

Examining Religion in Society: Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Periyar

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Abstract

The nineteenth century Europe and the early twentieth century Tamil Nadu witnessed thinkers examining the roles played by religion in society. The German poet Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), German philology professor and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and the Tamil social reformer E.V. Ramaswamy (1879-1973), well-known as Periyar, have interrogated and investigated the political and social facets of established religious systems. Hölderlin celebrates past religions and cultures; Nietzsche studies the limitations of his contemporary religious ideologies; Periyar demands a religious system that will accept human egalitarianism. This paper aims at studying the similarities between these thinkers in their respective location of their ideologies.

Keywords: Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Periyar, religion, caste

Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) longs to bring back the polytheistic Greek way of life back into the Christianized, monotheistic Europe of the nineteenth century. Christianity has become the official religion in a millennium and a half, and the ancient gods have been branded as pagan gods or demons. In the military evolution of Christianity, Greece has lost its sacred significance, and has re-emerged as a civilization of great culture during and after the renaissance.

The religion of the pagans was widely regarded as the worship of demons, and, even setting aside that fear, the Christian faithful was urged to remember the cultural achievements of ancient Greece and Rome as the quintessential works of the world, the kingdom of man, set against the transcendent, timeless kingdom of God. (Greenblatt 118)

The poem *Bread and Wine* by Hölderlin addresses Greece as “holy,” and states, “The fire of the gods drives us to set forth by day / And by night.” The poet further commands his readers: “And seek what is ours, as distant as it may be! / One thing is certain: a standard always

exists, at noon / Or at midnight, common to all of us” (Holderlin 9). The distant Greece, with its multiple gods and realistic humanism, has set a standard for Europe and has actually existed always, in spite of the intervention of a younger, institutionalized religion, he says further in the same poem:

Then let's be off to the Isthmus! There, where
The open sea roars at Parnassus, and the snow
Shines around the Delphian cliffs,
There in the land of Olympus, on Cithaeron's peak,
Under the pines, amid vineyards, from which
Thebes and Ismenos roar in the land of Cadmus.
The approaching god comes from there, and points back to it.

(Bread and Wine by Hölderlin 10)

Hölderlin invokes the symbols of Greece: Isthmus festivities; worship of the muses of poetry; Delphic god's guidance; gods of mount Olympus; Cithaeron (Actaeon was changed into a stag, Pentheus was torn by the Bacchantes, and Oedipus was left to die, the scene of the rites of Dionysus and of the festival of the Daedala); Thebes founded by Cadmus; and Ismenos, the river god of Boiotia. He asks for the religion and culture of the mythological Greece, claiming that the new or approaching god is a child of the ancient god and is pointing back to the past. Questions have been taken up by specialists in this field of philosophy and Christianity who analyse the concept of Christian gods. There is a possibility to interpret the line “The approaching god comes from there, and points back to it,” from such a perspective.

From the beginning, Christians have affirmed the claim that there is one God, and three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each of whom is God. In 675 C.E., the Council of Toledo framed this doctrine as follows:

Although we profess three persons we do not profess three substances but one substance and three persons ... If we are asked about the individual Person, we must answer that he is God. Therefore, we may say God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; but they are not three Gods, he is one God ... Each single Person is wholly God in himself and ... all three persons together are one God.

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., reflecting on the Council of Toledo's formulation, remarks that it “possesses great puzzling power” (Plantinga 1989, 22). (Murray)

Ancient Greece celebrated athletics and music in honour of the sea god Poseidon during the spring of the second and fourth years of each Olympiad at the Isthmus of Corinth. During the 4th century CE this festival was banned (Britannica). In Greek mythology, Parnassus refers

to a mountain where the Muses lived, and was honoured as the mythological home of music and poetry. The Delphian cliffs had the temple of the god Apollo.

Delphi was an ancient religious sanctuary dedicated to the Greek god Apollo. Developed in the 8th century B.C., the sanctuary was home to the Oracle of Delphi and the priestess Pythia, who was famed throughout the ancient world for divining the future and was consulted before all major undertakings. It was also home of the Pythian Games, the second most important games in Greece after the Olympics. Delphi declined with the rise of Christianity and was ultimately buried under the site of a new village until the late 1800s. (History.com)

It is interesting to note that Hölderlin comes out of the religious structure designed by the state religion of Christianity which does not encourage such an attitude of worshipping gods of other cultures. He longs for a free world which will give him the freedom to worship any god, as Christianity limits the scope of individuals in worshipping God that has constructed the concept of God as someone who is almighty and who does not tolerate other deities:

Exodus 34:14: For you must not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

Deuteronomy 4:24: For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

Deuteronomy 5:9: You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on their children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me. (Bible Hub)

Holderlin asks “Holy Greece!” which is the “Home of all the gods” whether “it’s true,” – “What once we heard when we were young?” He has heard about “A festival hall, whose floor is the ocean, whose tables / Are the mountains — anciently built for a single purpose.” Now he is not able to see the greatness, and in despair he asks, “But where are the thrones? Where the temples, the songs, / The vases full of nectar for the pleasure of the gods? / Where are the oracles that shine for miles and miles? / Delphi sleeps, and where does great Fate resound?” He is now living as a person belonging to a particular way of life that has condemned the early lifestyle. “Where does Fate suddenly break forth, full of omnipresent / Joy, thundering out of clear air over our eyes? He mourns for the loss of joy and calls out to the Greek primordial deity as “Father Aether!” The sound “called and flew from tongue to tongue / A thousand times, and nobody had to endure life alone.” The festivities of Greece are “Shared, such fortune is a joy; exchanged with strangers, /It becomes jubilant.” The joy of living enters this serious world, and the poet says, “Father! Joyful! The ancient sign resounds, as far it reaches, / Inherited from the elders, striking, creating.” Realizing the value of the ancient myths, gods, celebrations and joy people are ready to accept them, Holderlin visualizes grandly and announces: “Thus the gods enter; thus the

season of the gods falls / From the shadows down to men, shaking the depths” (“Bread and Wine” by Hölderlin 10). Greek mythological stories expand in his mind and he imagines every vivid detail with clarity, looking at these myths as a great cultural tradition of Europe which is the backbone of European thought.

There was a paradigm shift in the way people began to view religion in Europe, and the people accepted a religion with only one god with certain guidelines for thinking and living. In the early days of development of the upcoming and growing monotheistic Christianity, Europe destroyed the ancient religions and modern histories refer to this as the triumph of Christianity (Nixey).

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844 - 1900), the German philosopher and cultural critic, expresses similar views, and scholars claim he was influenced by Holderlin (Young). Nietzsche examines the core ideology of Christianity in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

The Christian faith from the beginning, is sacrifice: the sacrifice of freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit; it is at the same time subjection, self-derision, and self-mutilation. There is cruelty and religious Phoenicianism in this faith, which is adapted to a tender, many sided, and very fastidious conscience; it takes for granted that the subjection of the spirit is indescribably *painful*, that all the past and all the habits of such a spirit resist *absurdissimum*, in the form of which ‘faith’ comes to it. (Nietzsche 34)

For Nietzsche ‘Phoenicianism’ refers to Christianity (Cooper 234). Self-sacrifice, controlling the instincts of the body and subjection to the power of God are seminal values of Christianity, and to Nietzsche, who thinks in the line of Holderlin, the scope given by Christianity to human spirit is limited. Such a way of life does not recognize the greatness of human soul and treats it as subjugated to nature forever, he opines.

Holderlin refers to the joy of the past resounding once again, bringing back the celebrations and festivals that were permitted by Greek religion and culture and visualizes the day the Greek gods would appear: “At first the gods come unperceived. Children try to get / Near them. But their glory dazzles and blinds and / Awakens fear... Their joy fills his heart” (Holderlin 11). The faith of sacrifice, Holderlin says, is giving way to the gods of the past. They will bring liberation and joy, he dreams. Nietzsche takes up this argument very well and builds his philosophic interpretations of religion.

Both the poet who writes philosophic poems and the philosopher who writes poetic fragments look at human soul as a free bird that has to be given the space to grow and develop.

Nietzsche asks in desperation: “How is the negation of will possible?” (Nietzsche 35) His idea of superman as a man of will is born as resistance to the subjection and self-derision of the

state religion. According to him human will has to be celebrated as a power of nature. Religions cannot rob humanity of its willpower to live independently. They cannot curb man's energy and vitality.

Holderlin and Nietzsche look at Greece and its gods as cultural and social symbols of freedom, joy and celebration as opposite to the dogmatized and ordered life of the Europeans, and they do not delve into the way Greeks had organized their economic life. Would it have been possible for a society, in which the educated men practiced philosophy and physical exercise, to have been wealthy without an active work force?

It is notoriously difficult to estimate the population of Athens or any other Greek city-state in ancient times. Generally accepted figures for Athens at the height of its power and prosperity in 431 B.C., though, are in the range of approximately 305,000 people, of which perhaps 160,000 were citizens (40,000 male, 40,000 female, 80,000 children), 25,000 were free resident foreigners (*metics*), and 120,000 were slaves. Athens was the largest polis and the populations of most city-states were probably much smaller. Citizens, metics, and slaves all performed labor in the economy. In addition, many city-states included forms of dependent labor somewhere in between slave and free. (Darel Tai Engen)

(*metics* means “a foreigner living in an ancient Greek city who had some of the privileges of citizenship.”
https://www.google.com/search?q=meaning+of+metics&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS794US795&oq=meaning+of+metics&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l6.15968j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

The work force is represented in a very limited manner in archaeological evidences, literary works, esp. comedies and philosophical treatises. These evidences are not enough to construct their stories and they did not have a representing voice as writing was the activity of free men, and literary texts have upheld this system of slavery. (Tordoff 1-3). Each household had 5 to 8 slaves and they did not have specific slave names, and hence we cannot come to any conclusion based on their names as represented by Aristophanes and Menander enabling literary paradoxes (Tordoff 23-23). Herodotus, Aristophanes and others are at least talking about the economic work done by women who are not discussed by mainstream philosophers (Cuchet).

In “Thesmophoriazusae,” Aristophanes presents a slave – he is simply called as “A servant of Agathon.” He makes the announcements like this:

All people be still!
Allow not a word from your lips to be heard,
For the muses are here, and are making their odes in my master's abodes.
Let ether be lulled, and forgetful to blow,

And the blue sea waves, let them cease to flow,
And be noiseless. (Aristophanes 381)

We cannot infer how economically Greek society operated from these kinds of voiceless representations by comic writers. Culture and leisure belonged to the upper class men, and women and slaves have operated in a hierarchic manner. In “Lysistrata,” Calonice complains about the order of work in a household: “It’s hard for women...There’s much to do...Servants to be poked out...” (Aristophanes 331). The social hierarchy began from men to women to servants – one above the other.

In “Ecclesiazusae,” Praxagora complains how women operate households: “They are won’t to dye their wools in tinctures brought / To boiling...They roast barley, sitting, as of old...They carry baskets on their heads, as of old” (Aristophanes 488). The scenes are exaggerated for comic effects and Praxagora does not tell us about the slaves in her household, as they are taken for granted. Greece manipulated slave system so well that the privileged classes could work on higher intellectual pursuits.

Slave system was a natural part of Greek economic and political system, and Aristotle did not find anything wrong in it –the polis was made of people and slaves. These lowest strata in society could not have their own emotions, and took up their masters’ emotions as theirs (Dillon 179). The history of slavery and serfdom runs parallel to the history of Greek gods, oracles, philosophies and even growing science.

Nietzsche appears to support the system of hierarchy in society and builds an argument that the “preachers of equality”... are the “secretly revengeful ones!” He argues that such people “disguise” their “secret tyrant-longings” in “virtue-words!” (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 97) The argument is against the Christian tenet of love for everyone, professing egalitarianism. Nietzsche only addresses the lack of self-knowledge of people who profess to love all in an equal manner.

Although Nietzsche’s illiberal attitudes (for example, about human equality) are apparent, there are no grounds for ascribing to him a political philosophy, since he has no systematic (or even partly systematic) views about the nature of state and society. As an esoteric moralist, Nietzsche aims at freeing higher human beings from their false consciousness about morality (their false belief that this morality is good for them), not at a transformation of society at large. (Leiter)

The interesting paradox in the thought process of Nietzsche is that the meek European had already established colonies abroad with great economic, social and political success. It did not occur to Nietzsche that Europeans have exercised great will power and have dominated the

Americas and Asia. Scholars like Holub even wonder if he was in touch with the contemporary socio-political events at all (Holub 33). In his letters Nietzsche has written about his interests in settling down in Paraguay in the Nueva Germania colony founded in Paraguay in 1888. He was also planning to settle down in Mexico. He did begin to develop interest in South American colonization (Holub 37-38). Though he did not like nationalist ideologies behind Nueva Germania, though he cannot be called a proponent of German colonialism, still he was not an opponent of colonialism (Holub 40).

Hence, we can argue that Holderlin and Nietzsche are examining concepts of religion to which they belong without really analyzing the socio-political roles played by their practicing ideologies. Preaching love and sacrifice and self-discipline or any other such noble principles with written down dogmas, religions can also prepare people in domination and hegemony.

The reality of meeting the voiceless community in a society that has hierarchic social orders is expressed by the Tamil social reformer and thinker Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy (1879-1973), known as the great man or *Periyar*. He takes up the paradox in religions that creates political hegemonies in societies. A true religious person or wise man or a *gnani* does not require written down concepts or frameworks or even the idea of god to lead a good life, he argues:

The meaning for the word ‘mukthi’ is the destruction of sorrow and the attainment of pleasure, it is said...To reach this level, we require gnana. Therefore, it is said, ‘A gnani does not have pain; sorrow.’ Similarly, it is said, ‘A gnani has no god and no worship of images.’ What is the meaning of gnani? One who has gnana is a gnani. One who has buddhi is a Buddha. So, one who has intelligence is an intelligent man. Why is it such people do not bow down in front of images considering them as gods?... Even a ‘Thuravi’ does not believe in the concept of god, it is said. Thuravi means one who renounces. He has no desires for materials. Because he has no desires, he has no need for a god. He does not worry about god. He enjoins the natural world. So, the intelligence to understand nature and create a suitable life style is gnana. (Periyar 276-277. Translated from Tamil by myself)

Why does Periyar perceive religion as gnana? That is an Indian thought that recommends detachment as the highest form of religious wisdom. Periyar views ideologies of religion within a particular framework of society. He lives in a world where he sees religion as a human creation – paradoxical in nature – that presents philosophies for the soul on one side, and creating a rigid system of work force on the other side. It is a rigid social structure and controlling system designed as one dependent on the other – a model of nature. He is responding to the way religious principles operate in a society and how individuals cannot actually follow all the scientific principles of a philosophic system written in a highly standardized language, not

available to all. Indian thought did not reach the masses, and has not taken any efforts to spread. Instead, it has maintained its special identity, kept itself highly specialized and has concentrated on social ordering and developing an organized sector of economic development under a monarchic political philosophy.

The unwritten religions of India believe in personal deities and Indian intellectuals ignored this popular orgiasticism (“tending to arouse or excite unrestrained emotion” https://www.google.com/search?q=meaning+of+orgiasticism&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS794US795&og=meaning+of+orgiasticism&aqs=chrome..69i57j33.12299j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8) and ignored them (Weber 192). Indian mainstream thinking is philosophical in nature.

Indian thought is objective, scientific and analytical, and it is very interesting to note this philosophy also has created rigid social hierarchies of labour system negating social mobility completely, sealing the lives of people forever – believing in its permanent value and purpose, not realizing the fluidity of nature. Millenniums have gone by and human migrations have brought new ways of life and this ancient social system is now questioned by thinkers, philosophers and others who see the majority of the population bound by ideas of failure and hopelessness believing that it is their karma and destiny to live in permanent sorrow. Periyar brings in an argument that living a life of *gnana* does not require the ideology of religion and then quite naturally the people can be free and empowered.

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