

IDEOLOGICAL RELIGION: AN EXAMPLE FROM EARLY INDIA*

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It is not always that ideology** is avowedly religious, but religion invariably develops ideology or an ideological dimension. When a particular form of religion takes root in a society and becomes the means of its cultural expression, it not only co-exists with a given economic and political set-up, but the two also develop into a mutually supporting system.

We might expect the situation in a nascent society that is struggling to evolve a viable economic-political structure to be an exception to this almost universal pattern. What place has religious ideology in such a situation?

An illuminating answer to this question seems to us to be provided by a very ancient document, the Rgveda Samhitā of India.

The Vedic Aryans portrayed in this document entered India probably from around the 15th century B.C., or may be a little later. Sociologically, they were organized in *janas* and in sub-groups of the *jana* called the *vis*. Those who were not of the Aryan *janas* were called *Dasyus* and these of course were outsiders. Everything said about them stresses their difference—in language, worship and most of all in their way of life.

The *ṛsis*, who were the elite religious men of the Aryans, the composers of the songs of worship that form the nucleus of the Vedic literature, desired most ardently to emphasize these differences. They did not want to have any truck with the *Dasyus*. Rather, they wished to see them exterminated. The struggles that ensued exposed the Aryan social system to tremendous strains. Through these stresses and strains a new society evolved. For this reason it can be said that the Vedic literature depicts a nascent society.

The wishes of the Vedic *ṛsis* in respect of their *Dasyu* opponents are expressed in a religious garb, in the epic of Indra as the pre-eminent *dasyuhān*, or *Dasyu-destroyer*. For this reason and others, the Indra cult is also an illuminating example of the misdirection of the religious

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**We would define ideology as the body of religious or philosophical concepts through which a particular way of life or program of action is recommended to a society. In the case of a religion, it is that aspect of it which justifies, explicitly or implicitly, a given socio-political and socio-economic arrangement, or proposes an alternate socio-political / socio-economic arrangement.