

Sociology of Religion Today: Practices of Thought and Learning

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Abstract

This conversation attempts to critically map out the field of sociology/anthropology of religion as it is practised in select institutions of learning in India. The focus is not merely on the classical works in the field but also on classroom practices. In particular, it engages with the ways in which the canonical works in the field have been articulated through multiple pedagogic forms and institutional sites.

Keywords

Religion, sociology/anthropology, Emile Durkheim, secular, teaching

About the Conversation

Human time, that is also known as historical time, has perhaps always been pervaded by a complex presence of religion and religiosities. The future, it seems, holds similar potentials. Religion calms and soothes believers but it also stakes their and others' lives into death and competing transcendences in very turbulent ways. Religion provokes and infuriates non-believers. Religion is as much a lay engagement as a scholarly one. The point is, it is difficult to wholly ignore religion as thought, practice and rationality from most vantages of human existence. Religion as a general universality can be said to as that which lines the social partially. However, as is well known to any insider, this same general religion is also a motor of unending differentiation and social change. It can thus be seen as a very important influence on how human is conceived and thought is extended towards the understanding of both life and society in varying degrees and in different ways.

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Considering this as background the following conversation is conceived on two overlapping themes. One, by entering the university classrooms as a site of conversations and comparing the learning and teaching of sociology across some of the prominent universities based in the capital region of the country. Two, we undertake a small experiment for both the interlocutors and the audiences of the subject. It involves taking Emile Durkheim's classic text *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]) as a central station to exemplify departures and returns in the sociology of religion. This means Ravi has to playfully illustrate why the book is his touchstone by constantly using its substantive discussions to showcase its range, imagination and moorings. Both the modalities combined, we hope to have a contemporary and conversational portrait of practices of thought and learning in relation to, to borrow from the title of Durkheim's book already, 'forms of religious life' and their sociology. Known as a patient listener, Ravi forays here into engaging conversations that are nourished by rehearsals and long practices of classroom teaching and learning in Indian universities. Both the questions and the answers animate this quotidian element of the classroom. It helps that we are all colleagues in conversation as fellow teachers and students in no special order. Following are the participants to the conversation; their initials serving as convenient shorthands in the main text: Ravi Nandan Singh (RNS), Anushka Goel (AG), Nabanipa Bhattacharjee (NB) and Urmi Bhattacharyya (UB).

The conversation was initially recorded on 11th March 2017 at the residence of Ravi Nandan Singh in New Delhi. Substantial portions of it appeared the same year – June 2017 – in the New Delhi based Sri Venkateswara College's magazine titled *Invitation to Religion* edited by Nabanipa Bhattacharjee and Urmi Bhattacharyya. With readers' welcoming review of the initiative, the current extended version was conceived and the original transcript of the conversation has been duly revised and edited by the participants with updated inputs in March–April 2019. The original flavour of spontaneity is retained while the interview sustains its own flow of emphases, ellipses and threads of lost and found.

Biographies

Ravi Nandan Singh is a member of the sociology faculty, Hindu College, University of Delhi since 2006. He graduated in the life sciences, and thereafter completed his post-graduate and doctoral studies in sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He has a lasting interest in sociology of religion that deepened through his doctoral research on representations of death in the crematoria and hospitals of *Banaras* (Varanasi), India followed by a brief post-doctoral fieldwork based study of a crematorium in Denmark in 2011–2012, and a just concluded multi-sited study on Christian theology and cremation amongst Christians at Rome and Turin in Italy and the Vatican in 2018–2019. He has lectured, written and published on religion and is fondly recognized as one of the deeply invested scholars on the subject amongst his peers. His work on Banaras and Denmark can be accessed through journal essays while his book length ethnography on the subject is under publication. An open access general introduction to his Banaras work can be found under the program list of 'Last Minute Exercise' – a collaborative art-knowledge-public installation of 'useful knowledge and non-knowledge' – curated on www.blackmarket-archive.com and hosted by <http://www.mobileacademy-berlin.com>. His core area of work, of course, is the sociology of death or as he likes to emphasize, that of studying the dead. His most recent research is an attempt to study Christian theology with respect to cremation as a contemporary practice in Europe. He has shared interests in the sociology of science, kinship and, quite interestingly, in studying jokes as well. Singh is not just an engaged researcher who ardently believes in multi-sited and collaborative research but an equally devoted teacher of the subject. His pedagogic contributions stretch from the classroom, curriculum design, text-book translation, university-school 'circle-time' to a sustained effort towards integrating ethnographic films into the mainstream discipline of sociology.

Anushka Goel completed the post-graduate diploma in journalism and mass communication from Xavier Institute of Communications, Mumbai in 2019. Currently working with the *Delhi Times*, she graduated in sociology from Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi in 2018. Her academic interests stretch from sociology of religion, particularly Islam, to kinship, gender, environment and media. She has written and read extensively, mainly on the religious lives of African peoples like the Nuer of southern Sudan, on religion. Writing being a lasting interest to Goel, she is also a content-writer for different companies. Two other fields which draw Goel are teaching and music. She is a sixth grade trained pianist from Trinity Guildhall, London.

Nabanipa Bhattacharjee has been a member of the sociology faculty, Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi since 2001. She graduated in sociology from St. Mary's College, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong in 1994. Bhattacharjee completed her post-graduate (1996) and doctoral (2011) studies in sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Born and raised in Shillong, her family turned the city into its permanent home following the Sylhet referendum and partition of Assam in 1947. Her rather "unconventional" biography found a way to her doctoral work which explored, using multi-sited ethnography, the life and (culturally anchored and politically conditioned) identity of the Bengalis of Sylhet origin in India. She continues to have a sustained engagement, academic and otherwise, with the culture and politics of northeastern India, and she has lectured, written and published (in both English and Bangla) on the themes. Generally speaking, Bhattacharjee's academic interests are partition, migration and identity, and of late cosmopolitanism, war, violence and anthropology of ethics. Bhattacharjee came to religion through teaching and it has remained with her ever since; in fact, meaningful teaching and curriculum design have kept her deeply involved over the last twenty years. She was granted a short term fellowship in the Department of Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), United States of America in 2011. Her work at the UCSB focussed on the Christian missionaries in northeastern India and missiology in general, and an essay on that is awaiting publication. Her recent academic assignment has been a short term residency at the Management Centre for Human Values, Indian Institute of Management Calcutta (MCHV-IIMC) Kolkata in 2018. During the MCHV-IIMC tenure Bhattacharjee examined the complex contours of the conflictual relationship, following a long history of ethno-religious violence, between the tribals and non-tribals of Shillong.

Urmil Bhattacharyya is a member of the sociology faculty, Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi since 2016. Having graduated in sociology from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata in 2007, she completed her post-graduate and doctoral studies in the same discipline from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi respectively in 2009 and 2017. Her doctoral thesis explored the relationship between forms of symbolic representation and the production of collective belief and social identity among artist communities engaged in the practice of picture-storytelling in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. Her research interests revolve around visual culture, phenomenology and sociology of religion; her concerns are essential with questions pertaining to experience, interpretation, visibility, movement and identity. Bhattacharyya has written and published in journals and books and is currently working on a book-manuscript based on her doctoral work. She is also devoted to pedagogic exercises of all varieties ranging from classroom teaching and interaction to curriculum design and development.

The Conversation

AG: We welcome Ravi with thanks on this conversation about religion. Ravi, having read about you, we followed that you did your undergraduate studies in the sciences, and then moved to sociology, the subject in which you then pursued postgraduate and doctoral studies. How and why did that interest

develop? On the same lines, how did you get particularly interested in death and religion, the focus of your research? Could you also tell us a little more about your research work?

RNS:

Science to sociology: The movement from natural science to social science imposed a double life on me and has remained a constant site of comparison and reflection to the present. This doubleness hinges on two main practical and theoretical concerns. On the one hand, the undeniable association is about the subject matter and content of these knowledge forms combined with modes and methods of enquiry. On the other hand, it is about the more interactive aspects, linked to the social and political lives of teachers and students in the respective disciplines. About research, when people ask how you zeroed in on a particular research, one wonders what may be an accurate answer. The accurate answer, in my case, is this: you know that there is something associated in your biography to the kind of research that you choose, but at the same time you stumble to come up with an answer that may make that connection manifest because it is never so conspicuous even to your own self. It doesn't always have to be the case but the selection of research has an affective dimension. Of course, instrumentality is not opposed to this effective selection, after all, research in itself is an instrumentality of a special kind. It is also the case that a tiny foray in research creates its own building-blocks and soon what had started as a hesitant enquiry turns into a contraption of questions-answers-questions. In fact, this growing contraption explains its self-nourishment; it is the tiny flame of the hesitant foray which is enigmatic. I do, however, recognize with some certainty that it was a very self-conscious decision to make the shift from natural science to social science. I have always liked science so it was not that I was feeling out of place in science and I wanted to move to something else. There was, however, something, that was not working in science and that, it seems to me now, was the fact that the questions were very rationed. You had to manoeuvre with what was laid out on the table that day and the rest had to always wait. It felt that the 'real' questions were always postponed. Now, I can say that knowledge making involves accepting some distance from one's own immediate existence in all disciplines perhaps, but I would still say that arts and humanities offer laboured consolations to that which science does only in great abstraction: the whirlwind of human existence. Even in human sciences, there is an abstraction that persists but there is a slight variation from 'science' in how it runs into recognition of life. Not that the social sciences are easy. In fact, in the beginning, when I joined sociology, it was very overwhelming. It was overwhelming in the sense that right at the introductory level you came to this realization that the world you live in is now reintroduced to you as an open and infracted world that is full of concerns and questions that perhaps defies 'solutions' in any easy way. Then you have to endlessly, through texts, teachers, friends, families, in different contexts find a poise of a response to that beckoning; howsoever tentative that poise may be, in that interim meantime, it is always reassuring. In science, this is too immediate and too distant at the same time and you as a student are not allowed to be the moderator of this relationship.

Interest in sociology: I had started reading all kinds of writings in Hindi and English much before joining college, ranging from Hindi action comics to religious magazines that my grandfather subscribed to after his retirement from the army. In college too, I continued reading on my own, much the same way as before and got interested in linguistics and sociology. I wrote exams for both. Jawaharlal Nehru University did not have linguistics. Actually, they did not have a separate department and it was combined with the school of language and literature of which I did not know. I wrote the linguistics exam for University of Delhi and sociology for Jawaharlal Nehru University. Again, I did not know then that the University of Delhi had sociology. I used to take the university special bus (U Special they were called then) from Patel Chest (Vallabhbbhai Patel Chest Hospital is a landmark in the north campus of University of Delhi) which is close to the Arts faculty; that is where I enquired about courses the University of Delhi offered in the arts, hoping to find sociology there and learnt that linguistics was on offer and sociology

was not. Of course, as is evident, I did not know about the Delhi School of Economics where the Sociology Department of the University of Delhi is based. It is not so much the insularity of doing science but my own personality of being oblivious of the world around me (I recall with embarrassment now that, that I read Charles Darwin and James Joyce in the U. Special commutes during my first year of college). So, I did not write any exam in the sciences, and nobody knew about it. My folks did not know, my friends did not know, and that was the time when I could have joined a Masters in science based on marks. So I was very clear. As I said, it is not that I did not enjoy science, I really enjoyed it. I own up to this double life.

Development of research interest(s): That brings me to the second part of your question and that is, why I did not follow up on sociology of science which would have worked. I could have combined both of my interests. That again goes back to some kind of biographical detail and once again one may struggle to provide a direct link. Let's say it comes from certain ways in which one has journeyed through all these stops and stations, academic or otherwise. So, for instance, the question of 'death' that I picked for my research comes from, I think or started with, a certain kind of preoccupation with the question of grief and loneliness, partly my own but also a conspicuous sense of grief that I inherited from Hindi literature as a very bookish child and teenager. Through that identification with grief, I gradually moved on to the question of death and religion was the guest waiting at home. And it just so happened that in anthropology people had worked on these things. Once discovered, I found myself drowned in those writings and there was always too much to do. Once you get started, it follows you: that is how I would explain the fact that I am still with the research theme of death.

UB: You have been teaching sociology of religion at the University of Delhi and are associated with the course/syllabus (framing and revision) for quite some time now. Can you tell us whether religion is offered (or not offered) as a course/paper in (Indian) colleges and universities? Further, would you please add a little on the conceptualization of the current undergraduate course/syllabus (introduced in 2015 under Choice Based Credit System [CBCS]) of the University of Delhi and the process of selection of themes and readings?

RNS: Well, I, for the longest while, was not teaching this paper. One of my senior colleagues at the department was teaching and she too has an abiding interest in religion. When it came to revision, senior colleagues were very kind because the earlier syllabus was completely revised and we changed the format as well. Once I got the opportunity, then, of course, I designed it the way I thought people should be introduced to the sociology of religion and with support from colleagues it was approved. As Nabanipa was pointing in our pre-interview talk, it is a pressing concern of learning sociology in Asia, South Asia in particular, that we are, kind of, in between religion all the time, but when you actually look at the departments offering courses on religion, it is very ironical that you do not have in-depth, rigorous courses on the subject. This, in fact, came up as a question few years back when I was doing research on curricula and syllabi of sociology departments in universities across northern India with Professor Satish Deshpande and colleagues from political science and history departments (see the complete report here: <http://tinyurl.com/y27cdhdh>). It surprised me even then that most of these universities did not actually have a course on the sociology of religion. One of the findings that meant much to me was that we, in fact, do not teach sociology of religion nation-wide while all the other regular courses on Introduction, India, rural, urban, gender, industrial/work, thinkers, theories and so on are all there. So it became a question for me and that is: why is it that we do not want to take up and explore religion sociologically?

I think the answer can be found in the way we think of the institution of the university as a site of knowledge production wherein we cultivate the perspective of being 'critical' to our subject and object of enquiry. This necessary compass of 'critical' leads us head on to treat sociology of work, politics and religion on the same plane and often with very similar perspectives. So I do appreciate the tact involved

in not having and teaching the course because to teach is to then allow a classroom conversation on a daily basis that may be very overwhelming and stirring in the sense I spoke of earlier, that is how social sciences and humanities gift the entirety of the world as an infracted concern while initiating students into their disciplines. Of course, it is also possible that there could be a consensus on a 'critical' perspective that sees religion and kinship as dead and ex-social entities that need not be put in the living company of economy and politics. The university where I was initiated into sociology, where I did my Masters seemed to take this line. However, I think the whole concern of what is taught and what is not in a sociology classroom cannot be delinked from our well-known concerns of what can be researched and what cannot be and that which can be researched, how it may take more than half the expenditure of one's self to say aloud, in so many words. Take this example: The Rosaldo couple who were studying headhunting amongst Ilongots were into their research for two whole years. They had collected great data that included songs around the practice and so on but they could not ask the question directly. After two years, in an intense discussion with the community members, Michelle Rosaldo finally ended up asking, 'but why do you do it?' So it is this: I think teaching sociology has to be seen in parallel to the existence of the social itself. How do we bring ourselves to say and do it requires endless tact. Now, it is obvious that universities cannot be expected to have the time and patience for such tact and must be entrusted superstitiously with the responsibility of enquiry. I am using superstitiously here for great belief rather than an empty belief of blind faith. And I do not see superstition and doubt as mutually exclusive. According to me then the questions that follow are these:

- a) How to, in fact, accept this dark gift of social sciences and humanities and reciprocate through an engagement with tough subjects like religion or sexuality as also using this engagement to arrive at different perspectives on the critical itself?
- b) Who can show us the path?

Let b)'s answer be a)'s comfort. This brings us to the Department of Sociology, University of Delhi. Let me start with UB's question on framing the course on the sociology of religion. One visible feature of this course is that it is heavily classical in terms of anthropological writings. While framing it I thought there is already a mandate that works in the University of Delhi which may permit this revision. The aim of the revision was to introduce students to, borrowing from Durkheim's title, the '*elementary* forms of religious life'. So if at the undergraduate level, you have got the elementary, an elementary that anticipates the complex then you are well prepared. At least you can identify and recognize what are the important questions in sociology. And like any other course, it is not a stand-alone course. It speaks to other courses, but once followed it is for sure that sociology of religion forces you to think about different rationalities and relationalities than what one may do while studying economy and polity. That is for sure. Anyway, we will return to this discussion again but in response to the two questions – a) and b) – posed above, I think a shining instance is the Department of Sociology of the University of Delhi that has for over five decades showed by example how religion can be studied and researched in the company of science, work and politics.

NB: So far as teaching sociology of religion at the University of Delhi is concerned we have an independent question on this later, but since it has come up may we just add to this a question about sociology of religion in India in general: don't you think it is to do with the way the sociology-anthropology debate, which I think we should not have wasted so many years on, panned out? That is, universities that identified with a narrow idea of sociology considered religion as unsuitable for the university's scientific-rational culture of critique and refutations. Since we both went to this university could you talk about *not learning* sociology of religion at our alma mater? (For the readers: Very simply

put sociology is the self-study of modern society that has religion, family, marriage and kinship as its 'ex' and anthropology is the modern study of 'primitive' societies that are, in fact, largely defined by the organized presence of religion, family, marriage and kinship. The debate NB is referring to is settled in so far we, in India, have granted ourselves entitlement to both the disciplines under the name of sociology).

RNS: I think that sociology being defined with respect to economy and polity is, to an extent, one version of how people imagined the doing of sociology. There was a certain interpretation of modernity, and religion and kinship were forcibly and hastily relegated to the unmodern and primitive. To leave them unspoken was to follow the modern, and the logic of the modern was that the world that we inhabit is one where we allow ourselves to incessantly question and look at things in economic and political terms. The inclusion of economy and politics as the sunny side in sociology is as intriguing as the exclusion of religion and kinship. I would like to think that religion was not absent in these courses, but would be brought in only to be critiqued or when you could exemplify its mutation into the secular. You wanted to keep religion in order to critique it; as an idea, as an ideology or as a practice. But you did not want to make sense of it as a practice that somehow surpassed these frames of references or simply for what it could be: a practice unto itself that does not often qualify for the high title of ideology. You wanted to keep a clear distance from it. In fact, there was alertness, a very sharp alertness that did not allow the 'contamination' of the secular. I think that this alertness in terms of critiquing it in very formal ways, if you like, was tied with an ethical imagination of upholding and protecting an areligious secularity for India. At that time, at the university, I greatly identified with this idea of critical and ethical. Of course, in social sciences, we learn to revolt against the father but not so much against the mother. It is difficult to sever ties from the alma mater. I can't tell you how many times in the thick of research I have felt that religious deadlocks are so frustrating. So for me, it is not a question of switching from one critical to another but rather that of pluralizing the notion of 'critical' that we employ in social sciences and humanities. I am convinced that just as studying human sexuality or science and technology enables us to look at the complexity of human existence, similarly studying religion and kinship can bring us to a greater reflection of our collective selves plus it would persuade philosophy to recognize religious thought as a shared enterprise.

NB: To come back to the University of Delhi, we know that the Department of Sociology at Delhi School of Economics has shown a lasting interest in teaching and research on religion. At the undergraduate level, religion was always offered alongside kinship until 2006. From 2006 onwards, the university decided to have a full (separate) course on religion. Would you please elaborate on this?

RNS: Yes, I can proudly say that it has taken me two decades to learn like Eklavya from D. School, as the Department of Sociology is fondly called, both religion and kinship, subjects that I was not taught at my alma mater. I say like Eklavya because I was never enrolled at the department but granted it in my mind and heart the status of my greatest teacher and never missed an opportunity to learn. Of course, everybody knows that compared to our lulling alma mater it comes across as an executioners' tea party for the uninitiated but if you persist you start liking the tea. In a way, I think a lot of credit should go to people like M. N. Srinivas, J. P. S. Uberoi and Veena Das who were interested in these questions and devoted their lives, and safeguarded certain ways of looking at the world. The establishment of the journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology* with a refreshing focus on researched sociology rather than right and left ideologies is another stunning example of a vision that has endured rough seasons and stands solidly in the present. The credit though would be only in part to the founding minds of these institutions, the rest must go to those who have perpetuated this legacy and continue to do so to this day. And I think that fifty years on, you are witnessing the third or fourth generation of scholars in D. School, but there has always been a presence of people who have both taught and researched religion and kinship

and were equally instrumental in bringing and sustaining, say, sociology of science, sociology of medicine and a sociology of violence in the mix. It is these five decades that stand testimony to the fact that doing religion and kinship would neither jeopardize our discipline of sociology in India nor that of an idea of India for that matter.

UB: Earlier we were talking about the course/syllabus and the readings. Could you tell us about the possibilities that emerge from both sides of the bench, that is, out of teaching and learning? What are the difficulties in getting students to read and write religion sociologically?

RNS: Well, as I said, from colleagues there has been a lot of enthusiasm and support for the new (CBCS, 2015) syllabus. Senior colleagues supported the move, which I think was a very kind gesture. Amongst students, there are two concerns. First, is the general, local one and it is to do with difficulties in terms of writing, and second, is the more universal concern in terms of getting them to read. I think it is a well-known thing, but to put it in words, it is like this: our best students and better students, you can merge them, you can train them. But we are perhaps failing continuously to train our average and below average students. We are not able to catch them. It is a free fall for them. And that is where the difficulty is. In a certain sense, if you are to test them, you would get nothing out of them in terms of what the course is about and what is it that they have learnt. But if you were to go to the better students, there is something that you would get out of them. So that is where our success is; a very modest success, indeed. One must say that out of a class of 50–60, you have around 5–6 students who, I would say, have been reasonably trained. Not that you have been cutting corners or they are cutting corners. Some of them try really hard but there is so much to do that it requires prior practise and training. The way it works, and this pattern may not entirely meet the well-known co-ordinates of exclusion and inclusion, is that given our circumstances those 4–5 students emerge from the context of the classroom composition itself and are not necessarily the caste elite or cultural captains and the stake for the teacher is to use all her/his resources to give the bunch a good level of engagement. In other words, the amount of training due to the entire class cannot be met in the circumstances that we have at our end and it is an achievement to even get a bunch to notice what the discipline has to offer to make sense of the world we live in. Through my own classroom experiments, I have realized that looking for a seamless link between school and university does not work for us. We have to be more counterintuitive and think of two distinct spheres of school and university. Of course, the university is indebted to school but our success of schooling is not tied so much with the imagination of higher education. Our schooling succeeds because it treats itself (Board Exams) and competitive exams as ends and produces results on both counts. We need to similarly conceive the university with its own ends and we must build a minimal and maximal framework towards realizing it. To return back to college, it is a sort of liminal theatre between school and university. There is this little known fact about college which is that a college is equally a despairing place for young people. It is here that one is, for the first time, exposed to peers and potentials of all kind ranging from bodily aesthetics to varying skills and intelligence, and one finds that there is nowhere to hide. So college becomes that site where one is confronted with a traumatic realization of one's place in most schemes of life, from personal to that of professional.

The concern with religion would be, I think, the difficulty which students face in terms of making sense of what is being taught. When I say this, I have something very specific in mind. For instance, it is quite possible for students to understand that there is an authority and you need to resist authority. There is a political seat of power and you must change it if it is repressive. So this idea of politics, political authority or authority in general, resistance, change, notions of equality, that we all must be clinically equal, are all accessible one way or the other. What that equality would entail is not perhaps the question explored as yet but there is this belief that we must be equal and then there would be no more puzzles to solve, once and for all. These are very fine-tuned ideas and people are able to follow. But when you tell

them, as I very often do borrowing from Truck literature (one or two lined words of wisdom painted on the back of trucks, autos, taxis and buses in the subcontinent), ‘*dhan chahiye to daan karo*’ (if you seek prosperity, begin to donate), there is that perplexing expression of dismay. This is difficult. Again, to take another example, to illustrate Weber’s theodicy for instance, ‘*haare ka sahaara, Baba Shyam hamara*’ (the helpless is in the closest company of Lord Shyam). How do we begin to frame the question of equality starting from this register is what unsettles students’ ideas about the poor (depicted as helpless in the statement) and the others. And even if they follow it and somewhere they feel it, they say it back in a way that expresses that these are things to make the poor feel good. What would the poor get out of this? It is in these contexts that you realize that these ways of thinking are rare in the social sciences.

AG: When you talk about the sociology of religion, there are many perspectives, theories and different kinds of contributions to the subject. Which would you consider the path-breaking one(s)? Which classical work(s) you personally feel talks about the sociology of religion in the best possible way? I, for example, really enjoyed reading Evans-Pritchard’s *Nuer religion* (1956). It speaks to you about ‘primitive’ religion and how it was basically perceived by the West. Do you have a similar example? Can you, in fact, list us a top ten of books of your choice?

RNS: For me, Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms* is the book. (This would also give you a clue to figure out the design of University of Delhi’s current (CBCS, 2015) sociology of religion paper; it is a shift from the earlier emphasis on studying religion to the current emphasis on an understanding of the *elements of religious life*). I think that if one has been able to read and I mean, and let us put it on record here, there is no ‘reading’ in the social sciences; there is no ‘writing’ in social sciences. There is only re-reading and re-writing in the social sciences, and that is how one has to do it. You cannot read and come out of it, and that is not the way it has to be done. There has to be a re-reading and *The Elementary Forms* is a book that can be endlessly discovered, particularly the parts where he is talking about rituals, but not just that. I think the part where he speaks of society as an embodiment of the religious is a weak argument and it is weak precisely because Durkheim falls into a temptation to raise this relationship to such a dramatic crescendo. But, if you resist that part and come to the other parts of the text where he is talking about rituals and particularly about the question of death and finally towards the end of the book where he has very astute observations about religion and science you stand to gain a lot. The other concern with Durkheim which, I think, is a bigger theoretical question, a question that, in a way, is constitutive of anthropology of religion in a certain sense is when you notice that what Durkheim does is nothing short of founding totemism as a model to think of religious practice universally. I think, for me, this is a question which has a kind of a wager on it. Show me, if you can, if there is another way in which we can make sense of religious life. In a way, if there is an ‘elements’ component to Durkheim’s text which is very useful to think, totemism appears as a foreclosed totality and that calls for a critical re-imagination. Why is this critical re-imagination so arduous because the more you follow from Durkheim to Sigmund Freud to Claude Levi-Strauss it becomes more and more difficult to let go of totemism as the meta-elementary ground of religious life. And this might be one more reason for us wanting to keep going back to the ‘forms’ of ‘religious life’.

This return may open another concern with respect to studying religion, and that is in terms of seeking religious knowledge as equivalent to philosophical knowledge. For instance, when we say that totemism as a founding gesture of sociology of religion must be substituted with other practices of existent religions and forms of religious lives we are in a way paving way for the religious knowledge much the same way as we treat philosophical knowledge. That is, by creating a link between forms of thought and forms of religious life. There is another way in which this question infuses Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms*. What we find is that totemism serves as a researched contraption that nevertheless showcases Durkheim’s struggle with Judaic and Catholic Christian understanding of the sacred. That is the reason why in the

first two hundred pages of the book he already has at least four different and competing definitions of the sacred. Of course, this is also a way in which the 'primitive' Australian Aboriginals find themselves in thought experiments with their understated Judaic and Catholic Christian counterparts in the book. In Marx's 'On the Jewish question' (2008/2009 [1844]) you can find him in a similar situation to Durkheim, being caught between Judaic, Christian and the scientific-civil, but here is the key difference between Durkheim and Marx. Durkheim does not emancipate his competing versions of the sacred totally from either Judaic, Catholic Christian or the Aboriginal while Marx seeks a total emancipation from Judaism and Christianity so as to have the pervasive reign of the scientific-civil. Let me stop here on *The Elementary Forms* and provide a list of my ten favourite books which I have found very illuminating. I keep returning to some over and over again, some have stayed with me from the strong impressions I have had while reading them. Here are the names:

1. *Structure and Cognition: Aspects of Hindu caste and ritual* by Veena Das
2. *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* by Gananath Obeyesekere
3. *Hindusim: The Anthropology of a Civilization* by Madeleine Biardieu
4. *Hamadsa: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry* by Vincent Crapanzano
5. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Max Weber
6. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* by Diana Eck
7. *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: The Ramlila of Ramnagar* by Anuradha Kapur
8. *Religion, Civil Society and the State* by J. P. S. Uberoi
9. *Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual Among the Yakoba* by Susan Visvanathan
10. *God and Man in the Qur'an: Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung* by Toshihiko Izutsu.

NB: We would really like to know, first, about the state of research, in both classical and contemporary terms, in, say, for example, this part of the world, and second, the kind of work currently being done in the field of sociology/anthropology of religion worldwide.

RNS: One of the things we see is that the kind of anxiety and vulnerability people experienced when they resisted teaching religion, all of that has come true. You cannot have a world which is uncontaminated by religious life, so you have to face it. Can we really maintain the older categories of life that is secular in public and has a private world of religiosity? It seems to me that even if it can be done, say at the level of political thought (in continuation of certain European vision), there has to be an acknowledgement of the complexity of the contemporary than what the earlier scholars/polities acknowledged. So the credit goes to the contemporary research in the anthropology of religion that has lived up to the challenge. You have a world where you have to ask how nuclear disasters and prayers come together.

One question that has been the hallmark of anthropology of religion in the last three decades is the question of the secular. What we have witnessed in the last two-three decades with anthropological scholarship on religion is that how we think about the secular is redefined in more than one way. In other words, the secular, ultimately, appears to be as limited as a caricaturist and universalistic premise of religion as religion appeared in the original scene of enlightenment. So, we can no longer turn to the secular the way it could be done in sociology classrooms for long. As mentioned earlier, it was not that religion was not broached in sociology classes, rather it was broached against the mighty awe of the secular and with great conviction that once discussed we just needed to point towards the solar glow of the secular with the hope that all questions of religious life would be automatically answered or silenced. That has been one line of enquiry, and this has to be rethought.

Another is, in terms of more regular anthropological fare, of classical and the popular. That is, how do we think of popular culture with and without symbols of religious life, and so forth. The third would be the site of rationality. A quest towards pluralizing rationalities with which the world can be experienced, adjudged and approached is also where the anthropology of hope and reparation can be founded. I do not mean to pitch religious as the balm, it is not hidden from anyone that like other human socialites it holds the potential to harm and exterminate as well. The point I am making, in fact, is that the militant opposition between religious forms of life and non-religious forms of life could give way to a borrowing and returning. So there are different domains, ranging from epistemological to concrete, in fact, and if one were to think about it, it is quite possible to say that almost every theme has been recast.

NB: We started in the introductory section of the interview seeking to know about your own research. May be, now you could return to that thread and speak in light of the preceding discussions about your own research and some key theoretical concerns that you are engaged within in the process.

RNS: Yes, one concern that I missed out in the introductory section, in the first answer while I was talking about the question of death and grief is in showing how does religion come into the picture. It may appear odd to say but let me say this anyway. As I see it, studying the dead is primarily a question of life. The same equation with 'life' becomes more difficult when one talks about death as an event. The way to pose the question then in case of death is to make it a question of social structure. In other words, how do we begin to think of the social itself? Traditionally, in anthropology death and the dead are pitched as offering the social a double scope of crisis and transformation. The way I see, it is not to neglect this contribution but to pitch death and the dead in a link with the social and the idiom of life as recursive relationships. In this sense, my effort has been to move beyond the life-cycle and ritual regeneration of the dead framework and to think of the dead and death as empiricisms that require us to respond to complex questions of what goes on in the social at the ethnographic level. How do we comb and glean the present to build accounts of the scattered and diffused presence of death as an event and the dead as affective subjects and objects through the studies of hospital, crematorium, morgue and home, for instance. Now, to come back to the question of religion with regard to death: I think, once you move away from the death and regeneration framework, the biggest difficulty is to precisely think through the presence of the religious as thoughtful practice in an epistemological and practical company to the dead and death. This is the exploration that I am invested in very much.

To end this heavy discussion, let me cite from my latest research experience of venturing into Catholic Christian theology with regard to understanding cremation as a practice in Europe. Into the research for a while, I am persuaded that cremation indeed belongs to the long list of European initiatives that rely on science and technology's capacity to create a solid and substantive parallel to the religious and traditional ways of life. The current question for me is: how does theology respond to this shift? How is the religious put to a thoughtful practice? If science can snatch the body from religion what is involved in the theological work of recovery and retrieval? It is not the case of positing theological as the prime meaning maker. On the contrary, one of the surprising findings is precisely this that the theological is forced into a reflective exercise and as the Vatican moves from accepting the practice of cremation to now accepting practices around cremation, we have Catholic Christian theology's engagement with the empiricism of death and religion in the contemporary. The capacity of religious thought to enable theology to retrieve the dead as a Catholic Christian is what is at work. What is this religious that has to recover its own dead would then enable one to think of religious' complex and engaged presence in the empiricism of the dead. All of this bears on the question of grief and the place of the dead amongst the living. Of course, posing the above question as a turf war between science and religion would be incorrect ethnographically. Not in the least because Catholicism holds itself on the side of science but because cremation as a European practice can be tied to a searching and effective way of life to secure remembrance and

proximity with the dead that the materialities of straight forward burial could no longer provide in the changing sociologies of contemporary existence. Thus to sum up, when one turns to theology, it is not to find the master meaning of death and the dead through the theological, it is, in fact, an attempt to see afresh how religion exemplifies the recursive re-return of life and the social. I must also make clear that I do not think that the ethnographic exercise is to be limited to registering practice as social action wholly distinct from thought. I, instead, think that it is ethnography's strength to engage with texts, practices as thoughts and this strength is partly based on treating philosophy and theology as allies.

NB: Well, to return to another register. I personally think that the sociology of religion (CBCS, 2015) syllabus which we are currently teaching at the University of Delhi is exciting and most of the credit for designing that goes to you. I would like to know if you wish to revisit it in terms of form, theme, content, readings, and so forth. In short, do you have any suggestions about the paper?

RNS: One section that was cut out, and I can understand why there were objections to it, was the section on religion and violence. We struck it out. But I think it would be a good idea to have it, though I am open and happy to go along with whatever everyone thinks. There is no halfway going there in religion. It is where the question of epistemology, totemism etc. ultimately lies. We have to think of violence and religion as linked but not synonymous as some commentators tend to do (think of Derrida's definition of religious through re-accounting of the Abraham-Issac myth, which ends up with this conflation). Why I want religion and violence to be expressed and acknowledged is because it provides us as much with an avenue to go back to the founding questions of the anthropology of religion as it allows us to hold dark mirrors to the contemporary. How violence was constituted and framed in the original questions, say of elementary forms of religious life, is an epistemological concern. I think it has epistemic value in terms of making sense of violence, the place of violence in society but also how violence as a sociality can be partly conceived. So, how violence becomes constitutive to everyday life has to be understood through the religious. While, of course, we must remain careful to think of religious life as more variegated because it caters to wide-ranging concerns of providing a competing philosophical vocabulary to a moral and spiritual imagination of a virtual world that lines our actual social bearings. This tugs on to the worry, as I mentioned earlier, of why universities were hesitant to discuss religion in the classroom at the first place. We come back to where we started but hopefully the conversation in the middle substantiates the point made earlier that the classroom, learning and teaching in social sciences are very tactfully linked.

AG, NB and UB: Ravi, it has been a pleasure talking to you. We look forward to having similar conversations in the future. Thank you so much.

RNS: Thanks to all of you.

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