

## **IMAGING GOD: MODES OF WORSHIP AND HINDU INTEGRATION**

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In this paper, I shall be dealing with (I) god-concept, (II) god-relation, (III) modes of worship, and lastly (IV) the question of the “imageability” of god, in that order. It will be seen from my argument that there are diverse ways of conceiving of god-relation and of worshipping him, and many dimensions to any given mode of worship, although they are all directed towards the same soteriological goal, namely, man’s need to find a principle of transcendence, whereby he will escape the limitations of earthly existence.

### **(I) God-Concept**

For purposes of this discussion, we need not inquire into the question whether there is a god, as an ontic reality, that is, or whether he is merely a human construct, but, in the spirit of a cultural anthropologist, proceed on the basis of the fact that belief in a god or gods has been with us from times immemorial, as part of the belief system of any culture. Man has always felt the need to postulate a divine being by way of explaining to himself the mystery of creation and to secure permanence and final happiness. He has therefore conceived of a creator god, or spirits or powers behind natural forces, by propitiating which he can bend them to his own benefit. He has imagined a soul apart from the body and a heaven where it will escape after the body dies. For, as the Koran says, and the Indian religions concur, “the life of the world is nothing but a fleeting vanity.” Thus a commonness of motive underlies all the religions of the world, from primitive beliefs *to* the more developed theories of later times.

However, there have been differences in the way the nature and role of the divine being and of his relation to man has been conceived, the most outstanding differences centring on whether there is one God or many gods, and on how man should picture him in order to relate to him and commune with him. These differences account for the diversity in the way men have designed their modes of worshipping the deities.

### *One God or Many Gods:*

On the question of one or many gods, polytheistic beliefs seem to have predated the monotheistic conception. It is plausible that man first saw a god in every elemental force that he came in immediate contact with, daunted by their power and awe-struck by a sense of mystery, before he could have any notion of a creator God or a single underlying power, of which the elemental forces are diverse manifestations. Such a notion could come only from a higher degree of intellectual abstraction. Thus it is that we have the Pantheons of gods and goddesses--Egyptian, Greek, Hindu--and mythologies surrounding them.

In the Vedic tradition, the concept of one God as an immanent principle runs concurrently with that of the many gods of nature. The Rg Vedic hymn has it:

\*\*\* *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadantyagnim yamam matarisyanamahuh//*

“Seers call that one reality by many names-- Indra, Agni, Mitra, Varona, etc. In the Upanishads, however, the focus is entirely on the immanent God or world-soul (Brahman, Paramatman). In the Judeo-Christian-Islamic scriptures; the One God of Moses and Abraham is a transcendent, all-powerful creator, lawgiver; father figure, who is apart from his creation and who “sits on his throne above the earth and beyond the sky” (Isaiah 40). The worship of the one God, as opposed to the gods of nature, is defended on the ground that “the Sun, Moon, and the stars create nothing, but are themselves the created” [Koran (Penguin trans. p. 125). The rationale implied here is that by obeying the one Lord of the universe, his creation would fall into place and work for the benefit of man.

### **(II) God-Relation**

Man’s relationship with god depends on how god himself is conceived. If god is an impersonal lawgiver, the relationship would be distant. In the Judaic-Islamic thinking, God is someone to be obeyed, revered, and prayed to, whereas in the Christian belief, since man’s relation with God is through his intercessor-son, Christ is thought of in various personal relations--as a mend, leader, bridegroom, etc., with whom man can enter into a mystic union--agapé. In the Vedic hymns, gods are in large part impersonal and distant and meant to be propitiated. The Upanishadic Brahman is an abstract concept and is there as a truth to be meditated upon. In the later devotional theology (Bhakti), the Vedic gods and their derivatives are thought of in intimately personal terms, and an emotional attachment to the deity became the hallmark of the devotional cults. In the worship of a personal deity, the devotee could enter into many types of relationship and run through the whole gamut of human emotions, as in

some forms of Christian devotionism.

### **(III) Modes of Worship**

Although worship of any kind involves contemplating the deity under some description, the kind of relationship the worshipper establishes with his deity determines the mode in which to worship him. Thus, we can distinguish four basic modes of worship: the Mode of Propitiation, the Mode of Adoration, and the Mode of Meditation. These are not, by any means, mutually exclusive, but do often work in combination.

Religious worship can also be seen to have different dimensions: 1. the Ritual Dimension, involving the performing of certain symbolically significant actions by way of propitiating the deity. 2. The Experiential Dimension, in which worshippers make images of the deity and other artifacts, build places of worship, use elaborate ornamentation, and perform music, song, and dance to adore and celebrate the deity. 3. The Meditational Dimension, in which one meditates on a visualized image of god, or on an abstract idea of him, or on the meaning of some scriptural passage, in an entirely analytical or conceptual way. 4. The Practical Dimension, involving the conduct of life in obedience to the scriptural commands or a covenant with god. The Modes of Worship and their different dimensions can, again, work in different combinations and overlap. They are simply ways of differentiating diverse elements that go to make up religious worship in general.

Rituals are prevalent mostly in polytheistic religions where the spirits of nature are invoked by priests chanting hymns, into objects like a water jar, a blade of grass, a lump of meat or cooked rice, and so on, and placed on a sacrificial altar, and oblations of water, fat, or food stuff are offered. The object of ritual is to propitiate the deity so that he may grant favours. Vedic worship consists entirely of elaborate ritual procedure. Ritual is present in an equally elaborate form in all temple worship, where idols or other sacred objects are installed--predominantly in Hindu temple worship, in the Zoroastrian fire worship, in Jainism, where idols of saints are honoured, and in the Tantric Buddhism of Tibet and Nepal, in Mandala worship. Ritual performance is prevalent in the monotheistic, non-idolatrous Jewish practice as well as in the Christian worship of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, which admit idols as well. In Islamic worship, on the other hand, priesthood and ritualization are completely shunned, together with holy images. From this we gather that the ritual dimension is common to both polytheistic and monotheistic religions, in a greater or lesser

measure, and to both idolatrous and non-idolatrous traditions.

Prayer and meditation, while it runs across the board in all modes of worship, is exclusively practiced in non-idolatrous religions, where the only support for the worshipper's contemplation is the word of God or some scriptural passage. Islam is an outstanding case in point. As it prohibits all manner of ritual or celebration, and teaches an austere, ascetic regimen of living, its only approach to God is by calling out his name, offering prayers, and meditating on his greatness, as enjoined in the Koran. Meditation and right understanding is also the method of Vedanta, and crucial equally in the atheistic, both non-idolatrous and idolatrous, forms of Buddhism and the sole means for the attainment of salvation. Jainism admits images of saints and temple worship, but emphasizes asceticism and meditation by the monks. This same practice is prevalent in Sikhism.

The experiential, emotional dimension is the special province of the idolatrous temple culture, in which the deity is totally humanized and made an object of enjoyment and mystical adoration. But it is equally present in the non-idolatrous Jewish and Christian worship, and in Sikhism, characteristically expressed in music, and liturgical hymn singing and chanting.

#### **(IV) Idol Worship: The Material Dimension**

Whether one God or many gods, the greatest contention has occurred over the question whether a god can be given material or human form, and human or visible attributes, and whether he is characterizable at all in human terms. If he is incorporeal, uncontainable, and beyond human comprehension, as he is by definition, then, no imaging or representing of him would be possible. Hence the iconoclastic Biblical religions have historically shown an uncompromising antagonism towards Pagan gods and their idols. This attitude is common to both the Old and New Testaments, although it is more strongly worded in the Old Testament, "God is not like an idol! That workmen make" (Isaiah 40). "Do not make gods of metal and worship them" (Deuteronomy 29). "Those who make idols are worthless and the gods they prize so highly are useless. Such people are too stupid to know what they are doing. What is the good of bowing down to a block of wood?" (Isaiah 44). "What can they learn from wooden idols?" (Jeremiah 10). Islam, being a fundamentalist, ascetic religion of solitary prayer and meditation, shunned all traces of humanizing and representation of God. For Islam, Pagans are, by definition, unbelievers, who deify natural elements and make images of them, instead of adoring

the one creator God of Moses and Abraham. The stars, Sun, Moon, etc. are not God: "Yet they worship those which create nothing, but are themselves the created" (Koran, p. 125). "Idolatry is more grievous than bloodshed. Fight against them (idolators) until idolatry is no more" (Koran, p. 26).

In the Indian tradition, however, the picture is rather different. The existence of multiple ethnic cultures in one body, not only made for a less dogmatic, tolerant, pluralistic outlook, it also encouraged mutual interaction, dialogue, and assimilation between different faiths. Historically, the Vedic Aryan religion--Hinduism, so called--has found room for innumerable faiths and cults, and for both monotheistic and polytheistic beliefs, for image-worshipping as well as for the more abstract, ascetic forms of worship. The dominant Vedic religion itself was non-idolatrous and the temple cult was alien to its mode of worship. The nature gods were conceived of, not as persons, but as powers or functions. The Brahman of the Upanishads was not in any way an "imageable" entity.

"There is no likeness of him":

"His form does not come within the range of our vision": (Svetasvatara Upanishad)

In the Vedic ritual procedure, the Mantras (hymns) alone served as objects of meditation and carried the potency to invoke the deity's presence. But, nonetheless, the deities were given anthropomorphic limbs and attributes and appellations, although it was recognized that they had no material forms. The question of their representability was raised in the ancient discussions and this description of the gods was justified on the ground that (i) this is done according to the diversity of their anthropomorphic functions--such as, caring, protecting, punishing, rewarding, and so on; and (ii) that humans are given to humanizing and personifying objects, trees, rivers, mountains, etc., and natural forces, like fire, wind, and even abstract entities, like Death, Wealth, Justice, etc. (Yaska, *Nirukta*).

A full-fledged defence of idol-worship is attempted in the Agama literature. The argument runs: (i) A deity without form is impossible to contemplate; (ii) Only an icon can be an object of worship, not a bloodless abstraction.

If the religious attitude is taken as god-relation, then the mere notion of a Great God or world-spirit (Brahman) is not enough to evoke feeling; it is not equal to a realization of that idea.

It is only when that idea is given a name, a form, an embodiment of

some sort, and a local ‘

habitation--a landscape of its own dwelling--that its divinity and domain can be experienced as a tangible presence. Hence the psychological need for anthropomorphic or theriomorphic images of cosmic forces: the world-spirit as a cosmic person, the Earth Goddess as a Mother, the wind as an eagle, the Sun as a rider driving his chariot drawn by seven horses, etc., which are given specific descriptions according to their natures and functions. And for abodes of the deities, we have the grand temples of India and South East Asia, and temple festivals and celebrations, in which the gods seem to come alive and move in the midst of human worshippers.

The object of any worship is to realize the living presence of God (*sannidhya*). For this purpose, even the non-idolatrous religions--both Indian and Biblical--may be seen to employ various supports to concretize the notion of God and facilitate the concentration of the mind. And this is done, first, by providing a place of worship where God's presence may be felt--indirectly, if not so directly through the image, by association with events connected with the visions of God appearing to his messengers or prophets. Thus we have the "Tent of the Lord's Presence" (which God commanded Moses to build), Solomon's Temple, the Islamic Kabba (where Mohammad had his revelation) and the Masjid pointing in the direction of Mecca; and among the non-idolatrous Indian religions, the Jaina Mandir, the Buddhist Stupa (both of which religions do not believe in God), and the Gurdwara of the Sikhs--who worship the attributeless One God, but revere the images of the great teachers of the Guruparampara.

Another way the divine presence is evoked is through the objects and artifacts connected with worship. Although all of the non-idolatrous religions prohibit worship of "graven images" of gods, all of them, barring Islam, have historically admitted holy articles into their temples as reminders of the Lord: e.g., "The Lord's Covenant Box," and the Stone Tablets, which Moses had placed at Mt. Sinai, of Solomon's Temple, the Torah of the Jewish temple, the Granth Saheb of the Sikh temple--which is treated almost as if it were the idol of God himself. Yet other ways of evoking the divine presence is by aniconic images of God designed according to certain geometrical or other mystical formulae, as symbolic representations of the body of the deity, e.g., the Hindu Siva Linga, the Tantric Yantra and Mandala; and also by representing superhuman beings as image-translations of poetic metaphors and doctrinal allegories--such as, the Lamb, standing for Jesus Christ, the Wheel of Righteousness,

the Tree, and the Lotus of Buddhism--which signify objects and events connected with Buddha's life.

All of the objects mentioned above--both iconic and aniconic, artifacts, and so forth--are intended as means of visualization and aids to contemplation. Their true significance is not so much that they are the likenesses of the formless divine, but that they, in some ways, serve to call to mind the living presence of the spirit. Even in the case of the crassly idolatrous Hindu worship, the image is not taken as the very God himself, but simply as a symbolic representation and as an aid to thought, the image simply standing for what it is an image of, namely, the idea of the divine, conceived in a certain way and given a certain description. As in the non-idolatrous Vedic ritual, it is the Mantra which invests the object with its significance and its power as an idol is believed to last only as long as it is sanctified by the Mantra in daily worship. The Mantra is the soul of the idol:

*mantratma devata/*

A distinction is sometimes made between two ways of regarding the idol: The idol can be taken as an aid to contemplation and prayer, or it may itself be looked upon as an object of veneration. The distinction may often be blurred, as in the case of the images of Virgin Mary, Christ on the Cross, etc. A sect of Hindus, Vaishnavas, believe that the icon is the incarnation of Vishnu, and that the divine spirit actually takes shape as his temple image (*arcavatara*), so as to become an object of enjoyment to the devotee. But even for them, the Mantra, the ritual, and the meditation remain the basic conditions of image worship.

Although Hindu worship permits free variation of different elements, in its fullest form it represents an integration of both external and internal modes of worship: It combines ritual/Puja with prayer and meditation, solemnity with celebration and festivities, the sacred with the profane--elaborate rituals are performed on domestic occasions, such as wedding, birth, housewarming, etc. It permits both temple gods and household gods. Hindu religion tolerates manifold and undogmatic beliefs--one god or many gods, often existing cheek by jowl in the same temple, and collapsing and merging into one another, on the assumption that any given god is any other god or all gods, and all gods are one god, they being aspects of the same unity. It allows for the worship of the attributeless Brahman (*nirgunabrahman*) and the one with attributes (*sagunabrahman*). All in all, it is a democratic paradise where each man can have his own favourite



god, according to his taste and disposition, But of course, idol worship is the dominant feature and hallmark of Hinduism.

### **Conclusion**

The case for idolatry/iconolatry may be summed up as follows:

(I) The human mind cannot capture the notion of the divine experientially without humanization and personification, without visualization or embodiment of some sort. Imaging is not so much a matter of doctrinal belief, but a psychological need.

(II) Even the non-idolatrous, iconoclastic religions have perforce got to depend on visual, material aids, and they do in fact humanize their gods to some extent. The Christian god is of course a human incarnation. But even the god who spoke to Moses and Abraham and Job, and who delivered the Koran to the Prophet Mohammad is already, partially at least, humanized, although only his voice is heard or his presence is made to be felt through signs, like thunder, dazzling light, or burning bush. The creator God, architect, maker who “stretched out the sky like a curtain or like a tent to live in” «(Isaiah) already appears in a human, personal aspect, and is “imaged,” however faintly. And it is only one step from here to making a wooden, stone, or metal image of him (perhaps as a bearded old man in robes, resembling a Jewish patriarch).

(III) Again, what harm is done to the Great God Almighty if images are made of Him to facilitate the thought of Him, as long as it is understood that the image is not God. himself in his proper person. The professed antagonism towards idol worship is based on a misconception of its premises.

(IV) And again, if God created man in his own image, why can man not recreate him in his own image?

(V) On a final note: God told Prophet Mohammad to say to unbelievers: “Unbelievers, I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion, and I have mine. (Karan. p. 433)” Considering how diverse people’s faiths are, this is a sage advice, to unbelievers as much as to the believers themselves, and might well be the key to harmony at home and peace in world.