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**A Semiotic analysis of Divine Religion Versus Man Made Religion in the  
Light of Lotman's Semiosphere: Islam Versus Hinduism.**

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**Introduction**

Juri Lotman's establishment of the semiotics of culture and particularly his concept of the semiosphere provides us with a tool through which we can approach different phenomena such as religion. The attributes of the semiosphere are the core, periphery and boundary. Lotman's (2005) description of the semiosphere informs us that each semiosphere is a whole containing other semiospheres while also being a part of a larger semiosphere. In the light of this, we can consider religion as a semiosphere which is a part of a larger semiosphere. In this paper, we aim to study two different religions namely Islam and Hinduism as two different semiospheres. At the beginning, we have studied the semiosphere of Islam as a divine religion. After that, we have seen that because Hinduism, as a non-divine religion, is in constant change whether at the level of the core or the periphery this makes it categorized into a different semiosphere.

**1.The Semiosphere of Islam**

**1.1. Definition of Lotman's Semiosphere**

Lotman defines the semiosphere as follows: “ *the semiotic space outside of which semiosis cannot exist*” (p.205.2005). He states that each semiosphere is a whole containing semiospheres while being a part of a larger semiosphere. It is made of hierarchical structures. Because it has a heterogenous nature, which is enhanced by its structural irregularity, the semiosphere develops at different speeds and different places. And as Eric Kovamez (2021)

explained in his lecture, it is the semiotic space which precedes any sign, significant act or any single isolated semiotic system such as a language or a text. In addition, they are: “working mechanism with separate elements in complex dynamic relationships working to circulating information, preserve it and produce new information” (ibid).

The semiosphere is featured by three elements, namely, the boundary, periphery and core. Related to them is the concept of dialogue which is considered as its central mechanism . It also transcends all considerations of time, space, scale and abstraction (Lotman, 2005).

Therefore, as an abstract phenomena, the concept of the semiosphere can be applied on many cultural phenomena including religion.

## **1.2. The Semiosphere of Islam**

### **Introduction**

El Saouah (2002), in his part, sees that religion is rooted in human thought. For him, to define religion is a prerequisite in the study of religious phenomena in order to delimit the aspects and fields of the study and not to astray to other distant phenomena that could not help in the study. From an Islamic perspective, we can define religion as the bond that binds man with his creator. It is a spiritual life that manifests through all the aspects of the believers' life. Their actions vary between prayers, fast, charity, pilgrimage and good manners and the pursuit for science and knowledge.

In looking at Islam as a semiosphere, we discuss the three attributes of Islam through the core, periphery and boundary.

#### **1.2.1.The Core**

According to Lotman (2005): “*The division between the core and the periphery is a law of the internal organization of the semiosphere. The dominant semiotic systems are located at the core*” (p. 214). It has the function to dominate the periphery, describe it or describe the relation between them. Dynamism features the relation between the core and the periphery also. The periphery of the semiosphere is much more dynamic or unstable than the core which is much more static and stable. Nevertheless, the periphery always tries to conquer and replace the core (ibid).

Considering Islam as a semiosphere, the Quran is its core. It is the miraculous speech that came down on the Prophet Mohamed-Peace Be Upon Him- (henceforth PBU) from God through angel Jibril. It is the holy book of the muslims. With the descent of the Quran, Islam appeared in 610 AD which witnessed its golden age culturally and economically between the eighth century and the thirteenth AD during the succession of El Abassia.<sup>1</sup>

The Quran contains 114 verses with a variety of topics, namely: creed, faith, spirituality, morality, the discussion of cultural, political and social issues, legislations and sentences. It is the basic reference with Suna (i.e, the speeches and deeds of Mohamed – PBUH-) for Islamic principles (ibid).

The first word and the first recommendation in the Quran was a call to knowledge and science in addition to a call to meditation on the universe which would reveal the existence of God, his power, discover the secrets of the universe and use them for the benefits of man and his development on earth:

*“ And what people should know is that the Quran is a way of worship...And when it treats, it does not treat the particularities...but it puts the principle...when it asks us to search in earth and look for signs of God’s existence...and learn in matters of life...and to work and produce...and construct the earth, it is asking us that if we have followed it, we could have reached the highest development that man could accomplish”* ( El Sharaoui, 2004.p: 41).

It is important to note that the Quran is the only holy book that has not changed or deviated from its original version since its appearance a thousand years ago. And this is considered as one of its miracles because God took charge to preserve it from any distortion as he says in the Quran: *“ Surely we revealed the message, and we will preserve it”* ( El Hidjre; Verse: 09. Trans: P.260).

Last point to consider in the Quran is information about scientific miracles which scientists keep discover at the present time. To give but just one little example, God says in the Quran:

*“ And the sun runs towards its destination, such is the design of the almighty, the all-knowing”* (Sourat Yaseen; verse: 38. Trans: p. 485). This is a fact that was revealed through revelation to prophet Mohamed –PBUH- that the sun runs. And recently, scientists have

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<sup>1</sup> -ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam (2021).

discovered that the sun runs with 43200 Mile per hour and since the distance between earth and the sun is about 92 million miles we think that the sun is fixed and unmovable.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2.2. Periphery

In contrast to the boundary, the periphery is internal. In the semiosphere of Islam, the periphery is in dynamic relation with the core. It is manifested in man, his community, ideologies and culture. It is a dynamic element which is in constant change.

Nevertheless, the periphery is dominated by the core which is the Quran. In one part, the Quran contains, directions and commands that muslims should follow, for example, there is a verse which orders the muslim to act good with his neighbours either muslims or non muslims:

*“ And worship God, and ascribe no partners to Him, and be good to the parents, and the relatives, and the orphans, and the poor, and the neighbor next door, and the distant neighbour, and the close associate, and the traveller, and your servants. God does not love the arrogant show off”* ( Sourat: El Nisaa, Verse; 36. Trans: P. 80).<sup>3</sup>

In another part, Quran carries also forbids that muslims should avoid. And the muslim who does not adhere to these regulations is called sinner and disobedient, in the following verse from the Quran, man is ordered not to mistreat his parents<sup>4</sup>:

*“ Your Lord has commanded that you worship none but Him, and you be good to your parents. If either of them or both of them reach old age with you, do not say to them a word of disrespect, nor scold them, but say to them kind words”* ( Soura: Israa, Verse;23. Transl: p. 284).

As we said earlier, the Quran is a way of life. We find in it the description of the general guidelines that should be present in the life of the muslim. So it provides the believers the principles of life where man has the right to live and enjoy his life to the fullest but at the same time he should not forget his role towards his God and think about the second life and work for it. Therefore, we see that the Quran organizes the life between the individual and his God, between muslims themselves or between muslims and non-muslims, This is achieved

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<sup>2</sup> -sites.google.com/sites/aludamaa/aludamaa-5 (2021).

<sup>3</sup> -quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura4-aya36.html (2021).

<sup>4</sup>-quaran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura17-aya23.htm (2021).

through regulations which control these relationships like honesty, charity, gratefulness, patience, respect, collaboration and mercy.

In the light of this, obeying God on earth does not deprive one from living his life. In the following Quranic verse, general guidelines that are the basis of the behaviour of the muslim<sup>5</sup>:

*“ But seek, with what God has given you, the Home of the Heerafter, and do not neglect your share of this world. And be charitable, as God has been charitable to you. And do not seek corruption in the land. God does not like the seekers of corruption”* (Sourate El Kasase; Verse: 77. Transl: p. 407).

### **1.2.3. Boundary**

Lotman (2005) states that there is a boundary between the semiosphere and the non or extra-semiotic space that surrounds it. It cannot be visualized and it has the function to delimit, that is the separation of the semiosphere's internal space from its external space. Furthermore, it establishes contact between the semiosphere and its external space. It is also: “ a bilingual mechanism translating external communication into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Thus only with the help of the boundary is the semiosphere able to establish contact with non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces” (p.210). Last, the boundary performs the function of filtration. Filtration is bidirectional and also involves the transforming of texts.

Though the periphery and the boundary are spaces of accelerated development, the difference between them is that the boundary exists both outside and inside the semiosphere while the periphery remains internal (ibid).

The religion of Islam has set a dividing line between Islam and non-Islam. This line is the boundary between belief and disbelief. To believe that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammed –PBUH- is his messenger one becomes a muslim and consequently he must adhere to its legislations.

God says in the holy Quran: *“Religion with God is islam”* (Al Imrane; Verse: 19. Trans:p.49).

Therefore, what comes outside the semiosphere of Islam is not religion except in the case of Christianity and Judaism. These latter are both deitic religions and do not contradict

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<sup>5</sup> -quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura28-aya77.html (2021).

with Islam. In fact, they all came with the same message. The difference between Islam in one side and Christianity and Judaism in another side is that both Christianity and Judaism came for a particular community to treat particular issues, while Islam came for all the humanity on earth. However, in essence, all deitic religions are Islam.

In looking at the boundary of Islam, the filter is activated in the rejection of non religion. Nevertheless, it is not in isolation from the outside world. It approves the coexistence between muslims and non-muslims. Thus, the contact between the outside world and the inside world is established. Both muslims and non-muslims can live together in one community which is guided by law which protects the rights to respect and dignity to both of them.

Furthermore, the boundary of Islam insures the interaction and contact with the outside world. Here, we recall the words of Lotman (2005): “ *The border is a bilingual mechanism, translating external communication into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Thus, only with the help of the boundary is the semiosphere able to establish contact with non-semiotic and extra semiotic spaces*” (p.210). As it impacts people and civilizations, it is also influenced by other civilizations. Indeed, Islamic civilization was a leading civilization in the period between 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. This period was called the golden Age of Islam. In addition to the importance given to religious life, the interest in knowledge and science was prominent. Indeed, Islam prompts on seeking all kinds of knowledge except those which threaten the credence. In this regard, the boundary of the semiosphere of Islam is open to newness and difference for the sake to improve man’s condition in life. Therefore, working on previous knowledge from other civilizations like the Greek one, the Islamic civilization was able to develop knowledge and flourish to arrive to the West and impact it in many areas of life like language, religion, art, architecture and agriculture.<sup>6-7</sup>. In this context, Lotman (2005) states that: “ *it (the boundary) is the area of accelerated semiotic processes which always flow more actively on the periphery of cultural environments, seeking to affix them to the core structures, with a view to displacing them*” (p. 212).

In both directions, the result of the impact of one on the other leads ultimately to development or what Lotman (2005) refers to as ‘new codes’: “*The eternal flow in culture of*

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<sup>6</sup> -marefa.org/islamic-civilization (2021).

<sup>7</sup> -aljazeera.net/blogs/2016/8/25/islamic-civilization –and-inheritance-of-civilizations (2021).

*specific reserves of text with lost codes lead to the process of creation of new codes, often understood subjectively as reconstructions ( “recollections”)*” (p.215).

In the light of this, considering Islam as a dynamic semiosphere, the question to ask; Out of its contact with different cultures and sciences, does Islam change?. If we look at its core, we can say that it resists change because the Quran has never changed and will never change. So as a religion it remains the same. But, if we look at the level of periphery we can claim that it is open to change because life always changes so its regulations adapt to what befits man in such situation. This is why at the contemporary time, muslims are open to western developments and ideas in all fields because this would improve and facilitate their life. As an example of this is the muslims’ use of the social media among endless examples.

This brief view of Islam in the light of Lotman’s concept of the semiosphere has demonstrated to what extent this concept is reliable in describing a religion like Islam. It enables us to go through many areas in Islam.

## **2.The Semiosphere of Hinduism**

The conversion of India with other populations like the Aryan people and the Yellow population from ancient times resulted into the appearance of the system of social classes. At the top of the social ladder, there were the Aryans who constitute the class of religious men. They are called the Brahma. After them, was the class of fighters ( i.e, Kastia), followed by the merchants and handcrafts ( i.e, Vaisya), and finally the lower class of the servants and slaves (i.e, Sudra) ( Chalbi, 2000).

The powers of nature had their effect in developing the religiosity of the Indian people. This is why they consider many elements of nature as their god. To illustrate, they have the god of Heaven Warona, the god of thunder Indra, the god of fire Aghni and the god of storms Rodra (Chalbi, 2000).

Being among the most ancient civilizations in the world, India was famous by its plurality of gods and religions. One of its prominent religions is Hinduism. It is a model of a non-divine religion.

### **2.1. Hinduism as Non-Divine Religion**

#### **Introduction**

When we try to categorize Hinduism as a semiosphere, we find ourselves in a maze of gods, texts and rituals. The constant dynamics at the levels of core and periphery put Hinduism in a different semiosphere. Therefore, we endeavour to highlight Hinduism as a non-divine religion and provide semiotic explanation to some of its elements.

It is an agreed fact that Hinduism is difficult to define. But it is said that any person who enters India and does not belong to any other religion is a Hindu. It is one of the biggest religions in the world. There are about one billion Hindus around the world. It took a lot of names as AL Vedas or the Brahma in reference to the great Hindu God (Chehabi, 2021).

In his book entitled *Religion of Man, a Research in the Nature of Religion and the Origin of the Religious Motivation* (2002), El Saouah has discussed three types of religions namely, the individual, the collective and finally the institutional.

Concerning the individual religion, it is the individual experience which man undergoes apart from other experiences which leads him to come up with an individual religion. So it is a starting psychological feeling:

*“And as Rodolf Outou truly remarked, this feeling is a psychological act which does not emerge from any willingness or a pre-design, but rather, the opposite is completely true. This is because man finds himself under the power of this feeling without any ability to redirect it or control it, he is more his prey than his creator”* ( El Saouah, 2002.p.31).

Therefore, the writer sees that the idea of the sacred precedes the idea of god.

Whereas the collective religion arises when different individuals gather their isolated experiences to participate together into a common general experience of religion the fact that leads to the construction of a credence which is considered as the basis of the collective religion (El Saouah, 2002).

In light of this and based on the literature, we categorize Hinduism as both an individual and collective religion. Thus, it is a non-divine religion because it was established by man out of particular experiences.

As a matter of fact, Hinduism appeared as a result of man’s feeling of weakness towards the powers of nature in the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC (Chalbi, 2000). Besides, Hinduism gathers between theory and practice. It established the scientific foundations to treat man’s existential problems ( Chehabi, 2021).

From a broader image, Chehabi (2021) states that it is possible to categorize Hinduism into three classes which represent the basics of Hinduism:

- a- The philosophy or the creed and faith.
- b- The application or the rituals and prayers.
- c- Celebrations and feasts.

As for fasting in Hinduism, it is seen as something traditional and personal. The Hindus fast on Tuesday. While the followers of Cheva fast on Mondays, the followers of Fechno fast on Thursdays. In general, all the Hindus fast nine days at the beginning of each season (ibid).

Some scholars like Chalbi (2000) is reluctant in considering Hinduism a religion. This is due to the fact that in addition to the religious and sacred matters, it also embodies life issues, for it describes the Indian life and its society with its system of classes, its ideologies, morals and law. So it is more a way of life than a religion. Chalbi further adds that Hinduism is a group of creeds which have formulas without determined features. From those creeds, it contains those which descend to the worship of rocks and trees and those which ascend to micro-philosophical abstractions.

Finally, the features of Hinduism as a non-divine religion are displayed in the following<sup>8</sup>:

- The absence of a principle creed.
- The paradox: As there is the belief in one God, there is also the belief in the plurality of Gods. In addition to the existence of personal and non-personal Gods.
- Hinduism was influenced by some religions. For instance, in analogy with Islam, they believe that their holy books are revelations from God, or that they are miracles in Hinduism.
- The religious belief in Hinduism has no relation with the mind or instinct.
- The plurality of Gods; the first God is called Brahma; in addition to the believe in many other Gods which are only manifestations of the great God.
- The worship of some elements of nature like water, air, sun, moon, trees, animals, fire,..
- The prostration in front of the statues.

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<sup>8</sup> -<https://youtube.be/UpD15aYMtso>. ( 2021).

## 2.2. The Semiotics of the Plenty Gods

In general, spirituality takes a big place in Indian life in addition to the belief in superstitions. From ancient times, Indians have worshiped powers of nature, animals and statues. They believe that God unfolds in the reincarnation of the souls (Chalbi, 2000).

The first Hindu great God is called Brahma who is considered the creator. Other Gods include God Ceva who destroys and God Feshno who protects the world. There is also the God Avatar who descends on earth in a particular image for a particular purpose, mostly, it is to salivate the believers from their enemies. It is estimated that there are 24 Avatars<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, any power of nature that they think befits them or harms them is considered a god they worship. For example, there is the god of water, fire, sun, mountains. They used to supplicate those gods in order to bless their children, money and make them win over their enemies. This phenomena was a result of their love and wonder of nature which led into the birth of this religious feeling within them. They thought that these natural phenomena possessed spirits so they considered them gods and got closer to them by worships and sacraments. This explains their tendency towards the plurality of gods (Chalbi, 2000).

Besides the elements of nature, the statue in the temple is also worshiped. They prepare and ornament and perfume it. It is treated as if it is a living being who can hear and recognize. They also celebrate the new God statue (Chalbi, 2000).

Some animals are also blessed and sacred in India. The most famous one is the cow. In this case, Chalbi (2000. P. 31) reports the words of Mahatma Ghandi from Braran's Journal in addressing the cow:

*“ My mother cow is better than my real mother in many faces. The true mother nurses us for one or two years and recommends us to serve her for life time as a return to this, but our mother cow provides us milk and does not recommend from us anything as a return of that only her usual food. And when our true mother gets sick, she costs us high expences, but with our mother cow we lose nothing. And when the cow dies, this benefits us like she does when she was alive because we can befit from any part of her body even the bones, skin and horns”.*

So the Hindus had wide options of creeds and practices. They chose what they want. It was not possible to gather them under one God and one text. It is not one religion but rather a

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<sup>9</sup> - <https://youtube.be/UpD15aYMtso>. ( 2021).

family of religions. It has the feature of flexibility and change and this is why it absorbs the living religions of the Hindus. (El Saouah, 2017).

The Hindus also have the flexibility to reconsider their gods every time. That is, they fade a god and give power and authority to another god which they think is more capable to meet their needs (El Saouah, 2017).

It is estimated that the Hindus have about 300 Gods. They consider them as a mediator between them and the Great God. So every God they have is a partial incarnation of the only God. These Gods are featured by the many human organs. For example, God Brahma has got four faces, God Rama has got 1000 eyes, among many.. ( Chehabi, 2021).

### **2.3. The Semiotics of the Hindu Texts**

Hinduism is a religion in constant change and development. Basically, it appeared as a result of the mixture of the creeds of the Aryans with other populations in their way to India and later with Indians also (Chalbi, 2000).

As there are many gods in Hinduism, books are also numerous. Al Veda is considered as the most prominent holy Hindus book. There is no specific writer to it. It contains myths, songs, prayers, poems and hymns<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the Veda describes the Indian life, its society, system of classes, its morals and ideologies. The Aryan news are also documented. It sheds light on their travels and trips either in the past or the present, their religion, houses, clothes, food, drinks, jobs and crafts (Chalbi, 2000).

The Veda is further composed of four other books with different subjects. The Rig Veda is the book which includes chants used for supplication to their different gods like the god Indra, Agni, Varona,...etc. The Yajur Veda contains prose worships which monks recite in granting their sacraments. The Sama Veda embodies songs that the vocalist chants during their prayers and supplications. While in the last book Athar Veda there are essays on magic and superstitions tainted with ancient Indian life (Chalbi, 2000, Al Saouah, 2017).

Nevertheless, the Veda was not the only Hindu book. Due to the complications found in the Veda, the Brahma tried to write explanations which resulted into other sub books named Brahmana, and after it the Upanchad which was featured by its call to purity of the heart and the serenity of the soul and that knowledge is the basis of liberation. Thus, the three

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<sup>10</sup> - [hindawi.org/books/62481531/6](http://hindawi.org/books/62481531/6). (2021).

books the Veda, Brahmana and Upanchad are sacred Hindus books which approve the plurality of gods with their different specialities<sup>11</sup>.

Furthermore, Al mabharta was a book which was written by many writers. It contains, philosophy, religion, stories and legal researches. It appeared in the fourth century BC (ibid).

In the sixth century CB, another book was written. It contained legends, stories, poems. It is called Biorana. It is also an important book for the Hindus. It embodied information about the life of gods, the saints, creators, religious chants, information about earth, rules of music and rules of language. In this book, there are three gods; the Brahma (i.e, the god creator), Vecho ( i.e, the god protector in the form of a man with four heads and four hands) and finally, the Cheva (i.e, the destructive god) (ibid).

The holy book Seruti is a group of regulations that were transmitted from one generation to another orally. While the Semerti is a set of teachings that were inherited and written from the oral tradition<sup>12</sup>.

### **2.3. The Semiotics of the Religious Rituals**

The Hindus have inherited some religious rituals from Aryan people. To illustrate, they did not have particular temples for worship but rather they practice their rituals in full air under the sky where they light a big fire in which they throw their sacraments in the form of a horse, wheat, or taurus. They paint it with oil or wine before throwing it in fire. In fact, for any sacrament to be effective, the presence of the god of fire (i.e, Agni) is conditioned. They call and supplicate it. They even express their love to it. They believe that it clears their sins and expel demons from their houses. And the other god that should also be present was the god Suma. They pour Suma juice on the grass thinking that he is invisible and is present at the same time. The last god that should be also present was called Brahmanspati which represents the holy power in the words of the vocal prayer. Therefore, for example, when they supplicate the god of the mountains Rudia, the presence of these three gods is mandatory. The priests believe that these rituals inherited from the Aryans contain certain supernatural powers which cause the occurrence of events through vocalizing words, acts and rituals (El Saouah, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>11</sup> - [hindawi.org/books/62481531/6](http://hindawi.org/books/62481531/6). (2021).

<sup>12</sup> - <https://youtube.be/UpD15aYMtso>. ( 2021).

In this research paper, we have tried to discuss two types of religions through the concept of Lotman's semiosphere. So we have studied the attributes of Islam as a divine religion in contrast to Hinduism as a non-divine religion.

Lotman's concept of the semiosphere shows to be effective in unfolding the attributes of Islam. We have been able to determine the core, the periphery and the boundary of Islam. In the light of this, we have been able to understand why has Islam not changed since its appearance. On the other hand, because of the mercurial nature of Hinduism we could categorize it as an other type of semiosphere. In spite of this, we have shed some light on the semiotics of Gods, texts and religious rituals. Islam shows to maintain a solid ground in one level and a flexibility in another level. Islam has come to connect man with his creator, to honour him on earth and make the universe at his service. While in Hinduism man creates his god, texts and rituals. He degrades his humanity and puts himself for the service of nature, rigid statues and even animals like the cow which can not even clean itself. And this is what makes the difference between what is called a divine religion and non-divine religion.

For future research, we can suggest the application of the concept of the semiosphere in order to understand the religious mechanisms in some societies. Lotman's concepts of core, periphery and boundary pave the way for future religious studies. They can be used to study why some people move from one religion to another or even decline their religious belief completely.

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