

The Prologue: Understanding Religion in Our World

As I step out of the airport in Mumbai, I am instantly dizzied with amazement that the place I had just left and the place I was now at could possibly belong on the same planet. I am hit by the frenzied chatter of more people than I am used to seeing in a single day, the distinctive scents of what can only be described as “India,” and the warmth and stickiness of air with which I am so unacquainted. Each of these observations precede many more of their kind, reminding me that I am in a place that will never quite be completely familiar to me. As I walk through the crowded streets, I find yet another truth hard to ignore: this city of over 18 million people belongs to a Hindu majority country.

Idols and statues of gods are sold on every other street corner and traditional flower garlands adorn nearly every doorway in sight. Large displays of deities stand in the middle of streets, while religious chants can be heard blocks away from the nearest temple. I see the marks of religion on daily life in more than just a cursory glance; I see its infiltration into the actions performed as if by second nature. People bow down to touch the feet of their elders out of reverence, respect, and worship. Feet do not touch books, paper, food, or money, or else the sin will be corrected by a hand gesture touching the object, the person’s forehead, and then their chest. Every milestone is accompanied by a prayer whose rituals and procedures define the very occasion. As I look at this world through the eyes of those who live there, it becomes clear to me that regardless of my faith, I would be exposed to a part of the Hindu religion in a way I would never be exposed to the Christianity of my country back home. Here, religion isn’t neatly tucked away from daily life. In fact, the line between the two is almost indistinguishable.

Growing up in Seattle, I have seen religion pushed away from daily life, almost as if not to obstruct its flow. To the outside world, places of worship stand quietly as separate entities,

little known to anyone besides the people they belong to. Perhaps this is true because of the immense diversity of people and religions, or the liberal and secular tone of the city I call home. Whatever the cause, there is an undeniable separation of religion from daily life in the world I have grown up in, that simply wasn't present in this Indian city so many thousands of miles away from what I was familiar with. In my eyes, the people I was now surrounded by were never only immersed in their country's culture. They were immersed in their country's religion.

As my mind continued to make its own flight from Mumbai to Seattle and back to Mumbai, it became clear to me that this dichotomy between the two cities was more than just a commentary on the differences between the religious understandings of each of its inhabitants. The realization revealed something very powerful about what it takes to understand and interact with the people around us in a meaningful way: we must learn to read the prologues of the stories of each other's lives—especially in stories as complex and personal as religion. We must learn to see where these people have come from. The streets they have walked, the people they have known, the beliefs they have been immersed in.

And for me, this is what the city of Mumbai stands for. This city stands as a personal starting point and anecdote for a larger discussion about the way our environments and experiences shape how we understand religion. This city stands for the beliefs and backgrounds that cultivate our individual approaches to religion, not only in the Indian culture I belong to, or the American culture I have grown up in, but in people all over the world. The past few decades of gruesome global conflicts fueled by raging religious fires have prompted us to shy away from having honest, complex, and sometimes difficult discussions about the role of religion in our world. But such proceedings only serve as testament to the fact that religion remains such a vital construct of our personal identities and interactions with each other that we *must* understand the

nuances of this subject through the stories that are held within the cities and cultures beyond our own. These discussions cannot be forgone and I feel compelled to reignite them by opening the door to the bustling and vibrant corner of the world that has taught me this reality.

Works Cited

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