goods—means to an end because practices cannot exist without them, and internal goods could not therefore be obtained. But external goods are not ends in themselves.

However, MacIntyre adds one further type of goods to this framework that he is constructing—common goods.[2] So far, although we have already been working

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[2] The term 'the common good' is used quite often nowadays, and stems from its usage in Catholic Social Teaching. While MacIntyre's usage is similar to its Catholic origins, he deliberately uses the plural form to make the point that there are many kinds of common good.

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at the social level of practices and institutions, we have largely been thinking in terms of individual goods—how internal and external goods enable us in our individual search for the ultimate good of our lives. But MacIntyre makes the point that the achievement of these goods often involves cooperation with others (look back to the definition of a practice), and that some of the goods we depend on in this search are not individual but common: 'the goods of family, of political society, of workplace, of sports teams, orchestras, and theatre companies' (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 51). We also need these kinds of goods in our lives and, like internal goods, common goods should take priority over external goods while also being to some extent dependent on them.

We have now put together the framework that MacIntyre offers us—of practices, institutions, goods and virtues. How, then, might this be applied to business organisations? It is that to which we turn in the second part.

In the second part of this article, the focus turns from the individual level to the organisational and considers the implications of MacIntyre's framework when applied to business organisations.

Extending notions of virtue from the individual to the organisational level
Most ethical theories are focused on the individual level – 'How should I and we live?' – as we noted above. But there has been a long-standing acknowledgement that ethics also needs to be considered at other levels. Aristotle, for example, was particularly concerned with the 'city-state' (Athens, for example) as the primary political and indeed ethical 'entity' of his day. More recently, a lot of attention has been given to the study of business ethics, although this might more generally

have been focused on organisations of all kinds (schools, universities, charities, local government, and so on). And the questions that are raised at this intermediate level (between individual and state) are not simply, 'How should I and we live and behave when at work?', but also, 'What might it mean for an organisation to be considered to be ethical (or not)?'

Here is not the place to discuss in detail whether ethics 'works' at this level. Suffice to say that there is no intention to make an ontological claim that organisations, in their very nature, can be considered to be equivalent to people. But it is to make the claim that we can speak sensibly, *by way of metaphor*, of organisational or business ethics (for more on this, see Moore, 2017, pp. 50-53). And it is worth noting that we do this already when we use ideas like 'business strategy' (as though the business had a strategy of its own, independent of the senior people in the business), or 'organisational culture' (as though the organisation had a way of doing things, independent of the way people in the organisation do things.)

With that in mind, we can use the framework MacIntyre offers us and see where that takes us. And it is already clear from the discussion above that MacIntyre's notions of practices and institutions can be applied at the organisational level: 'chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions' (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 194, as cited above). Deriving from this, it has been argued that (business) organisations can be conceived of as *practice-institution combinations* (see Moore, 2017). In other words, a business organisation can be thought of as consisting of two inter-related parts. There is the practice at its core (for example,

mining, manufacturing or retailing), and the institution which 'houses' it[3] (for example, Rio Tinto plc, Unilever plc or Tesco plc). But MacIntyre enables us to develop this further. In speaking of internal goods (those which are realised in the course of the pursuit of excellence within a practice), he identifies these as the products and/or services which the organisation provides, and the 'perfection' (or human flourishing) of the organisation's practitioners (or employees, as we would normally refer to them) (see MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 187-196, and MacIntyre, 1994, p. 284). Two things follow from this. First, these internal goods *give point and purpose* to the organisation as a whole. This is what it exists for—to produce excellent products and/or services, and to enable its employees to flourish. Second, it is these internal goods which make a contribution to the common good. MacIntyre speaks of those who, in the ideal, find themselves 'deliberating with others as to how in this particular set of circumstances here and now to act so as to achieve the common good of this particular enterprise'[4] (2016, p. 174). So we see how business organisations can contribute to the common good through the internal goods they produce.

But then there are also external goods to consider. Recall that external goods are associated with the institution, and MacIntyre identified money, power and status as examples. More generally, in relation to business organisations, we might identify external goods with profit and success. The institutional element of the practice-institution combination necessarily (remember that these are 'goods') seeks profit because it needs this to generate the resources which enable the practice to survive and thrive. Equally, it seeks success (contrast this with the pursuit of excellence in the practice) in order to survive and thrive in

the long term. And there is also a close relationship between internal and external goods, since it is through the sale of the products and/or services which the practice produces (and the necessary skills and excellence of the employees in doing so), that the institution derives its profit.

This might suggest a happy combination of practice and institution, and in the ideal, and sometimes in practice, it is. But also recall the fundamental tension that MacIntyre identifies between practices and institutions, that 'the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, [and] in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution' (2007, p. 194, cited above). In other words, while they cannot exist apart from each other, business organisations are almost always subject to this tension, with the pursuit of external goods of the institution (profit, success) potentially dominating over the internal goods of the practice (the excellence of the products and/or services, and the flourishing of the employees).

Virtuous business organisations as a positive but challenging way of viewing the role of business in society
The fundamental and inherent tension that exists in all business organisations has led to attempts to characterise what a 'virtuous' business organisation might look like. And, given all that has been said above, the following characteristics should not be particularly surprising.

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[3] MacIntyre uses the word 'bearer' in his definition of an institution above, and elsewhere refers to the institution as the 'social bearer' of the practice (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 195).
[4] MacIntyre is using 'enterprise' generically to include family, school and workplace, among others.

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A *virtuous business organisation* would be one which:

- has a *good purpose*, which is realised in its pursuit of excellence in relation to internal goods (the excellence of its products and/or services and the flourishing of its employees), and in the contribution it makes to common goods;
- recognises that its most important function is in the sustaining and encouragement of excellence in the practice it 'houses';
- has an ordered focus on the achievement of external goods, in such a way that internal and common goods are prioritised (see Moore, 2017).

It is worth saying a little more about the first and last of these, by way of contrast with the way in which business organisations are often conceived. It is quite common to hear the view that the purpose of business is profit, and more particularly in relation to shareholder-owned businesses that it is the maximisation of shareholder wealth. On the basis of the approach that has been outlined here, this is in error in three ways.

First, and most obviously, it clearly prioritises what we can now call external goods (which should only ever be considered as instrumental goods) over internal and common goods. But second, it fails to recognise what is also inherent in the approach outlined here, that without the practice and the internal goods that derive from it, there are no external goods. So prioritising external goods will, in the long run, put the whole business organisation – the practice-institution combination – in jeopardy. Third, by generalising the pursuit of external goods – so that it really does not matter how these are generated – it diminishes practices and the pursuit of excellence in them.

By way of conclusion, this way of approaching the ethics of business organisations offers both a positive but also a challenging view of the role of business in society.

The positive view is that it conceives of business organisations (amongst organisations in general) as able to make a constructive contribution to society (the common good). They can make this contribution both through the excellence of the products and/or services they provide, and through enabling their employees to flourish. And business organisations also generate external goods, which are not to be sneered at ('no one can despise them altogether without a certain hypocrisy', MacIntyre, 2007, p. 196, as cited above), but which, as we have seen, are dangerous if prioritised. Indeed, MacIntyre warns that, 'We should therefore expect that, if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might suffer first attrition and then something near total effacement, although simulacra might abound' (2007, p. 196).

But the challenge that this approach entails in relation to the role of business in society, is that it flies in the face of the received wisdom that sees business organisations as a means to the end of profit and shareholder wealth. Standing out against that received wisdom is not easy for the 'virtuous' business organisation, and will require the virtues of wisdom and courage, amongst others, in both those who are engaged in the core practice and in those (senior managers) who represent the institution.

And finally, to link back to what we noted in the opening section about the way in which *character comes first* in a

virtue ethics approach, and with what was said in the third section about metaphor, this way of thinking about business organisations anticipates that such organisations will themselves need to develop a virtuous *character* of their own, possessing and exercising what we might call (metaphorically) corporate virtues, and lacking corporate vices (see Moore, 2017, pp. 124-131). But that is, perhaps, for another day.

Internet link

If you are interested in learning more about Alasdair MacIntyre, there is a group of academics which follows and develops his work across a wide range of disciplines: see

The International Society for MacIntyrean Enquiry.

Discussion points

1. Do you find virtue ethics a convincing way of approaching ethics? If so, why? If not, why not?

2. In which ways does MacIntyre's framework of practices, institutions, goods and virtues help to develop the basic idea of virtue?

3. Is the application of this framework to (business) organisations a helpful way of thinking about organisations? If so, why? If not, why not?

4. Do you think virtuous business organisations would be able to survive in the current environment, and if so how?

References and further reading

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Making Sense of Non-religion: Revisiting Secularisation from the Other Side…

Mathew Guest

This article considers the question of secularisation from the point of view of those who identify as 'non-religious' and asks what this label might mean.

Specification links:
OCR 2c. Content of Developments in Christian thought (H573/03); 6. Challenges – The Challenge of Secularism
WJEC/CBAC Unit 3: A Study of Religion - Option A: A Study of Christianity - Theme 2: Significant historical developments in religious thought
EDEXCEL Paper 4, Option 4B: Christianity, 4. Historical and Social Developments, 4.2: Secularisation
AQA 3.2.2 2B Christianity - Section A: Christianity - Christianity and the challenge of secularisation

Introduction

In 2008 the evangelical Christian organisation JesusSaid.org commissioned an advertising campaign on public buses, promoting Bible verses in accordance with their understanding of Christian faith. In response, comedy writer Ariane Sherine, backed by prominent atheist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and the organisation Humanists UK, launched their own campaign, based around the message 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and start enjoying your life'. Advertising space ordinarily used to promote the latest Hollywood movies was instead re-purposed as the battleground for an evangelical-atheist stand-off.

The campaign triggered public debate about the claims made by religious traditions, the moral message of humanism, and the question of whether religion occupies an unjustified position of privilege in UK society, one that has no place in the 21st century. The debate was often impassioned and featured spokespeople (like Dawkins) who are associated with the resurgence of anti-religious feeling commonly referred to as the 'new atheism'. Its advocates tend to view religion as either superstitious nonsense and/or nonsense that is socially damaging, fostering narrow-mindedness, judgementalism and violence. Some have suggested the

'black and white' absolutism of these passionate atheists means they deserve to be called 'fundamentalists', albeit non-religious ones.

Fast-forward to 2016, and the British Social Attitudes Survey reported that, for the first time, those saying they have 'no religion' had become the majority in Britain. Their annual survey, which had found 31% of the British public identifying as 'non-religious' when it was first launched in 1983, found that, in the second decade of the 21st century, this figure had increased to 53%.

So, Britain is now a secular country, right? Dawkins and the new atheists have won. Well, not necessarily. While the evidence that Britain has a higher proportion of citizens choosing to describe themselves as having 'no religion' is strong, what is less clear is what this actually means. As is often the case, the realities on the ground appear much more complex than the media headlines would have us believe.

Secularisation and the secular across societies

This growth in the proportion of the 'non-religious' can be found across so-called Western societies. Even the famously religious USA follows this pattern, if at a slower pace than Western Europe. The Pew Research Center, which specialises in collecting data on US religion, found 29% of the US population claimed to be 'religiously unaffiliated' in 2021. That's much lower than the UK figures, but it has also experienced a rapid growth (from 16% in 2007). So as those with the loudest religious voices in the USA appear to be getting louder (and demanding more column inches on either side of the Atlantic), at the same time the proportion of non-religious Americans appears higher than ever. Rather than a nation ever closer to secularisation, the USA is

more accurately described as a polarised country. Highly religious and highly secular voices are shouting ever more loudly at one another across the divide.

And yet the overall pattern, which spans many cultural boundaries, has a great deal to do with secularisation. Defined in the 1960s by sociologist Bryan Wilson as the process whereby religion 'loses social significance', secularisation has been traced along a variety of trajectories in a range of very different national contexts. Most simply measured in terms of declining levels of regular attendance at religious places of worship, secularisation has been taken to indicate a declining interest in religion more generally. The nature of secularisation as a process, though, is much more complicated.

A long-standing assumption has held that as societies become more modern, so they become less religious. The precise sociological link is sometimes understood to be the advance of science and technology – which provide answers to important questions that are now more convincing than those offered by religious traditions, or the growth of religious pluralism – which undermines the truth-claims made by any one religion by presenting the social fact of many religions, all of which might seem perfectly plausible on their own terms. It is possible to see how different mechanisms are more or less dominant in different societies.

More complex theories of secularisation look to the relationship between religion and the state, and how this brings about long-term patterns that progress differently in different nations. The fact that countries that have a national church – such as Sweden, Norway and the UK – tend also to have very low levels of church involvement suggests that the advantages of being linked to the state have their limits (Guest et al., 2012). By

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contrast, the USA and France are both bound by written constitutions that include the separation of church and state, and so are sometimes described as secular. What this means, though, is very different in each of these cases. The first amendment to the US Constitution reads: 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof'. Its separation of religion from the state is expressed in the same sentence as a call to protect the free expression of religion. Accordingly, US history bears witness to a diverse and abundant religious landscape; religious movements have thrived because they have been relatively free from state interference. By contrast, in France, the separation of church and state has led to a conception of citizenship in secular terms. Religion is removed not just from the state but from the public realm, and is expected to be affirmed privately. As a consequence, public expressions of religious identity are often viewed with suspicion, sometimes even fear.

Secularisation is commonly associated with countries with capitalist economies and liberal democratic systems of government – like the UK and USA, but also Canada, Australia, New Zealand and most of Europe. Evidence of religious vitality – even growth – within South America, Africa and parts of the Far East has made it increasingly difficult to speak of secularisation as a global trend. Some have even argued that Europe (including the UK) is the exception rather than the rule (Davie, 2002), and that we would do well to pause and reflect before assuming that the entire world is necessarily on the same path as our own society.

But do we really know what this path is, anyway? Does the British majority describing themselves as 'non-religious' share a common perspective? Can we infer from their response to the British Social Attitudes Survey that they reject all forms of religion, and for the same kinds of reasons? How is this label – 'non-religion' – to be understood? And how does it relate to more common terms like humanist, atheist or agnostic?

There is a growing body of scholarship on the 'non-religious'. It reveals a diversity of orientations that warns against making simple generalisations about what the non-religious stand for, and how their non-religious status influences how they live their lives. In the remainder of this article, I propose a typology for understanding the different perspectives that may be encompassed by the category 'non-religion', focusing particularly on the British context.

Breaking down the 'nones'

Those individuals who affirm their position on religion using 'none' as their answer on surveys appear to fall within several loosely defined sub-categories.

The thoroughly indifferent, who have no interest in religion or anything resembling the quasi-religious or spiritual, and no nostalgic connection to religion or religious institutions inherited from their upbringing. Such individuals would have been rare even within Western European nations until recent decades. However, with many now constituting second or third generation 'nones', a good number of young people have never known any familiarity with a religious tradition. Those outside religiously diverse cities may also not know any religious people. Religious matters may only touch on their awareness via the occasional popular news story, and these may not generate much interest either.

The practitioner of alternative religions or spiritualities, who is unlikely to describe themselves as 'religious' out of a reluctance to be associated with

mainstream religious traditions. They may be very serious about and committed to traditions or practices like yoga, transcendental meditation, wicca or paganism. They may also choose to describe themselves as 'spiritual' rather than religious.

The quasi-religious, who do not exhibit many, or any, markers of religiosity in the conventional sense, but nevertheless affirm attitudes and values that do not easily fit within what Herbert and Bullock call a 'rationalist-materialist worldview' (2018, p. 158). This category includes superstition, folk religion or beliefs in the paranormal; it may also incorporate ideas associated with conspiracy theories. The beliefs of those in this category are unlikely to cohere into a single system or tradition, nor be reflected in any enduring set of practices, rituals or major lifestyle choices.

The culturally religious, who exhibit few if any markers of conventional religiosity but nevertheless retain an attachment to mainstream religions of a nominal or nostalgic character (Day, 2013). They may view religion generally – or a specific religious tradition – as an important source of moral wisdom and recognise its importance to the identities of others, even if they find it impossible to embrace theological doctrines. They may even attend the occasional religious ritual or service, whether to support other family members or out of a vague sense that the experience might have value, even if they cannot subscribe to the beliefs affirmed there. Some may opt for 'non-religion' as a preferred category in order to distance themselves from the more theistic or theological elements that they perceive to be core to the tradition to which they have a tenuous attachment.

The cognitive atheist, for whom belief in God, the divine or the supernatural is irrational and groundless, and who hold this conviction to be important to who they are. Their non-belief is a matter of individual and intellectual conviction. They may read about atheism and religion, and discuss it with friends, so that the arguments and ideas surrounding this debate are important, but they stay within the intellectual and social realm. They are not politicised or acted upon, aside from as an interesting topic for discussion among like-minded peers. As such, while a position based around a cognitive (knowledge, thinking) commitment, it may also resemble what anthropologist Matthew Engelke has described as 'lived humanism' (Engelke, 2014).

The secularist, for whom religion of any form has no place within the public sphere of society. Religion is generally viewed as carrying the potential for irrational thinking and/or violence and as such presents a risk to social order and sound governance. They are likely to be atheist as well, although not necessarily in all cases. The secularist's convictions about religion stretch into a political perspective, and some may express their convictions by engaging in activism in order to advance secularist causes.

This is the perspective most aligned with Richard Dawkins' campaign described earlier, and with the agenda of the 'new atheists'. And yet the evidence suggests those who are secularist in this sense make up only a minority of those identifying as non-religious in the British context. A national survey analysed by Linda Woodhead sheds greater light on what characterises this 'non-religious' population. She finds this label is more popular among younger than older people (60% of those under 40 describe themselves as 'non-religious'), and the vast majority are white British. The non-religious are more liberal in their values than Christians and Muslims, for

example; more internationalist in their politics and more accepting of those who are different from themselves. But only a minority are convinced atheists. Echoing some of the sentiments outlined in some

of the other categories described above, Woodhead also finds that these 'non-religious' do not 'abandon the belief that there are things beyond this life which give it meaning' (Woodhead, 2016, p. 45).

Glossary

agnosticism is the position of remaining unsure, uncommitted or ambivalent with respect to the existence of God.

atheism is the belief that there is no God (as contrasted with 'theism', the belief in God).

humanism has acquired a variety of meanings during its history and is developed differently by the organisations that promote it as a philosophical position. However, they tend to have in common a belief that human beings have an inherent capacity to act morally without the need for any external (including supernatural) source outside of humanity.

non-religious: a term derived from questionnaire surveys that simply indicates that a person has answered a question about religion by stating that they have none. It therefore encompasses a variety of possible perspectives.

secularisation: the process whereby a society or societies become less religious.

secularism: an ideological position distinguished by the conviction that society ought to be organised so that religion plays no role in its public life.

Internet links

https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media-centre/archived-press-releases/bsa-34-record-number-of-brits-with-no-religion.aspx (British Social Attitudes data on religion and non-religion in Britain)

https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/ (Pew Study on religion in the USA, 2021)

Discussion points

1. Is describing a society as 'secular' as problematic as describing it as 'religious'? 'Secular' according to

whom? The majority of the population? If so, what does this mean for religious minorities?

2. Is secular status defined more from the top down, via government constitutions, legal measures or the speeches of politicians? Who has the power to claim a society as secular, and on what grounds?

3. If there are various forms of non-religion or secularity across different societies, might there also be various forms within societies? What might lead some people to embrace one form of non-religion over another?

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Was Hinduism Invented?

Stephen Jacobs

This article addresses how and when Hinduism was conceived as a distinctive religion that could be compared with other religions. While the roots of Hinduism may possibly be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilisation (c.2500 BCE–1700 BCE), the term 'Hinduism' was not widely used until the 19th century. The article focuses on the encounter between Indians and Europeans during the colonial period, which was the context for the emergence of the idea of Hinduism as a coherent and unified religious tradition.

Specification links
AQA: Component 2: Study of Religion and Dialogues. 2C Hinduism. Hinduism and the challenge of secularisation: In India: the 19th century context and the encounter with western values; comparison of the significant ideas of Ram Mohan Roy and Dayananda Saraswati about the nature of Hinduism
EDEXEL: Paper 4, Option 4C Hinduism: Topic 4 Social and historical developments including challenges and responses.4.1(a) Context to the modern development of Hinduism – India subject to foreign rule, Christian and Islamic influences, challenges of secularisation. 4.1 (b) Key emphases in movements, including Brahmo Samaj, Neo-Vedanta, Ramakrishna Mission, Arya Samaj, Hindutva movement. 4.1(c) Key figures in these developments, including Mahatma Gandhi, Ram Mohan Roy, Sri Ramakrishna and Dayananda Saraswati. 4.2(b) Views about Hindu renaissance and the concept of 'Hinduism' compared to a range of traditions, and Hinduism as a world religion
EDUQAS: Component 1: A Study of Religion, Option E: Hinduism. Theme 3 Significant social and historical developments in religious thought
OCR: Developments in Hindu Though (H573/07) 4 Developments, Topic: Hinduism as 'Religion'

Introduction

In 2005, Brian K. Pennington published a book with the title *Was Hinduism Invented?* This seems like a curious title as there are numerous books and websites that include the term 'Hinduism' in their titles, and Hinduism is taught as a distinct religious tradition in schools and Religious Studies Departments in universities across the world. Furthermore, there are approximately 1 billion Hindus worldwide most of whom would acknowledge that they belong to a religion called Hinduism. To understand why Pennington poses this question we will have to look at a range of issues, such as: the etymology of the term 'Hinduism', the encounter between Indians and the British colonial period and the rich diversity of the Hindu traditions.

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What is in a term?

There are two problematic words: 'religion' and the term 'Hinduism' itself. There is no word in any of the Indian languages that is synonymous with the English word 'religion'. Consequently, to define Hinduism as a religion might be to misconstrue the beliefs and practices of Hindus. It is not uncommon to hear Hindus assert that 'Hinduism is not a religion, but a way of life'. The Sanskrit term *dharma* perhaps has the closest meaning to the concept of religion. However, religion does not exhaust all the connotations of that term. *Dharma* in different contexts can signify law, duty, truth and morality, as well as religion.

The term 'Hindu' derives from the Indo-Iranian word *sindhu* meaning river. From about 500 BCE the term 'Hindu' was used by the Persians as a geographical designation for the land and the people south-east of the river Indus that flows through the north-west of the Indian subcontinent, mostly through present day Pakistan. 'Hindu', as far as we know, was not used as a self-designation by the people of India until much later. Audrey Trushke notes that from about the early 15th century there were a few thinkers who 'spoke about "hindus" in a religious sense' (Trushke, p. 8). However, there was no recognition of a distinctive religion called Hinduism until the late 18th century.

Many Hindus trace the origins of Hinduism to the Vedic period (c.1500 BCE –500 BCE) and possibly to the earlier Indus Valley Civilisation (c.2500 BCE – 1700 BCE). However, the term 'Hinduism' was not commonly used until the 19th century. The first use of the term 'Hinduism' to designate a religion is generally attributed to the Christian missionary Charles Grant (1746–1823) in a letter he wrote in 1786. Although, he spelt the term 'Hindooism', it is suggested that because Europeans were the first to use the term 'Hinduism' to designate a single religious tradition, that Hinduism was somehow a fabrication by outsiders. However, it soon became a designation that was accepted by many Hindus themselves. It is generally agreed that the Bengali reformer Raja Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) was the first Indian to use the term 'Hinduism' to designate a unified religion.

The colonial context

The arrival of Europeans in India created what Wilhelm Halbfass (1988) has called a new 'hermeneutic situation'. Halbfass argues that the European presence in India created a totally new context 'in which India and Europe, the traditional and the contemporary, self-understanding and awareness of the other were linked together in new and peculiar ways' (Halbfass, 1988, p. 203). This new hermeneutic situation was characterised by several interacting and contesting discourses that all suggested that the term 'Hinduism' signified a coherent religious tradition that could be contrasted with other religions.

Missionaries, scholars and romantics

Many Christian missionaries believed that they had to understand the religion of India to have any chance of bringing the message of Christ to the local population. Some Christian missionaries were also concerned with representing their perception of Indian religion to congregations back in Britain. For example, the Baptist missionary William Ward published a two-volume account in 1815 entitled *A View of the history, literature and mythology of the Hindoos.* Ward and many other missionaries in India dismissed Hinduism as being mere superstition and suggested that it was irredeemably polytheistic and idolatrous, and therefore inherently inferior to

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Christianity.

The Christian missionary evaluation of the Hindu traditions is a form of what the Palestinian scholar Edward Said calls 'Orientalism'. Said argues that Orientalism is a discourse that divides the world into two unequal parts – 'the Orient' and the West. Said observes that 'Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of discovery, learning and practice' (Said, 1991, p. 73).

Whilst the missionary discourse tended to disparage Hindu beliefs and practices, the colonial period was also the context for a growing academic interest in Hinduism. For example, William Jones, who was a judge for the Indian Supreme Court, founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 as a forum for scholarly research on Indian culture, religion, history and geography. Although Jones suggested that the culture had degenerated, 'in some early age [Hindus] were splendid in arts and arms, happy in government, wise in legislation, and eminent in various knowledge' (Jones, 1786, cited in Marshall, 2008, p. 251).

Other Europeans, disillusioned with Christianity and scientism, identified Hinduism as a source of esoteric wisdom. There were numerous groups and individuals from the late 18th century onwards who can be identified as seeking a spiritual truth in India that they felt had been lost in European culture. This evaluation of Hinduism can be called 'Romantic Orientalism'. These seekers 'projected onto India a more fully realised human existence and a more holistic and spiritually driven culture' (Clarke, 1997, p. 60).

One of the most significant examples of Romantic Orientalism was Theosophy. Many Theosophists regarded Hinduism as the oldest surviving manifestation of a perennial wisdom, that they believed was the source of all religions. Because the Theosophists had a positive view of Indian traditions, it motivated some Indians to re-evaluate their religion. Madam Blavatsky's book, *Key to Theosophy*, inspired a young Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi 'to read books on Hinduism, and disabused me of the notion that Hinduism was rife with superstition' (Gandhi, 1982, p. 77).

Reformers and traditionalists

At around the same time we can identify two styles of Indian discourses, the reformist and the traditionalist, which also proposed that Hinduism is a religion. Raja Rammohun Roy best represents the reformist discourse. In 1828 Roy founded the Brahmo Sabha, which later changed its name to the Brahmo Samaj: 'for the worship and adoration of the Eternal Unsearchable and Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe' (Sastri, 1974, p. 552). Although the content of the Brahma Samaj service was drawn from the Hindu traditions, for example chanting from the Vedas, the style was very similar to Christian congregational worship.

Roy's agenda was two-fold. Firstly, to awaken Hindus from what he calls 'their dream of error' (Roy, 1901, p. 5). The second aspect of his agenda was to counter the criticism of Hinduism by Christian missionaries. Roy's argument centred on the misperception that Hinduism was polytheistic and entailed idol worship. He suggested that the multiplicity of deities referred to in the ancient Hindu compositions known as the Vedas are allegorical and concluded that Hinduism is in fact monotheistic. However, the literal interpretation of the Vedas had led to the belief 'in the real existence of innumerable gods and goddesses', which in turn entailed the practice of 'injurious rites' and ultimately

'destroys the texture of society' (Roy, 1901, p. 5). Roy was not alone and is often represented as the precursor of what is sometimes referred to as the Hindu Renaissance later in the 19th century. The Hindu Renaissance was characterised by an array of individuals and groups engaged in what Agenhananda Bharati identifies as an 'enthusiastic redefinition of religion' (Bharati, 1970, p. 268).

Roy's proposal that Hinduism had degenerated from its monotheistic Vedic origins, while having some appeal to the Bengali intelligentsia, had little impact on most Hindus. Furthermore, there was a backlash against Roy's rejection of the use of images. Several individuals and groups, who might be called 'traditionalists', argued that images are integral to the religious life of Hindus. For example, the Dharma Sabha (The Society of Religion), founded in 1830, sought to promote a 'Hindu unity and identity' (Pennington, 2005, p. 143). While the Dharma Sabha vehemently opposed the Christian denigration of Hindu religious practices and Roy's interpretation of tradition, it shared with both these discourses the idea that there was a unified religion that could be called Hinduism.

Diversity
One of the major problems in trying to define Hinduism is that it is incredibly diverse. Robert Frykenberg, for example, argues, 'There has never been any such thing as a single "Hinduism" or any single "Hindu community"' (Frykenberg, 2001, p. 82). The reason why commentators like Frykenberg suggest that there is no unified religious tradition that can be called Hinduism is that there is no single reference point that is universally accepted by all Hindus. Hinduism has no single founder, no canon of texts, no creedal statement, no agreed theology, and no overarching institutional organisation. Hindu religious ideas and practices are divided by caste, region and lineage.

In the Shri Swaminarayan Temple in North London there is an exhibition called 'What is Hinduism'. This exhibition acknowledges that 'Hinduism, in fact, is a "family" of many diverse traditions, or sampradayas, each with its own distinct theology, philosophy, rituals, code of practices, and value system'. Nonetheless, it does suggest that, while very diverse, there are 'some common elements' such as accepting 'the 'authority of the Vedas' (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, 2023).

The idea that all Hindus accept the authority of the Vedas may be challenged. The Vedas were originally oral compositions, and as such it is very difficult to date them, but probably they were composed between 1500 BCE and 1000 BCE, although some date these compositions much earlier. There was about 1,000 years before these oral compositions were written down, and there is a significant period between the earliest parts and the later parts of this vast corpus. Consequently, the Vedas are incredibly diverse, and the meaning of these compositions is often very obscure. They are also composed in Sanskrit which, although the basis of the northern Indian languages, is no longer spoken. While most Hindus are aware of the Vedas, many have very little knowledge of their contents. Furthermore, other texts such as the epic the *Ramāyāna*, are more widely known.

Conclusion
By naming something, you are not

simply identifying that thing, but you are also creating it. Categories do not simply exist as some sort of objective reality that are unified by some essential essence that distinguishes a particular category of things from all other categories of things. Categories are created through discourses. The idea that religion is a distinctive category of human activity, and that the conceptualisations Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and so on are clearly defined religious traditions, are in some sense cultural constructions. Consequently, it has been argued that the idea of Hinduism was fabricated through the orientalist discourses of the missionaries, scholars and romantics during the colonial period.

However, to suggest that Hinduism is simply a fabrication of orientalist discourses is to deny Hindus agency. It is the colonial milieu and the interaction between Europeans and Indians that created the conditions for the idea of Hinduism as a religion to materialise. Many of the diverse aspects of what is now identified as Hinduism have existed for centuries, if not millennia, although some features are much more recent. While there is no essential and defining feature that unifies all Hindus, I agree with Wendy Doniger that Hinduism is best understood as a sort of Venn diagram, a 'set of intersecting circles of concepts and beliefs' (Doniger, 1991, p. 36).

Glossary

Brahmo Samaj: Originally called the Brahmo Sabha, the Brahmo Samaj was founded by Raja Rammohun Roy in 1828. It was intended to provide a form of worship that was distinctly Hindu but was consistent with Roy's monotheistic philosophy and his opposition to the use of images. In 1858 it split into two groups. Whilst never attracting many members, the Brahmo Samaj was very influential.

Dharma: A Sanskrit term that derives from the root *dhṛ* which means to support or sustain. The concept of *dharma* indicates order as opposed to *adharma* which implies chaos. The term has many connotations including law, duty, morality and religion.

Hindu Renaissance: Between the 19th and early 20th centuries numerous groups and individuals delineated the Hindu traditions in new ways. In particular reformers, like Rammohun Roy, proposed that the Hindu traditions had degenerated from its pristine Vedic roots, and sought to reinterpret the Vedas. Other terms, such as Neo-Hinduism, Hindu revivalism or Hindu modernism, have also been used to describe the ethos of this period. However, the individuals and groups that are associated with this period are very diverse. It is also contested that the cultural movement in Europe between the 15th and 16th century called the Renaissance is an appropriate term to describe the

religious changes in India in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Idolatry: the worship of images. This term is often used in a derogatory way to imply superstitious and irrational religious practices and is often associated with polytheism.

Indus Valley Civilisation: The culture in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, mostly located in present day Pakistan, that flourished between 2500 BCE and 1700 BCE. Some of the objects found at the archaeological sites have been interpreted as indicating that the origins of Hinduism lie in the Indus Valley Civilisation.

Orientalism: a theory proposed by the Palestinian scholar Edward Said. A range of evaluative discourses that represents non-European cultures as alien and exotic.

Ramāyāṇa: an epic poem that tells the story of how Rāma, an incarnation of the deity Viṣṇu, rescued his wife Sītā after she has been kidnapped by the ten headed demon Rāvaṇa. One of the most popular mythical narratives of the Hindu traditions.

Sanskrit: An Indo-European language. Many Hindu texts are composed in Sanskrit. Although it is no longer spoken or widely understood, it is the basis of the northern Indian languages such as Hindi. Such commonly used religious terms such as 'guru' and 'karma' are Sanskrit.

Saṃpradāya: a tradition handed down from an original founder through a lineage of spiritual successors.

Theosophical Society: founded in 1875 by Madam Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott, who moved the headquarters to India in 1877. *Theosophy* is a blend of occultism and Indian religions. The Theosophical Society was immensely important in popularising Hindu and Buddhist ideas in the West in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Vedas: a vast corpus of compositions in Sanskrit probably composed between 1500 BCE and 1000 BCE. Although most Hindus know very little of the content of the Vedas, they are often considered to be foundational texts.

Internet links

https://londonmandir.baps.org/the-mandir/exhibition-understanding-hinduism (The guide to the exhibition *Understanding Hinduism* at the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in London)

https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/themes/hinduism (This British Library site has some very useful articles on Hinduism by renowned scholars)

https://www.asiaticsocietykolkata.org (The Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded by William Jones in 1784. This site has an interesting video on the early days of the Society *Where History Never Sleeps* as well as a short biography of Jones)

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https://www.thebrahmosamaj.net/history/history.html (The Brahmo Samaj was the Hindu Reform Organisation founded by Rammohun Roy. This site has a useful history of the Brahmo Samaj and a short biography of Rammohun Roy)

Discussion points

1. In what ways might Hinduism be considered to be both an ancient and a relatively recent religious tradition?

2. Is it a mistake to consider Hinduism to be a unified and distinctive religion?

3. What is meant by 'the Hindu Renaissance' and why might this be a problematic concept?

4. Is Hinduism simply a fabrication of colonial discourses?

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Should Buddhists abandon rites and rituals?

Phra Nicholas Thanissaro

Although rites and rituals appear to be widespread in traditional Buddhism, some ambiguity surrounds whether historically ceremonies were to be encouraged or abandoned, especially when 'adherence to rites and rituals' is listed amongst the fetters holding a practitioner back from enlightenment. This debate has resurfaced in present-day Western Buddhism where those influenced by Protestantism tend to deprioritise ceremony in favour of meditation. This article examines possible attitudes to ceremony that can reconcile both sides of the argument.

Specification links
AQA 7062 2A Buddhism: Expressions of Buddhist Identity: Devotion and its purposes: acts of devotion in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism; the different perspectives about the significance of worship
OCR Developments in Buddhist thought (H573/06): Western 'inculturation' of Buddhism, the Secular Buddhism of Stephen Batchelor
Also:
EDUQAS Component 1: A Study of Religion: Option D: A Study of Buddhism, Theme 4: Religious practices that shape religious identity
SCOTTISH HIGHERS Component 2: question paper 2 Section 1. Part A. Buddhism, Practices (the relationship between beliefs and practices), Devotion

If you were to go anywhere in the world and visit a Buddhist temple (rather than a meditation centre), you would discover that the reality of Buddhist life tends to be conspicuously involved with chanting, rites and rituals, cultural conventions, vows and resolutions. The number of precepts observed by lay Buddhists is only exceeded by the number kept by monks and nuns. Water is poured to dedicate merits for the departed. Mahāyāna Buddhists take Bodhisattva vows to help them aspire to Buddhahood and the salvation of all sentient beings. Dedicated meditators vow not to sleep lying down, while other Buddhists do prostrations along pilgrimage routes. Some Buddhists commit to being vegetarian. Tibetan Buddhists believe auspiciousness can be generated by the

spinning of prayer wheels or the flapping of prayer flags. There is an abundance of Buddhist amulets and relics that look suspiciously like the 'indulgences' of the pre-Lutheran church.

With ceremonies so much in evidence, it would therefore come as surprise to learn that rites and rituals appear to be discouraged in the higher echelons of Buddhist practice. A literal reading of the inclusion of 'adherence to rites and rituals' [*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*] as one of the subtle mental defilements that needs to be overcome to reach the stages of enlightenment, would mean Buddhists having to give up religious rites and rituals if they want to become enlightened. Of course, some practices in Buddhism could be understood as 'means to an end' or 'skilful means' designed to be let go of once they have served their purpose – as illustrated by the simile of the raft.[1] Is it the case therefore, that precepts and vows,[2] disciplines, practices, ethics or ideology,[3] rites, rituals and ceremonies[4] need to be treated as a hindrance to genuine practice?

What is the problem with adhering to rites and rituals?
The etymology of the term *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* derives from *sīla*, meaning 'virtue, morality or convention' (in the sense of intentionally omitting unwholesomeness from one's behaviour). *(B)bata* refers to oaths or commitments (in the sense of intentionally including wholesomeness in one's behaviour). The term *parāmāsa* means 'in a way that is externally imposed'. Externally imposed discipline is often compared to trying to hold a ball underwater. So, taken together, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* would refer to adherence to rites or rituals that are an 'external imposition'. Such clinging is shunned for

the way it leads to rigidity, dogmatism, resistance to change and the belief that attainments can be reached merely by undertaking rituals or oaths. If parallels were to be sought with Freudian psychology, it could be compared to a complex involving the *superego* (Punnaji, 2013, p. 42).

Adherence to rites and rituals is most commonly found as one of the Ten Fetters [*samyojana*].[5] It is considered problematic on the same level as 'deluded view about the self' and 'doubt'. Apart from being one of the ten fetters, it is also included as one of the four forms of clinging [*upādāna*] – alongside clinging to sensuality objects [*kāmupādāna*], clinging to views [*diṭṭhupādāna*] and clinging to ego-belief [*attavādupādāna*].[6]

Historical objections to rites and rituals
To give some historical context, contemporary with the Buddha there were many competing religions that taught that rites and rituals in honour of the gods was the only way to ensure change in the world – whether it be a plentiful harvest, freedom from disease or healthy childbirth. Rites and rituals were considered sufficient for awakening or salvation. The Buddha soundly rejected this view, because he taught that things happen because of natural laws, not because of petitions to the gods. The Kukkuravatika Sutta[7] is often used to illustrate the perils of blind adherence to oaths or rituals, relating the case of

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[1] M.i.130 [see *Conventions for Citing Early Buddhist Primary Texts*, at the end of this article].
[2] Translation of *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* by Gethin, 1998, Harvey, 2007, Thanissaro, 2014.
[3] Translation of *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* by Mipham, 2004, Chodron, 2018, Jinpa, 2020, Guenther, 1975.
[4] Translation of *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* by Bodhi, 2000, Walshe, 1995, Nyanatiloka, 1970.
[5] S.v.61, A.v.13, Vbh.377.
[6] D.iii.230, M.i.66, Vbh.375.
[7] M.i.387.

ascetics who dutifully imitated dogs or oxen as part of their spiritual practice. They would eat only food thrown on the ground, wear no clothes and go about on all fours – and believed that such practices would lead to their salvation.

These are quite extreme examples of 'magical thinking' that may seem poles apart from the practices of the majority of reasonable Buddhists in the present day. Consequently, modern Buddhists tend to think that, rather than the content of the rites and rituals themselves, the issue being addressed likely concerns blindly following externally imposed conventions (Punnaji, 2013, p. 67). It would refer to people believing that eating certain foods will allow them to gain salvation or ritual bathing in a certain sacred river, consulting fortune tellers, spirit worship or other forms of superstition can be a refuge from suffering. It seems to indicate that petitioning external spiritual forces or reliance on any external imposition of discipline are less genuine than being motivated to do good or avoid evil by one's own sense of satisfaction or conscience. The caution against adherence to rites and rituals highlights the perceived inferiority of discipline as compared to self-discipline – and implies that in higher Buddhist practice good behaviour should have become internalized [*ariya-sīla*], as exemplified by Sāriputta, the Buddha's right-hand disciple, who was praised in the Anupada Sutta.[8]

Contemporary objections to rites and rituals
The ambiguity historically surrounding Buddhist rites and rituals is only compounded in the present day, where they have found themselves at the forefront of Buddhist internal 'culture wars' – with meditation and ritual often at opposing ends of a discourse polarised

along the lines of heritage-convert, traditionalist-modernist or post-colonial-orientalist. Convert Buddhists, secular Buddhists and modernists claim that authentic Buddhists need to abandon rituals such as expressing respect [*pūjā*] or homage [*vandanā*], despite these being basic Theravada Buddhist practices advocated in the Buddhist scriptures. In a sort of spiritual essentialism, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* has been cited by some westerners as justification for rejecting tradition, thinking that freedom from traditional Buddhist rituals should be conducive to clarity and authenticity of mind – and amongst their number are the academics responsible for the English translations of the term '*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*'. Western scholars have consistently relegated rites, rituals and commitment to the domain of 'cultural accretions', and for Westerners to become naively involved in such rites and rituals is regarded with the same horror as 'going native'. It should be acknowledged that although, over the last two decades with the gradual de-colonisation of Buddhist Studies, those dismissive of rites and rituals in Buddhism have become less vocal, secular Buddhists such as Joseph Goldstein (2003) and Stephen Bachelor (1997) maintain an influence on what has become known as 'consensus Buddhism' in the West, where Buddhism has come to be regarded as nothing more than a 'way of life'.

The disproportionate eagerness to dismiss rites, rituals and vows may originate from the Protestant roots of many Western countries where Buddhism has gained popularity (Baumann, 1997). Sometimes this dismissiveness comes in the passive form of *inherent* Protestantism, where the

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[8] M.iii.28.

expectations of Westerners who have converted to Buddhism are unintentionally affected by their former religious background. Sometimes it is more active and intentional, as a form of Protestant *chauvinism*, where Buddhist teachings are taken out of context to justify the rejection of rituals. Unexamined assumptions underlying inherent Protestantism uncritically treats meditation as positive and beneficial, while ritual is at best considered a waste of time and at worst condemned as detrimental to true practice.

Nonetheless, there should be common ground for the assumptions of Eastern and Western Buddhists. The Buddha did not make different accommodations for East and West, since in the Vāseṭṭha Sutta[9] he taught that distinctions of birth, race or nationality ought to be eclipsed by devotion to practice and understanding of the Dharma. Current post-modernist and post-secularist trends in Western society, with diversity of practice and increasing levels of acceptance of ritual aspects of religion in the public sphere, perhaps signal how that reconciliation might happen, moving forward – and it is refreshing to note how Western Buddhists are often now redressing the balance in their practice by 'making up' their own rituals, to assuage any guilt they may feel about cultural appropriation.

Nuanced caution concerning rites and rituals

To many, the de-prioritisation of ceremonies in Buddhism makes sense because, after all, there is no explicit mention of rites or rituals in the factors of the Eightfold Path. Would caution concerning rites and rituals mean prioritising rituals most relevant to liberation from rebirth, or is the issue more to do with the way a practitioner

'adheres'? Certainly, some sorts of rites are discouraged by Buddhists, such as excessively transactional approaches to ritual (Tambiah, 1981), where a devotee might bargain with Buddha, promising a sacrifice in return (such as a donation to the temple) – in return for a favour, but only if the petition 'comes true'. Within Buddhism, it would generally be preferred that such an unskilful ritual can be made skilful by making the donation in advance and channelling the merit of the deed unconditionally toward the outcome sought. This, along with black magic oaths, self-mortification rituals or taking refuge in things other than the Triple Gem, are probably the only rites and rituals that traditional Buddhists would seek to abandon outright.

In conclusion, caution towards rites and rituals is best implemented through a better understanding of the role that motivations, intentions and worldview play in the ceremonial practices of respect, homage or resolution, and shifting attention away from the precept or practice *per se* to the qualities of mind surrounding them. Even superficially 'empty' actions can be imbued with spiritual meaning if performed with Right Intention. Similarly, many rites and rituals in a Buddhist context can be understood as the formal opportunity to practise generosity, bolster morality and meditate. So, the need to break the fetter of *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* would most likely mean relinquishing a distorted understanding of the role that precepts and conventions play in practice, since whether a Buddhist refrains from ritual is no guarantee of escaping magical thinking.

Such an understanding of rites and rituals avoids throwing the (meritorious) baby out with the bathwater, as

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[9] M.ii.196.

modernists might advocate. Meanwhile, Buddhists need to keep in touch with the deeper objectives underlying rites and

rituals in a way that makes them meaningful to ultimate liberation from suffering.

Glossary

consensus Buddhism: mainstream perception of Buddhist orthodoxy (usually by Westerners).

convert Buddhist: those whose ancestry is not Asian and whose heritage is not Buddhist.

decolonisation: scholarly correction of orientalist prejudices to present a less Eurocentric perspective.

Dharma: in the Buddhist context (sometimes spelt *Dhamma*), the Buddha's teaching, what Buddhists consider right, true or wholesome.

fetter: subtle mental defilement holding a person back from enlightenment.

heritage Buddhist: those ethnically connected with countries where Buddhism has a dominant presence and who strive to preserve and perpetuate the Buddhist tradition in the Western country in which they reside.

merit: the beneficial karmic outcome of a wholesome deed.

pūjā: ritual expression of respect.

sīlabbata-parāmāsa: adherence to rites and rituals (but see alternative translations in the second paragraph of this article).

stream-entry: the lowest of four levels of awakening recognised in early Buddhism.

vandanā: ritual expression of homage or praise.

Internet links

https://secularbuddhism.com (A podcast geared toward people not interested in practising Buddhism as a religion)

https://secularbuddhistnetwork.org (Stephen and Martine Batchelor's UK-based Secular Buddhist Network)

Discussion points

1. Is it only relevant to worry about rites and rituals for those on the threshold of stream-entry?

2. Should Buddhists take issue only with compulsory or rote enactment of ceremonies?

3. If Buddhists are not supposed to perform rites and rituals 'like a ball held underwater', can you think of a metaphor for how rites and rituals should be performed? Explain.

Conventions for Citing Early Buddhist Primary Texts

As with biblical citations, Buddhist academic works referring to primary texts conventionally use non-Harvard style references. Agreed abbreviations refer to volumes of the PTS Pali language edition Tipitaka. Romanised numbers refer to volume numbers and Arabic numbers refer to page numbers in the Pali language edition. Abbreviations used in the article are as follows:

A = Anguttara Nikāya   D = Digha Nikāya

M = Majjima Nikāya   S = Samyutta Nikāya

Vbh = Vibhanga

Interested students can find a comprehensive listing of agreed Buddhist textual abbreviations at https://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali/frontmatter/abbreviations.html.

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Sikh Discernment of the Divine
Opinderjit Kaur Takhar

This article focuses on the Sikh perspective on the nature and discernment of the Divine. Teachings from the Guru Granth Sahib portray the Ultimate Divine as gender-free, formless and experienced through the senses – especially by the process of 'seeing' the Divine [darśan]. The devotees' experience of the Divine (often referred to as Waheguru) is compared to the blissful union with one's Beloved. This union is understood as the mechanism by which the devotee can elevate their consciousness from the worldly [manmukh] to the Divine [gurmukh]. This personal relationship with the Divine is explained as experiencing this essence within, rather than looking for the Divine in spaces external to the body.

Specification links:
WJEC/ CBAC/EDUQAS Component 1, Option F Sikhism Theme 4E Philosophical understandings of the nature of God and religious experience found in the names of God. Also: Theme 2A & B on the Philosophical understanding of the Sikh concept of God and the Soul
EDEXCEL Paper 4, Option 4F Sikhism: 1.1 Sikhs and the divine, 1.3 Key moral principles and values, 3.2b The nature and importance of nam simaran, including meditational practices and the use of mantras, 5.2 A study of the differing methods of explaining the Sikh understanding of the divine – a) propositional and analytic and unitive and holistic
SCOTTISH HIGHERS Component 1: question paper 1: World Religion Part F Sikhism: Beliefs about God, Gurmukh; Practices - simran

Use of the word 'Sikhi'

Although the youngest of the major world faiths Sikhism today has the fifth largest following globally. There is a great deal of debate amongst Sikhs whether the suffix 'ism' should be added to any references to their faith. Sikhs tend to show preference for the term 'Sikhi' which they believe is reflective of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. Sikhs, on the whole, view their faith as a *way of life* rather than a pronounced dogma. Many also view the suffix 'ism' as a colonial invention packaging customs and traditions together in a homogenous category. Consequently, in this article, I have preferred the term 'Sikhi' over 'Sikhism'. To minimise technical terms, I have favoured English translations, but have also included the relevant Romanised Sanskrit, Punjabi or Gurmukhi scriptural

terms, italicised in square brackets – with the more frequently mentioned terms included in a glossary at the end.

Inner and non-sectarian nature of the Divine

According to Sikh tradition, Guru Nanak was thirty years old when he underwent a religious experience which fully enlightened him. Nanak went to bathe in the river, as he normally did every morning, except that this time he disappeared for three days. According to Sikh tradition, he was taken to the court of the Divine [*Waheguru*] and on reappearing at the bank of the river spoke the following words, 'There is no Hindu. There is no Muslim. So whose path shall I follow? I will follow *Waheguru*'s path, since *Waheguru* is neither Hindu nor Muslim' (GGS page/Ang 1136, written by the fifth Guru). This utterance indicates that the Divine is a unity beyond all religious divisions and that the relationship to the Divine in Sikhi is a *personal* one that looks inwards to experiencing the Divine that is manifest within each and every human being. This personal relationship with the Divine is about *experiencing* this essence within, rather than *looking for* the Divine in spaces external to the body.

Scriptural description of the Divine

The Guru Granth Sahib (abbreviated 'GGS') is the scriptural authority on Sikh religious teachings. The concept of the Divine in Sikhi is strictly formless and gender-free. Contrary to prevalent Hindu beliefs at the time, Guru Nanak and the succeeding Gurus rejected the concept of reincarnation of the Divine in human or animal form [*avatars*]. The concept of the Divine is highlighted in the basic belief of the Sikh faith [*Mool Mantar*] (see table) and stated at the very beginning of the *Adi Granth,* which since 1708 CE has been referred to as the GGS.

There is One and only the One,	*IK ONKAAR*
Truth is the Name,	*SATNAM*
The Creator,	*KARTA PURKH*
Without fear,	*NIR BHAU*
Without hate,	*NIR VAIR*
Immortal,	*AKAL MURAT*
Beyond births and deaths,	*AJUNI*
The Enlightener,	*SAIBHANG*
Known by the Guru's Grace.	*GURPURSAD*

The concept of the unity of the Divine in Sikhi is one that sees the world and every material aspect of creation as existing within it. The Divine is therefore *personal*, yet also transcendent.[1] The Divine is often referred to in Sikh teachings as 'the Groom' or 'the Beloved', thus strengthening the personal approach to *experiencing* the Divine based around love [*bhakti*] of the Divine through the often-used metaphor of a wedding day in the GGS. 'Seeing' the beloved is not a physical sighting of the Divine. A particular stanza from the GGS clearly highlights the importance of this personal relationship of experiencing or seeing the Divine.

> The crows have searched my skeleton, and eaten all my flesh. But please do not touch these eyes; I hope to see my Beloved. (GGS p. 1382)

How the mind appreciates the Divine

A number of different terms are also used to refer to the Divine, such as the wonderful [*Waheguru*], the True Name [*Satnam*] and the Formless [*Nirankar*].

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[1] The overriding importance given to the Divine in Sikhi is paramount to understanding that the Divine is central to teachings around the experience of Waheguru's immanence.

Time and time again, the teachings of the GGS allude to the bestowing of vision [*Nadar*] as the opportunity to transcend one's consciousness from being worldly or self-orientated [*manmukh*] to being attuned to the Divine [*gurmukh*]. To become attuned to the Divine is the concept of an awakened mind. According to Sikhi, one attuned to the Divine has 'seen' the formless Divine and has 'heard' the unstruck melody [*anahad sabad*], which suggests a heightening of the senses, an awakening of the mind [*mun or buddhi*]. Importantly, in Indian philosophy overall, the term *mun* has a much wider connotation than simply the 'mind': the word lacks a satisfactory translation in English, and can also be associated with the heart, which is further allied with feelings and emotions. In verbal discourses of the GGS, the term *buddhi* is also often used for both the mind and the conscience. Sikh practice is replete with sung recitation of the GGS or singing praise to God [*kirtan*], as a practical means towards the calming of the mind. Singing praise to God can be considered an art of spiritual communication with the Divine. Guru Arjan Dev clearly links 'seeing the Divine' [*darśan*][2] with an awakening of the mind:

> My mind [*mun*] longs for the Blessed Vision of the Guru's *darśan*. (GGS, p. 96)

> My mind [*mun*] yearns for seeing of the Divine [*darśan*], Nanak, my mind is thirsty. (GGS, p. 133)

Role of seeing the Divine
Therefore, 'seeing' according to the GGS is a realisation, a mystical experience of the acceptance of the immanence of the Divine within each and every human being. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh eloquently equates 'seeing' as realisation of the immanent Divine. She highlights:

dekhai or eyesight is, metaphysically speaking, identical with the category of *sujhai* – realization or discovery; literally, being endowed with insight into phenomena as they intrinsically are. Senses and rationality are not pitted against each other; on the contrary, they include each other. (1993, p. 21)

Path of practice
The emphasis here is upon 'love', a personal relationship with the transcendent Divine through devotion [*bhakti*] to a gender-free, formless Ultimate Divine, which must be experienced and realised in order to awaken the conscience into the ideal state attuned to the Divine. Seeing the Divine, conceived of as a gift to humanity, is an opportunity to experience mystical union with the Divine [*sahaj*] through contemplation and meditation on the Name [*Nam Simran*]. An analysis of the teachings of the GGS indicates that mystical union with the Divine results from the mystical experience of *darśan*: suggesting that mystical union and seeing the Divine are coterminous. Seeing the divine is thus the realisation of the Truth, an absence of which brings sadness and suffering.

The pursuit to end such suffering became a central concern for Guru Nanak. The concept of 'high spirits' or 'overcoming anxiety' [*chardi kala*] among Sikhs is synonymous with the controlling of the mind. Sikh spiritual leaders very often prescribe the *hearing* of songs in praise of God as the path towards high spirits or overcoming anxiety, and therefore overcoming mental illness and depression. In practice, these teachings are encompassed both in the practice of

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[2] Use of the term 'darśan' in Sikhi is not to be confused with the physical worship of murtis (as in the case of the Hindu tradition) since there are no representations of the Divine according to the Sikh faith.

meditation on the Name [*Nam Japna*] as well as in the form of *kundalini* yoga. The practice of the latter has become visibly present among Sikhs through the efforts of Harbhajan Singh Khalsa.[3] It is through the efforts of Harbhajan Singh Khalsa in the 1970s onwards in America that the global Sikh community [*panth*] has seen an influx of non-Punjabi Sikhs. There are numerous *gurdwara*s across the globe offering classes on *kundalini* yoga. For many Sikhs, the practical aspect of teachings around 'seeing' the Divine is through the mystical experience of Union with the immanent Divine, an experience derived through such practices as *kundalini* yoga in which the climax of 'seeing the truth' is to open the tenth gate of consciousness [*dasam duar*]. The numinosity and ineffability, to use Rudolf Otto's terms (see his *The Idea of the Holy*, 1917), of 'seeing' the Divine transcends consciousness to its highest point, that of the tenth gate, the highest chakra according to Nath yogic terminology, which is also used by Guru Nanak in his teachings.

The bridegroom metaphor
Returning to the bridegroom metaphor mentioned earlier, the feeling of being in awe [*visamad*] in the presence of the Divine is unarguably the result of attaining vision of the Divine through a mystical experience. 'Seeing' therefore is the absorption of the mind, through the meditational practice of repeating the name of the Divine, into unity with the Divine, in an inseparable relationship based on the utmost love that the bride (symbolising humanity) feels at the 'sight' of her Beloved Groom (an allegory for the Divine). The metaphor of a wedding day, in which the bride longs to be united with her Beloved Groom is used on a number of occasions in the GGS to depict the relationship between humanity and the

Divine. The GGS highlights the ecstatic feelings of the bride when united with her groom; it also illustrates her sorrow and sadness when separated from him. This is a concept that finds expression in the teachings of the Northern Sant tradition and referred to as separation [*viraha* or *birha*]. Hence, meditation on the Name of the Beloved is a comfort for the bride's longing to 'see' her groom.

Importance of human birth
In an exploration of the hermeneutics of the GGS, one finds an inseparable connection between the Will of the Divine [*Hukam*] and the gift of vision. In accordance with the Will of the Divine, the eternal self [*atman* or *jiva*] is granted birth into the human realm, thus bestowed with the golden opportunity to realise the Divine, to have a vision of Ultimate Reality. Indeed, one who is attuned to the Divine is characterised by total submission to the Will of the Divine (GGS, p. 636). It is the human birth alone, through which individual effort is of paramount importance towards the atman's release [*mukti*] from the cycle of reincarnation [*samsara*]. Since the ego [*haumai*] is the obstacle in Divine realisation, it must be overcome through a personal and loving relationship with the Divine through devotion [*bhakti*]. Contemplation on the Name of the Divine, which has become the core foundation of Sikhi, is a distinguishing pillar of Sikh thought. Hence the path [*marga*] of devotion is placed on a pedestal in Sikh philosophy. However, the final release from the cycle of continuous death and rebirth [*samsara*] is wholly dependent on the bestowal of vision, individual efforts alone cannot guarantee release. The worldly or self-orientated person remains alienated from the Divine

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3 a.k.a. Yogi Bhajan (1929-2004).

and chooses not to respond to the bestowal of vision and hence remains bound to *samsara*. The human predicament is the entrapment of the eternal self or soul [*atman*] in *samsara*. Such transmigration of the eternal self is the result of attachment to worldly pleasures, as characterised by the predominance of the ego. As remarked earlier, birth into the human realm is, according to the GGS, the golden opportunity through which the Divine can be realised, which is synonymous with the gift of 'vision'. The human birth is therefore regarded as the highest of all births in Sikhi(sm).

Overcoming the vices

The path to the Divine involves primarily meditation upon the Name of God. The one attuned to the Divine meditates upon the Name [*Nam*] to overcome the five vices of lust [*kam*], anger [*krodh*], greed [*lobh*], attachment [*moh*] and pride [*ahankar*]. Meditation on the Name enables one to become attuned to the Divine in order to detach from the *samsaric* hold of worldly attachments. The path towards release can also be found through listening [*sabad*] to the words of the GGS. The concept of

'listening' was incorporated into Guru Nanak's theology from the Northern Sant tradition, to describe the mystical 'sound' experienced at the climax of the *hatha* yoga technique.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sikh teachings acknowledge that 'seeing' the formless, incomprehensible Divine involves utmost acceptance of the Divine Will [*Hukam*]. A prerequisite for such knowledge is the abandonment of the ego. Since the Sanskrit etymology of the word to see or vision uses the root *dṛś*, it is clearly related to *darśan* in indicating 'sight' and 'seeing' in the sense that is discussed at length in Indian religious philosophy. The practical steps towards unity with the Divine, and thus seeing the Divine, is through practices such as keeping the company of the congregation [*sangat*], singing and hearing praises to God, and individual as well as communal meditation on the Name and physical yoga. Sikh sectarian movements with living Sants, Babas and Gurus have their own unique practices associated with the concept of *darśan*, the most prominent of which are the seeking of blessings from the revered spiritual leader

Glossary

atman: eternal self.

Babas: revered spiritual leaders.

bhakti: love, devotion.

buddhi: the mind, consciousness.

chardi kala: high spirits/overcoming anxiety.

darśan: 'seeing' or 'vision' of the Divine.

gurdwara: Sikh place of worship.

gurmukh: one who is attuned to the divine.

Guru: spiritual teacher – particularly the 10 Sikh Gurus, succeeded by the GGS as the final and 'eternal' guru.

GGS: see Guru Granth Sahib.

Guru Granth Sahib: main Sikh text, abbreviated to GGS.

hatha yoga: yoga typically involving physical postures and breathing techniques.

huamai: ego.

Hukam: will of the Divine.

kirtan: singing the praises of the Divine.

kundalini yoga: religious practice involving *chakra*s to release energy at the base of the spine.

manmukh: worldly or self-orientated person.

mun: the mind, consciousness.

Nadar: the gift or bestowal of vision, opportunity to transcend worldly consciousness.

Nam: the Name of the Divine.

Nam Japna: meditation on the Name.

Nam Simran: meditative practice of repeating the name of the Divine.

Nath: a Saivic sub-tradition of yoga.

Northern Sant tradition: Hathayogic tradition drawing upon Vaishnava bhakth Sufism and Nath Yoga.

sahaj: mystical union.

samsara: continuous cycle of death and rebirth.

Sants: literally 'pacified' or 'appeased' persons, saints.

Sikhi: Sikhi(sm), the teaching of the Sikh Gurus.

Waheguru: the Divine, the Beloved, the Wonderful Divine.

Internet links

https://www.srigranth.org
(A searchable online version in both English and Gurmukhi of the Guru Granth Sahib, developed by academics at Punjabi University, Patiala, India.)

https://www.sikhnet.com (Sikh website that covers many topics from philosophical, historical and contemporary perspectives.)

https://www.sikhs.org (Website that covers Sikh philosophy and beliefs.)

Discussion points

1. How does the Sikh teaching of *darśan* make God personal?

2. What role does *Nam Simran* have in this?

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