

Purusa Sukta:

Creating the Cosmos and Mapping the Methods

Emma Salter

**School of Education and Professional Development
University of Huddersfield**

This paper examines how *Purusa Sukta* can be used to encourage students to develop an academic approach to their study of religion by explaining how the hymn can be interpreted to model different methodological approaches in religious studies. Information presented here is drawn from my observations of teaching *Purusa Sukta* to first year undergraduates in the context of an introductory module on Hinduism. Themes addressed in the paper include curriculum design, constructivist pedagogy, phenomenology, Smart's 'salient features' with particular emphasis on myth and ritual, and functionalism with particular emphasis on sacralisation as a mechanism of social stability. Brief expositions of different aspects of the hymn are also included. The paper does not offer a critique of different methodologies

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in religious studies, but rather illustrates how they can be introduced to the novice scholar of religion in a classroom situation, using *Purusa Sukta* as an exemplar.

Some of the analysis of *Purusa Sukta* in this paper was originally included in my MA thesis *Purusa Sukta as a model of Vedic Structure* presented at Cardiff University in 1997. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies conference, Teaching Religions of South Asian Origin in January 2011. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s 1981 translation of *Purusa Sukta* published by Penguin in *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* is referred to in the paper.

Purusa Sukta is thought to be one of the later hymns of the *Rig Veda*. Some scholars date it at about 900 BCE (Lincoln 1986:3). It explains how gods and *rishis* conduct the first, primordial sacrifice of *Purusa*, the original Man, to create Vedic cosmic, social and ritual systems. Vedic literature is *shruti*, divinely revealed. This means *Purusa Sukta* provides divine origin, and therefore divine endorsement, of Vedic cultural identity which is located in society, ritual and cosmology. Implicit in the hymn is the requirement for ritual re-enactment of the primordial sacrifice resulting in the continuous reinforcement of Vedic cultural identity (Flood, 1996:36). Like a prism, from whichever angle it is viewed *Purusa Sukta* reflects all the colours of Vedic belief and culture. For this reason the hymn is an excellent resource for consolidating students’ learning about Vedic society. Its combination of myth, ritual and society also makes it a useful model for the application of different methodologies in the study of religion. For many undergraduate students Vedic society is a new and potentially obscure area of study. This distance is advantageous in the early stages of teaching and learning about methodological approaches to the study of religion because students are less likely to be affected by close personal or cultural associations that can, sometimes, hinder their understanding of critical distance in academic study.

Prior to being introduced to *Purusa Sukta* in their Hinduism class students learn about key features of the *Veda* and Vedic society, for example *Veda* as divinely revealed, social hierarchy and the prominence of ritual. Therefore an analysis of the hymn in class serves to reify and consolidate these themes. With regard to methodology in the study of religion, students are introduced to emic, eitc, reflexive and

phenomenological perspectives. Sociological and psychological approaches via Durkheim and Jung respectively are considered, as well as Smart's 'salient features' approach.

Curriculum design is a key concern in religious studies courses. My experience working with undergraduates indicates that the modular system preferred by the university where I teach, as well as at many UK universities, can be a barrier to students adopting a holistic approach to learning about their chosen academic subject (in this instance religious studies) because the ability to apply knowledge across modules does not always come easily to some students. Few religious studies courses would deny the importance of including methods in the study of religion in their curriculum (Chryssides and Geaves, 2007:2-5). However, this poses the question of whether it is better to teach methods as a stand alone module or to integrate it across the curriculum by embedding it in other subject areas. Both approaches have their benefits and disadvantages. This paper argues that methods, as well as being an important subject in its own right, is helpful in bridging different subject areas in the student's mind. Observant students notice that our analysis of *Purusa Suktareveals* pan-religious themes that can be applied to more familiar religions in more familiar contexts. For example, it is hoped that students would notice that the close association between myth and ritual observed in *Purusa Sukta* is also apparent in the Jewish celebration of Pesach and the Christian celebration of Eucharist, to name but two examples. The overall aim is for students to cultivate a holistic approach to their learning and sidestep the false notion that knowledge is boxed into individual modules. Therefore, learning outcomes for students' study of *Purusa Sukta* fall into two main categories; knowledge about Vedic religion and society, and to develop a growing confidence and ability in the academic study of religion. Beginning with *Purusa Sukta*, students' growing proficiency in dealing academically with the study of religion filters into the other religions they study, encouraging them to transpose knowledge and skills between modules.

As Vedic society is historically and culturally distant, students respond to the hymn instinctively as critical outsiders. I take a phenomenological stance in my discussion of *Purusa Suktawith* students in class by attempting to imagine its meaning and significance according to the world view of Vedic society. This demonstrates to them that

studying a religion academically does not mean it has to be viewed cynically. My phenomenological approach leads students to inevitably question; how do we really know about the Vedic world-view? This leads us neatly into a critical evaluation of phenomenology as a method, and, by extension, of methods and orientalism in general.

Purusa Sukta is essentially a creation myth. It explains the origins and structure of the cosmos and the origins of all the creatures therein.

[line 2] It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality, when he grows beyond everything through food.

[line 3] Such is his greatness, and the Man is yet more than this. All creatures are a quarter of him; three quarters are what is immortal in heaven.

[line 4] With three quarters the Man rose upwards, and one quarter of him still remains here. From this he spread out in all directions, into that which eats and that which does not eat.

The centrality of Vedic social hierarchy is explained and endorsed by the division of *Purusa* into the different social strata.

[line 11] When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?

[line 12] His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born.

Students are introduced to *Purusa Sukta* with straight forward constructivist pedagogy. This refers to finding ways for students to acquire new knowledge by building on their existing knowledge and understanding. Students' study of *Purusa Sukta* begins with a class discussion about the meaning and purpose of creation mythology. Prior to class students are asked to research briefly a creation myth of their

choosing, but that is unfamiliar to them. This, along with familiarity with their 'own' creation myth, provides stimulus for the discussion. Students tend to engage well with this activity, which invariably produces energetic debate and deep level thinking. Students' thoughts are recorded and displayed on flipchart posters. Their conclusions in response to the question 'what's the point of creation mythology' can be summarised as 'existential reassurance' to include the following points: where have I come from, what's my purpose, how should I behave, what happens when I die? Many students are able to extend their evaluation of the purpose of creation mythology to include cultural identity and social inclusion through a shared world-view. Recognition of these themes helps to inform discussions about religious pluralism, secularisation and community cohesion later on in their degree. Therefore, the introduction to *Purusa Sukta* begins with a gentle constructivist approach as students discuss their own thoughts and ideas about creation mythology. Confidence in their own independent thinking skills is reinforced through our analysis of *Purusa Sukta*, as their conclusions about existential reassurance and cultural identity are justified.

The term 'mythology' can be an early stumbling block in the study of religion. In colloquial use the word 'myth' often introduces pejorative or undermining connotations to a narrative. To describe religious narratives that some students might believe to be true and sacred as 'myth', without redefining the term, could easily disengage them. Similarly, it could diminish the significance of religious beliefs that are unfamiliar to them. Neither of these positions is desirable, but at the same time fruitful academic study of religion requires exposition of mythology and its relationship to other aspects of religious belief and practice. In the context of religious studies, students are taught to redefine 'myth' to mean a narrative that may be supernatural in origin, but, most significantly, that communicates a truth or truths of vital importance to society; namely the society observing the religion from which the myth originates (Eliade, 1961:59).

Purusa Sukta exemplifies this by revealing the intimate relationship between the cosmos and Vedic identity. Purusa's immolation not only creates the cosmos and natural world, but also creates the three markers of Vedic identity; the Vedas, social hierarchy and ritual:

[line 9] From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the verses and chants were born, the metres were born from it, and from it the formulas were born.

[line 7] They anointed the Man, the sacrifice born at the beginning, upon the sacred grass. With him the gods, Sadhyas, and sages sacrificed.

[line 15] There were seven enclosing-sticks for him, and thrice seven fuel-sticks, when the gods, spreading the sacrifice, bound the Man as the sacrificial beast.

[line 16] With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice. These were the first ritual laws. These very powers reached the dome of the sky where dwell the Sadyas, the ancient gods.

Through the creative process of divinely conducted ritual sacrifice, inter-relationships between these three markers of Vedic identity are forged. Further, Vedic cultural identity is endorsed by association with the divine process of creation and is clearly distinguished from other, unendorsed, cultures. Vedic cosmos, society and ritual are mutually bound through the first sacrifice described in *Purusa Sukta*, meaning that chaos in one aspect risks chaos in all three aspects (an analogy can be made with the physiological systems of the human body). This necessitates conformity to the prescribed social hierarchy and correct ritual practice in order to ensure cosmic stability; surely an important consideration of the time. Homologies between *Purusa*'s body-parts and social ranking define and assert an individual's place in the social hierarchy (Lincoln, 1986:20). Spiritual ontology is explained by the monistic overtones of the hymn. Created beings are rendered with a paradoxical ontology, being at the same time 'real'—having been divinely created—and 'unreal' due to the ephemeral nature of flesh and blood. *Purusa Sukta* addresses this paradox by explaining that when the cosmos is destroyed its parts reassemble as *Purusa*, who, reconstructed, is fit for sacrifice again; and so the cycle continues, reassuringly, for eternity.

[line 2] It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and

whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality, when he grows beyond everything through food.

This brief exposition of *Purusa Sukta*'s role as a creation myth demonstrates very clearly that mythology cannot be dismissed merely as fallacy or pre-scientific attempts at explaining natural phenomenon. Instead it demonstrates that myth is important in defining and endorsing cultural identity and in providing existential reassurance—both themes that were identified by students in their preliminary discussions about creation mythology. *Purusa Sukta* functions aetiologically by revealing important truths about the origin and maintenance of Vedic society, and, by extension, the cosmos. It functions existentially by explaining temporal and spiritual ontology and by positioning the individual within the whole drama of creation (Mol, 1976:246). When viewed phenomenologically, if we reject mythology we disconnect from our pre-existent origins—in short, from our immortality. Therefore, as a creation myth, *Purusa Sukta* has direct and significant cultural and spiritual influence. By noticing these important functions of mythology in *Purusa Sukta* it is hoped that students will make similar observations across other religious contexts and therefore develop a sophisticated understanding of the meaning and purpose of myth in their wider study of religion.

Having considered mythology phenomenologically, attention turns to ritual. Students are introduced to the concept of ritual through a constructivist pedagogy similar to that adopted in approaching creation mythology. They are asked to think of a religious ritual with which they are familiar and identify the qualities that make the action ritualistic. Between them, the class usually achieves a comprehensive list that includes the following points: behaviour that is repeated, meaningful and has special significance. People have prescribed roles, wear special clothes and use special language. There is a sense of occasion and a set order of events. Something important is remembered and sometimes re-enacted. An individual's changing place in society is marked (for example weddings and other rites of passage). Ritual conforms to social expectations and so shapes behaviour. Rituals are usually compulsory rather than optional. Rituals are set apart from ordinary life and involve communication between human and the divine (see Bell in Segal, 2006:397-409). Two features that students

typically miss in their preliminary analysis of ritual are its restorative effects and its relationship with mythology. Nevertheless, students' understanding and evaluation of ritual theory is enhanced by this process of analysis because they can test the criteria of ritual action they have devised by applying it to practical examples of religious ritual.

Whilst *Purusa Suktadoes* not meet all the criteria of ritual identified by students outlined above, it is a good example of many of the themes that typify ritual practice. It demonstrates how ritual is frequently underpinned by a mythic narrative that makes the ritual obligatory and laden with meaning. Ritual re-enactment of Purusa's immolation is necessary to maintain the cosmic harmony established at that first ritual sacrifice. As a re-enactment, or re-visitation, of a mythic event, ritual suspends temporal time and reduces the gap between human and divine realms, creating a chord between the temporal 'now' and the mythic 'then' that connects human and divine realms (Eliade, 1961:57-59). Linking sacred and temporal realms through ritual re-enactment of a divine event has a restorative effect. In the example of *Purusa Suktathe* cosmos and the *Yajamana*, the commissioning agent of the ritual, are restored. The *Yajamana* recreates the role of Purusa to symbolise both sacrificial victim and divine recipient of the offering. Therefore the *Yajamana* benefits from the regenerative effects of the ritual. As a sacred event, the ritual is an environment of spiritual purity so the *Yajamana* undergoes purification, or *diksa*, before being permitted at the ritual (Malamoud, 1996:44). The process of creation through destruction, at the core of *Purusa Sukta*, is ubiquitously observed in the natural world; seed-plant, egg-bird, day-night. Vedic ritual sacrifice replicates this creative destruction. A literal re-creation of the ritual would amount to homicide and deicide, therefore substitution is adopted as a side-stepping device (Smith and Doniger, 1989:200). The Brahmin, the religious specialist officiating at the ritual, has exclusive knowledge of the processes of substitution because it is revealed in the *Veda* to which only he has access. The Brahmin's gnosis of how mantras activate equivalencies that connect ritual words and actions with their cosmic outcomes is essential for ritual efficacy. To be successful the ritual must be performed correctly in accordance with a meticulously prescribed pattern that is known only to the Brahmin. Therefore the Brahmin and the *Yajmana* both have prescribed roles and

their combined presence at the ritual is essential. Their respective roles in the ritual influence their behaviour in wider society. It is essential that the Brahmin's spiritual purity remains intact precluding him from tasks that may threaten this. The *Yajmana* has to be accepted in society, which is demonstrated by his wearing of the sacred thread and his married status (Olivelle, 1996:pxli). Therefore the roles undertaken by the ritual participants conform to, and arguably shape, social expectations of normative behaviour.

Ritual theory can appear complex to the novice student of religious studies. Cultural and philosophical distance may make Vedic ritual appear impenetrable. However a constructivist approach demonstrates this not to be the case. The brief explanation above of Vedic ritual informed by *Purusa Sukta* illustrates that it conforms closely to criteria for ritual identified by students based on rituals with which they are already familiar.

In our study of *Purusa Sukta*, students quickly pick up on how social order appears to be controlled by religious belief in the power of ritual and the divine endorsement of the social hierarchy. This evaluation, which is instinctive and typically requires minimal tutor input, introduces sociological theories about the function of religion, most obviously theories about the preservation of social order through the sacralisation of a shared worldview posited by scholars such as Durkheim and Mol. Security is found in groups, a lone individual is vulnerable. Social groupings depend on mutually accepted behaviour patterns. Mutually accepted and expected behaviour patterns are the social norms that constitute cultural identity that might also be described as social order (Mol 1976:9). Without general agreement and adherence to social order, society would not function and survival of the individual is jeopardised. Order is maintained by mutually accepted values arising from a shared perception of reality. A commonly accepted 'reality' is therefore essential to cultural identity. Reality is divinely generated and revealed in mythic narratives that serve to preserve social order by a process of sacralisation. Therefore, social order is religiously validated and secured as cultural identity (Mol, 1976:202). In the context of Vedic culture this equates to belief in the divine authority of the Veda that demands ritual action to maintain cosmic stability, which in turn demands adherence to the social hierarchy; all of which is encapsulated by the Vedic, and later Hindu, concept

of *dharma*, making morality a principal legislative force in society.

In *Purusa Sukta* the intermeshing structures of the universe and society are mythically sacralised to become part of the accepted Vedic worldview, or Vedic reality. Acceptance of cosmic and social order is congruent to accepting the authority of the Veda which is an essential marker of Vedic religious and cultural identity. The respective roles of the *brahmin*, *ksatriya*, *vaishya* and *shudra* are fixed by the divine authority of the Veda in which the hymn appears. These are further endorsed by the absolute necessity of correct ritual performance to ensure cosmic harmony. The *brahmin*'s prominent role as the ritual's official fixes his social status because the efficacy of the ritual is dependent on his perpetual state of spiritual purity. It is essential that the *yajamana* commissioning the ritual is an included member of Vedic society. The necessity of the ritual therefore creates Vedic social hierarchy. *Purusa Sukta* further exemplifies the functional role of myth and ritual in sacralising society by accurately reflecting the four fold caste system and adapting the cosmic structure to mirror the social hierarchy. It achieves this through the inclusion of the cardinal points to create a quadripartite universe instead of the more familiar tripartite universe.

[line 14] From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear. Thus they set the worlds in order.

The Veda deals with reality, so mythic or divine reality has to reflect what is empirically observed. Without becoming drawn into a discussion of Aryan migration theories, the Vedic cosmic structure had to accommodate the real presence of the *shudra* who, whilst kept outside of accepted Vedic society and so precluded from participating in ritual, were really there. Therefore the divine mythology that generates reality is adapted to accurately reflect social change (Smith, 1994:79-80; Tull, 1989:52). Here students observe a sharp contrast between phenomenological and functional approaches to the study of religion, even though both are etic perspectives. The functionalist approach to *Purusa Sukta* places historical precedence with the action of the ritual rather than the myth that validates it, whereas the phenomenological approach begins with the myth and seeks to understand ritual as a mechanism for re-enacting or re-visiting the divine truth of the mythic narrative.

In conclusion this paper has demonstrated that complex concepts

in the study of religion can be made accessible to students through constructivist pedagogies that encourages them build on their existing knowledge and experience. It has shown that *Purusa Sukta*, a fascinating piece of literature in its own right, can also effectively model different methodological approaches to the study of religion. Methods not examined in this paper can also be applied to *Purusa Sukta*. *Purusa Sukta* is by no means the only example on which to map methodologies in the study of religion; this is axiomatic. If the methods we use to study religion hold any validity, then there should be a range of appropriate methods for any of the topics that we teach and learn about. However, a fine balance needs to be struck so that methodology enhances students' academic study of religion and does not drown it (Chryssides and Geaves, 2007:3). Earlier in the paper I argued that learning about methods can effectively bridge subject silos in modular curricula and questioned whether methods should be integrated across the curriculum or housed in a dedicated module. In an ideal world (or university), my answer would be both. A dedicated module gives methods the space and status it deserves for religious studies students to realise that it is the lynch pin in successful academic study of religion. However, methods are meaningless unless applied to the practical examples of religion that students study across different subject areas. Until that ideal is realised, such decisions about curriculum design are more often than not dictated by timetable management than academic preference.

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