Praenotandum: This article was published in
Iva Doležalová, Břetislav Horyna & Dalibor Papoušek (eds.) 1996, *Religions in Contact: Select Proceedings of the Special IAHR Conference held at Brno, August 23-26, 1994*. Brno: Czech Society for the Study of Religions
Page numbers of the original publication are indicated between square brackets and in bold, as are any changes and the additions I have made.

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RELIGIONS IN CONTEST
THE AYODHYA RITUALS
OF CONFRONTATION

The aims of this article

One manner of contact between religions that merits sustained critical analysis is the violent encounter between communities which use their religions not only to demarcate their separate identities and maintain boundaries against each other but also in power contests for mobilising their adherents in situations of political instability in order to attempt to reform a society after their own ideals.

One instance of the use of religion for these purposes is examined in this article: the mass mobilisation campaigns which two RSS[1]-affiliated organisations, the VHP[2] and the BJP,[3] conducted between 1984 and 1993 in order to rouse the Hindus of India for the liberation of the god Ram from his 'prison' in the Babri mosque at Ayodhya. This religious goal was the centre piece, and mobilization motor, of the much more ambitious RSS political strategy of increasing the political, cultural and religious **[128]** power of the *Sangh parivar*, the family of RSS-affiliated Hindu reform organisations,[4] in order that it might realise the ideals that it pursued. These may be briefly summarised as (1) the de-secularisation of India; (2) the reduction of Muslims, and the believers of other religions of non-Indian origin, to their 'proper' places as aliens in Hindu India who would

[1] The *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 'National Volunteer Corps', is a cultural reform movement which was founded in September 1925 by the *brahmin* K.B. Hedgewar (1889-1940) at Nagpur in Maharashtra at a time when a wave of violent Hindu-Muslim riots was sweeping across India (Andersen & Damle 1987: 26). It aims to create cohesion and a nationalist militancy among Hindus through political and ritualized martial training in *akharas*, 'gymnasia'. It is supported mainly by urban upper caste Hindus, in particular those with middle class occupations and a need for upwards social mobility. These 'laymen' are schooled in RSS ideology by a dedicated cadre of celibate *pracharaks*, 'missionaries' which functions as the RSS's very able ideological and organisational backbone and, if assigned to do so, also run affiliated organisations. By 1985, the RSS claimed to have 25.000 *shakhas*, local units, in 18.000 villages and towns all over India with some 2 million full members and to reach some 5 million Hindus more through its affiliated organisations (Janssen 1989: 16). It is strongest in states with a high degree of Hindu-Muslim tension, such as Kerala, all 5.000 villages of which had *shakhas*, local units, which were attended in 1986 by more than a million people daily (Badhwar 1986: 34; see also Embree 1994: 617-652).

[2] The *Vishva Hindu Parisad* (Hindu World Federation) was founded in 1964 in order to unify Hindus in India and abroad, and to propagate it through an order of missionaries (Andersen & Damle 1987: 133; Janssen 1989: 18; Van der Veer 1994: 653-654).

[3] The *Bharatiya Janata* ('Indian People's') Party was founded in April 1980 when the RSS affiliated *Jana Sangh* section seceded from the *Janata* Party. The *Janata* Party itself was a merger, in May 1977, of the *Jana Sangh*, the 'political arm' of the RSS founded in 1951, and some other parties (Andersen & Damle 1987: 8n5, 224-237).

[4] The *Sangh parivar* consists of 38 organisations (Janssen 1989: 15). Apart from the VHP and BJP, its other important affiliate was the *Bajrang Dal*, its militant youth movement.

be suffered to stay on only if they agreed to become 'cultural Hindus', i.e. 'Hindu Muslims' and 'Hindu Christians';[5] (3) the unification of the Hindu 'community' by bridging the many deep rifts among the Hindus, in particular the social one between the upper castes and the lower ones, the untouchables and the *adivasi* (Aboriginals); but also the many religious ones between its major devotional streams and its numerous organisations of renouncers; and (4) to establish a unified, modern, militant *Hindu rashtra*, Hindu nation,[6] marked thoroughly by its *Hindutva* (Hindudom) nature, which must try to undo the 1947 partition and reconstitute the entire Indian subcontinent, including Sri Lanka and adjacent regions that were under Hindu influence at some time in the past, into a re-united *Bharata*, the Indian subcontinent as the land of Mother India.

The primary means used by the VHP/BJP in the 1984-1992 campaigns for rallying Hindus to their cause were ritual. An instrument for determining what ritual is and does in mono- and pluri-religious situations is, therefore, indispensable for the purposes of this article. As the study of religions, taken as the distinct academic discipline of *Religionswissenschaft*, **has so far** taken ritual in an unproblematic manner as referring to only the cultic behaviour of religious believers towards their postulated, meta-empirical beings, **and has** never developed theory on ritual, one must resort for the building blocks of a theory **on ritual** to especially anthropology of religion. That social-scientific branch of the study of religions did develop a rich and confusing variety of theories on rituals, but was constrained by the Durkheimian paradigm of ritual's role in socially and culturally unified society. Because of this legitimate but limited perspective it failed to reflect on ritual in situations of religious and cultural plurality; it also suffered from a number of other limitations because of its neglect of that field of study.

My first task, therefore, is to propose an operational definition of ritual that will serve as a heuristic instrument of analysis in my second part, in which I will briefly describe the complexes of pregnant Hindu core symbols which Ayodhya contains and how the VHP/BJP used them for their mass rousing rituals. I will end with seven anti-Durkheimian conclusions.

[129]

Two inclusive definitions of ritual[7]

I need not belabour the point that operational definitions are merely heuristic and analytical instruments and do not, as theoretical hypotheses, claim to define the universal and unvarying nature, or essence, of the object of study.[8]

If I chided the study of religions for not developing theory on ritual, then it should also be said in its defence that there are good reasons for its failure to do so. One is that there seems no need to problematise the concept of ritual; one 'knows' quite well in daily life what to understand by it. Another reason is that if ritual is made the subject of comparative analysis, it proves very difficult to define it unambiguously, because it is found in all human societies, in a huge morphological diversity and serving very many different functions. Though anthropologists of religion, and some other scholars have until now proposed at least some twenty different definitions of ritual,[9] I find none satisfactory and will, therefore, propose two of my own devising. They are one of the family resemblance type in which the thirteen marks, or dimensions, are enumerated, most, though not necessarily all, of which will be found in any ritual; and another of the operational kind that may serve as a heuristic and analytical instrument because it enumerates only those of ritual's morphological traits and functions for society which I consider more distinctive, and which I expect

[5] Cf. Van der Veer 1994: 656

[6] Cf. Van der Veer 1994: 653-654, 656-657

[7] Only a very few references are given in the theoretical part of this paper. For the full documentation, cf. Platvoet 1995a.

[8] See Platvoet 1991: 181-183; 1994b: 701-702

[9] See appendix I in Platvoet 1995a

will prove more effective for heuristic purposes and more fruitful in analysis. The family resemblance one is a synthetic definition and as such able to cover a wide variety of ritual, but it is a weak instrument of analysis. It is useful, however, because it provides the fund of data on ritual from which an operational definition with better analytical qualities may be developed.

Before I present these two definitions, I must remark that the definitions I propose are 'inclusive' ones: they cover both the cultic behaviour by believers towards their postulated beings and **also** those forms of 'secular' social intercourse between humans, between humans and some animals, and between certain animals that may be shown to be morphologically and functionally similar to religious ritual. I defend a substantive, 'exclusive' definition of 'religion', for one reason because the circumscription of the field and central object of study of our discipline is at stake here, and I reject inclusive definitions of 'religion' of the functional type for reasons which I have stated elsewhere.[10] In the matter of the definition of **[130]** 'ritual', however, it seems analytically much more profitable, though also much more difficult because of the huge extension of the field of study, to define ritual inclusively. This inclusive approach has become the established position in theory on ritual since the mid-seventies for all anthropologists, sociologists, politicologists and ethologists,[11] with the exception of scholars of religions who have either not reflected on ritual at all or have followed the religionist[12] views of Eliade.

Let me begin by defining ritual synthetically as that broad range of forms of social interaction between humans, and from humans to other, really or putatively addressable beings, which are marked by a sufficient number of the traits and functions, or dimensions, set out below to merit classification as 'ritual' conceived as a fuzzy, polythetic category of the 'family resemblance' type. I gather the traits and functions by which ritual may be analytically distinguished under the wider category of 'dimensions'. They comprise both the morphological and substantive traits of ritual as well as what it does and how it does it. The substantive/morphological dimensions of ritual are constituted by the fact that it is (1) interactive, (2) collective, and (3) customary behaviour. Its functional dimensions in respect of what ritual 'does' by the fact that it is (4) communicative, (5) expressive, (6) performative (i.e. constitutive of the social relationships or positions which are enacted in some rituals), (7) strategic, and (8) usually integrative but sometimes explosive[13] action; and its other functional dimensions, in respect of the means by which, and manners in which, ritual achieves what it does, are constituted by the fact that ritual (9) employs symbols in (10) aesthetic ways in (11) multi-media (12) performances, or enacted dramas, by means of (13) traditionalising innovation.

As I have dealt elsewhere[14] with each of these dimensions in detail, I will here restrict myself to only six remarks. My first remark respects the first and second dimensions. As interaction, ritual may be collective in minimal, modal, or maximal degrees, after the size of the 'audience' it engages, i.e. according to the number, the types, and the extent of the networks of social relationships which constitute its field of communication. As we will see below, the analysis of the composition of it's audience is important: whether it is a homogeneous congregation, composed of insiders only, or also has outsiders in attention, as spectators, as addressees, or even as functionaries; or whether it addresses several distinct 'audiences', some directly, *viva voce* and by face-to-face communication, and others indirectly, e.g. through some other means of communication, such as rumours, or by modern media technology, live or delayed; and whether these other 'audi-

[10] Platvoet 1991, 1994b
[11] For a summary of that history, see appendix II in Platvoet 1995a
[12] On 'religionism', as an important methodological position in the academic study of religions, cf. Platvoet 1994a
[13] (8) may, however, also be subsumed under (7).
[14] Platvoet 1995a

ences', which are not in physical attention, are, or are not, for some reason gravely concerned about, or in some manner deeply involved in, the ritual.

[131] My second remark respects the third and thirteenth dimensions. Ritual is, on the one hand, a standardised flow, or sequence, of conventional behaviour **that** is structured and shaped by the rules of precedence and protocol governing the relationships that are enacted in it. On the other hand, it also has a capacity for traditionalising innovation: changes, even quite fundamental ones may be introduced, e.g. in times of cultural or religious revivalism,[15] but they are quickly routinised and made normative. **Their innovations are hidden because they are perceived as 'tradition'.** Ritual's formality also has distancing effects upon its participants: it prevents spontaneity by separating the actors from their spontaneous selves; it reduces them, for the time of the ritual, to roles, views and strategies that are consonant with the ritual itself. If it allows spontaneity and chaos, it does so in prescribed times, places, and style.

My third remark concerns the fourth, fifth and sixth dimensions. Society is expressed in ritual by the very fact and act of its members partaking in it. Leach terms this ritual's communicative dimension, but in this sense it is communicative only for the analytical eye of the sociologists who use ritual as a means of studying society, be it a very stubborn one which reveals society to sociologists in virtually as dark and disguised manners as it does to its actors and participants, for the numerous messages which a ritual sends about society are sent at the latent level. At this level, it also transmits values and instils 'proper' attitudes. But a ritual also always has a manifest level of communication. **At that level,** a definite matter may sometimes be **communicated by means of** emphatic messages, **but** more often socio-cultural relations are expressed by means of phatic messages of diffuse content.[16] By enacting, and communicating about, social relationships, ritual re-affirms, re-creates, or may performatively constitute the relationships expressed, but it does this in a process of constant adaptation to the developments, cultural, socio-structural, religious, as well as political and economical, which prevail in its society.

My fourth remark respects the ninth, eleventh and twelfth dimensions, i.e. the means by which the manifest and latent messages and norms are expressed in rituals. They are the complexes of dense, polysemous, consonant symbols **that** are constantly being renewed in each culture. These symbol complexes are effective also because they often evoke powerful emotions, and thereby instil the values and attitudes a society cherishes. Our cultures have provided us with many media for expressing messages and values: the symbolic languages of the body, the ways in which we dress and ornament it; speech, and other means of presenting oneself or a message, norm or attitude, such as music, dance, trance, and theatre; but also gift-giving, the manipulation of objects; the manner of ordering the space in which a ritual is conducted; the external diachronic order into which a ritual is inserted and the internal one by which it is itself ordered; and the ordering, or self-ordering, of the participants, and roles which they are allotted, or allot themselves, in the ritual.

[132] My fifth remark concerns the tenth, again the eleventh, and the seventh dimensions, all three respecting the manners, and style, in and by which ritual achieves its manifest and latent goals. It achieves them by an aesthetically pleasing, evocative presentation **that** alerts attention and keeps it focused. In its full-blown examples, ritual may produce by these means in the participants a concentration of attention, an enrapture, so extreme that they experience a feeling of 'flow', and a dissociation from 'ordinary' life; in its normal examples, they establish an awareness of the event, and purposes served, as set apart from the normal routine of daily life. The effectiveness of ritual in achieving its goals is to a high degree determined by the multi-media, re-

[15] But also in undramatic times; for an explanation of the creative facility with which humans construct new, 'properly' shaped rituals or elements of rituals, cf. e.g. Lawson & McCauley 1990, Boyer 1992, Boyer 1993

[16] **On 'phatic' and 'emphatic' communication, cf. Platvoet 1982: 27**

dundant ways in which it expresses the messages sent, the values to be adopted, and the norms to be maintained, at several levels simultaneously by different languages and codes, thus transmitting the same message, value, norm or attitude symphonically in numerous transformations, each repeating, and thus redundant of, the other. This redundancy is, however, so normal in ritual that participants do not notice it or pass it over as perfectly 'natural'. That sets in operation the important mechanism, analysed by Bourdieu, of 'misrecognition', i.e. of ritual serving strategic goals of which the participants are unaware, and achieving them because they have been conditioned to see them as 'normal' and 'natural'.[17]

My last remark, therefore, concerns the seventh, or strategic, dimension. The goals of ritual are not only those of manifest communication, but also of exercising power by effectively hiding **the** use **of power** by the mechanism of 'misrecognition' which I have just described.

Now, all this presents us with adequate tools **for a Durkheimian** analysis of ritual in a unified congregation or social community**. B**ut they are insufficient for **the** analysis **of rituals** in situations of plurality, religious, ethnic, cultural, and otherwise. The analytical attention of students of ritual has until now been virtually exclusively centred on ritual as a means of studying society and more recently on the mechanisms of power hidden in ritual, because they studied ritual, in the tradition initiated by Robertson Smith and made paradigmatic by Durkheim, exclusively as the conventional behaviour of unified corporate groups for expressing and maintaining relationships within them.

The analysis of the use of rituals in situations of cultural and religious plurality, however, shows a number of features that cannot be accounted for by present theory of ritual as developed **after** the Durkheimian model. They are:

1. ritual may serve manifest strategic goals;
2. ritual may be a one-time only event and serve explicitly planned purposes for the achievement of which the ritual is carefully designed and constructed;
3. rituals, in particular modern ones, may have a much wider audience than the culturally or religiously unified congregation that is in attention when a ritual is conducted in a mono-religious, cultural, or ethnic situation. They may have audiences of several sorts, constituted by direct and indirect communication, the latter not only through rumour but nowadays especially **[133]** through the modern news media. These non-unified audiences may be found in the locality, the region, the nation, and, exceptionally, the entire world, depending on the impact which the news media expect the messages sent in a ritual to have in any of these ever-widening circles. The 'implosion' of our world effected by modern media technology has created fundamental changes for ethnic, cultural, and religious communities. For instance, they allow intensive contact between religious or ethnic diaspora communities and the communities 'at home'.

The integration of these data into a theory of ritual demands a number of additional analytical distinctions such as those between

1. the direct and the indirect communication fields of a ritual;
2. the direct, or overt, and the indirect or intended addressee;
3. the overt and the intended meanings of messages versus those implicit or latent in them;
4. the interpretation of the messages after the codes in the heads of the addressers and the direct addressees, and that according to the different codes of the several audiences of indirect addressees.

It should also be stated that these processes of meaning detection are not constituted by each of these groups rationally and mechanically decoding the meanings present in a symbolic behaviour for them, but as much by the irrational interpretation fostered by the contexts of either accommo-

[17] Cf. e.g. Bourdieu 1990: 26; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 51, 168, 171-172, 194-195

dation and integration, or those of contest and conflicts and the feelings of hope and amity, or fear and hostility which each bring into play.

Let me end this section on the theory of ritual by offering, on the basis of the data and reflections presented, as my operational definition of ritual that it is

1. that ordered sequence of stylised social behaviour that
2. may be distinguished from ordinary interaction between humans by its alerting qualities which enable it to alert and keep the attention of its audiences – its 'congregation' as well as a wider public – focused and cause them to perceive it as a special event, at a special place and/or time, for a special occasion and/or with a special message; which
3. it effects by the use of the appropriate, culturally specific, polysemous pregnant core symbols, and
4. by sending the messages and stimuli contained in them in several redundant transformations by multi-media performance, thereby
5. achieving not only the smooth, un- or barely noticed transmission of a multitude of messages – some overt, most of them covert – and stimuli, but
6. also serving the strategic purposes – most often latent, sometimes manifest – of those who perform it, either only *ad intra*, within unified congregations, or *ad extra* as well as *ad intra* in situations of plurality.

[134]

Ayodhya

Ayodhya[18] is nowadays a suburb of Faizabab, a town in Uttar Pradesh. It has a population of 30,000 which may swell to over 1 million in the pilgrimage season. It has over 3,000 Hindu temples, and 26 mosques, one-third of its population being Muslim.[19] It is also a minor place of pilgrimage for Jains who believe that the first of their preceptors, Rishabdev, was born there; and for Buddhists because their scripture says that the Buddha meditated in the town of Saketa, which Buddhists identify with Ayodhya. Hindus, however, form the overwhelming majority of pilgrims. Most come because Ayodhya is situated on the river Sarayu and as such a *tirtha*, 'ford', on which *purohits*, 'pilgrimage-priests', may perform rites of purification for pilgrims, cremate corpses, conduct psychopompic rituals for their recently deceased, or feed their ancestors. Van der Veer calls this 'the brahmanical ritual complex'.

Many, however, come for the cult of the god Rama, which Van der Veer terms 'the spiritual complex' of Ayodhya. The foundations of it are in the *Ramayana*[20] which says that in *tretayuga*, a million or so years ago, when humans were much more holy, healthy and happy than they are now, and society nearly perfect, Rama ruled from Ayodhya. As *avatar* ('descent') of Vishnu, Rama is depicted as the just ruler of a perfect kingdom, and as the paragon of man, being both a valiant martial hero as well as a loving, yet strict husband. In the *Ramcharitmanas* ('Lake of the deeds of Rama) by Tulsidas (1532-1623), written at the time when the cult of Rama had begun to develop strongly in Northern India, these teachings culminated in the belief that Rama did not die but ascended to heaven at the end of his life. Rama is now one of the most popular Hindu gods, particularly in the Hindi speaking parts of North India.

The *bhakti* cult of Rama as a god in heaven was in particular promoted by the Ramanandi order, a loose organisation of three types of ascetics: the *tyagis* or peripatetic renouncers; the *nagas* or naked warrior ascetics; and the *rasiks* or doting temple-dwelling servants of the divine couple,

[18] On Ayodhya as a dense complex of consonant religious symbols, cf. Bakker 1986, 1991; Van der Veer 1982, 1985, 1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1989

[19] Of the roughly 10,000 Muslims of Ayodhya, 6,000 are Shi'ites, the rest Sunnite.

[20] ***Ramayana*, 'Rama's Journey', is one of the two great Indian ancient Sanskrit epics. 'It depicts the duties of relationships, portraying ideal characters like the ideal servant, the ideal brother, the ideal wife and the ideal king' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramayana).**

Rama and Sita. **Whereas** the latter find their bliss in the cult of *Ramsaguna*, 'Rama qualified': Rama as he may be sacramentally **[135]** beheld (*darshan*) in his phenomenal forms (*murti*) of temple statues which may be worshipped daily, and in the plays (*Ramlila*) in which the epic stories are recited; and **while** the *nagas* have a special devotion for the god Hanuman, the general of the armies of monkeys that assisted Rama in his battle against Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka (the South), the *tyagis* direct their devotion to *Ramnirguna*, 'Ram unqualified': Rama as a mode of the unqualified supreme reality, the essence of which they worship in his name (*Ram Nam*) which **they regard as** his phonic body, or in small, form- and faceless black ammonite stones (*shalagram*).

Ayodhya **is** the city where Rama was believed to have been born as the son of the ruler**;** from where he went out to win by contest his faithful wife Sita**;** which he left for an exile of fourteen years – which he accepted tough it was forced upon him by a trick of his father's second wife –**;** and to which he returned after the battle against Ravana to rule from it as the paradigmatic *dharmaraja*[21]**;** and where he ascended into heaven**. Ayodhya** is **therefore** a sacred story in stone for the Rama devotee, **for most of** its temples, temple ponds, monasteries and other spots **have** been dedicated to commemorate some event in his life. **O**ne of these **is** *Ramjanmabhumi*, 'Ram's birthplace'. **It** was at the centre of the tensions between Hindus and Muslims in the **1980s and early 1990s**.

The Babrimashid dispute, 1853-1980[22]

Ramjannmabhumi is in a corner of *Ramkot*, 'Rama's fortress', a steep hill in the centre of Ayodhya that served as its citadel. *Hanumangarhi*, the Hanuman-fortress, which is the major residence in Ayodhya of the naked *nagas* and a temple of Hanuman, is also on it not far from *Ramjanmabhumi*. A mosque stood on that spot**. It [136]** was called the *Babrimashid* because it been built there in 1528 on the orders of Babur Shah (1483-1530), who had founded the Moghul empire in 1526.

Relations between Hindus and Muslims were not strained in Ayodhya till the middle of the 19th century. In the last few years before 1856, when Awadh, the kingdom in which Ayodhya was situated, was annexed by the British, a power vacuum prevailed despite the pact of 'protection' which the English had concluded in 1816 with the *Nawab*, **the** Shi'a ruler of Awadh. The local dispute over the *Babrimashid* dispute has its roots in events in this period. Before or by the early 1850s, traditions had begun to circulate in Ayodhya that a Hindu temple, devoted to Rama's place of birth, had stood in *Ramjanmabhumi* and had been destroyed on the orders of Babur Shah in 1528 to make room for the Babri mosque. Serious disputes between Hindus and Muslims followed when Ramanandi ascetics began to claim the spot and to attempt to seize it. Perhaps as a countermove, the less than 1,000 Sunnite Muslims of Ayodhya asserted in 1853 that a mosque had stood in the precincts of *Hanumangarhi* and demanded that they be permitted to pray there. When they launched an attack on *Hanumangarhi*, a pitched battle between them and *nagas* ensued, in which the *nagas* drove the Muslims back into the Babri mosque killing seventy. Thereupon the rumour was spread among the Muslims of Awadh that the *nagas* had destroyed the *Babrimashid*, upon which a *fakir*, Maulvi Amir Ali, proclaimed the *jihad* and marched with a force of 2,000 on Ayodhya[23]. The Nawab sent a regiment commanded by the British Colonel Barlow to

[21] The ruler who maintains perfect moral, spiritual and social order.

[22] On the developments in this period, see, apart from the publications by Bakker and van der Veer, the essays by Gopal, Hasan, Noorani, Panikkar, and Srivastava in Gopal 1993a, and further literature cited in Platvoet 1995b.

[23] Among the *fakir*'s followers were a great number of 'people from the lower castes *among the Hindus* and Muslims' (Srivastava 1993: 43; my italics).

stop him. He did so in a fierce battle **that** resulted in heavy losses of lives on both sides. The head of Maulvi Amir Ali was sent to the Nawab.[24]

In 1859,[25] the British erected an iron railing in the outer court of the Babri mosque in order to separate the inner court and the mosque, to be used exclusively by Muslims, from the three spots in the outer court, at which Hindus had since long been permitted to worship: the *Ramchabutra*, the *Sitarasoi* ('Sita's kitchen'), and a tree in the utmost corner under which stood statues of a number of Hindu gods. Each 'community' was to enter their place of worship by **a** different entrance. Though some litigation over *Ramjanmabhumi* continued in the colonial period (1856 1947) and Ayodhya suffered some 'communal' violence because of the steady increase of tensions between Hindus and Muslims under British **rule,**[26] in general the relations between Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya were relatively peaceful.

However, in the aftermath of the partition in 1947, when local Congress politicians revived the *Ramjanmabhumi* issue for electoral purposes, relations **[137]** between Hindus and Muslims became tense again **in Ayodhya**. A Hindu committee was formed that organised uninterrupted recitation of the *Ramayana* in front of the Babri mosque. Tensions exploded into violence on 23 December 1949, after statues of Rama and Sita had been smuggled into the Babri mosque in the night and it had been announced that Rama (and Sita) had miraculously 'appeared' in the Babri mosque. The District Commissioner with RSS sympathies, K.K. Nayar, moreover posted an armed guard as a watch over the statues to prevent their removal from the mosque. After police and the army had quelled the riots between Muslims and Hindus that followed, court orders were issued forbidding entry into the mosque to both **Muslims and Hindus**. The District Commissioner Nayar was ordered to remove the statues but refused to comply. Litigation for the right to worship in the mosque was started by both Muslims and Hindus, but the courts never reached a verdict on the case except to grant to a Hindu committee the permission to perform rites for the statues once a year, on the night of 22 December. The continuous devotional singing of the Ramayana was also continued. The attempt of Rama devotees to regain *Ramjanmabhumi* had resulted in Rama being imprisoned in a Muslim jail.

The campaigns for Rama's liberation, 1984 - 6.12.1992[27]

Sikh-Hindu violence dominated India's political scene in the early eighties because of the attack of government troops on the Golden Temple at Amritsar in July 1984 in order to dislodge Bhindrawale from it, and the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards on 31 October 1984. Hindu-Muslim tensions, however, increased markedly in the 1980s also due to widely publicized news about (1) the conversions of untouchables to Islam in Meenakshipuram in South India in 1981-1982; (2) the violent reactions of Muslims in India to the news of the killing of over one thousand Muslims by 'tribals' (*adivasi*) in Assam in 1984; (3) Muslim outrage, in 1985, over the ruling of the Supreme Court in the Shah Bano case that this divorced Muslim woman was entitled to financial support from her former husband under the (secular) law of India[28], which Muslims vehemently condemned as an infringement of the immunity from state legislation granted to them in matters of personal law; and (4) the law undoing the Shah Bano ruling which Rajiv Gandhi forced through parliament in 1986.

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[24] See Srivastava 1993: 42-44

[25] This is the date given by Srivastava (1993: 45). Documents pertaining to a litigation in 1885, speak of the construction of a boundary wall 'in 1855 after the fight [over Hanumangarhi] between Hindus and Muslims'. That fight, which Srivastava dates in 1853, is dated by most authors in 1855.

[26] For an analysis of the factors involved in the increase in communalist tensions in the colonial period and references to the abundant literature, cf. Platvoet 1995b.

[27] Apart for Bakker 1991 and van der Veer 1987a and 1988, see for further references Platvoet 1995b.

[28] Thakur 1993: 649

The RSS *sangh parivar* responded to these events by organizing a number of campaigns in order to further rouse the growing anti-Muslim sentiments among **[138]** Hindus. They were four, of which only the first one, the 1983 *Ekatmatayagna*, 'sacrifice for unity', campaign was not focused on Ayodhya. The others were the 1984-1986 *Ramarathayagna*, 'sacrifice for Rama's war chariot'; the 1989 *Ramshila*, 'Rama bricks', campaign; and the 1990-1992 *Ramarathyatra*, 'Rama's war chariot processions', and *karsevak* ('voluntary service') campaign. I briefly describe these four in order to be able to analyze the ritual elements in them, in particular the religious rituals.

The 1983 Ekatmatayagna campaign[29]

It is essential to include the *Ekatmatayagna* campaign in 1983 here in order to understand the morphology and success of the Ayodhya-centred campaigns that followed it. It was a one-month, nationwide drive organised by the RSS religious arm, the VHP, for funds for its missionary and social work among low caste communities in order to forestall that more Hindus were converted to Islam or Christianity and reconvert them who had. It brought in 30 million rupees. It was organized by a committee on which sat religious leaders from the whole width of Hindu religious diversity, including the *Arya Samaj*.[30] The campaign consisted of three processions, each traversing the whole length or width of India and all three converging mid-way on the RSS headquarters at Nagpur on 29 November to celebrate this 'confluence of the three rivers'.[31] It was complemented by ninety subsidiary ones that joined a major one at some point. Their routes took them through all the towns and districts with a high incidence of Hindu-Muslim strive. All in all, they covered 85,000 kilometres and reached 60 million people. The central piece of the processions were two big trucks, one with an eight foot high brass *kalasha* (vessel) containing four hundred litres of *gangajal*, water from India's holiest river, the Ganges, and a portrait of *Bharat Mata*, 'Mother India', depicted as a young goddess sitting astride a lion; and the other one with a smaller *kalasha* containing water from other rivers. The water was distributed along the way to temples for the ritual bathing of its deities and sold in bottles; posters of *Bharat Mata* were also sold in great numbers. Water from local rivers and temple ponds was added to the *kalashas* to symbolize the unity of Hindu India. The success of these processions enabled the VHP and RSS to strengthen, and increase the number of, their local organisations greatly.

[139]

1984-1986, the Ramarathayagna campaign

In view of the **upcoming** national elections in late 1984, the VHP launched a *Ramarathayagna* campaign from Sitamarhi (Sita's 'birthplace') in Bihar on 25 September 1984 **to** Ayodhya and then on to Delhi in order to put pressure on the political parties **to accede to RSS demand** that mosques be cleared from spots held sacred by Hindus. The main feature of the VHP procession was a truck carrying large statues of Rama and Sita, and a banner saying *Bharat Mata ki jay*, 'Mother India, hail'. When it arrived at Ayodhya, in the evening of 6 October 1984, it failed to stir up the emotions there it had roused in other places. The rally on the banks of the Sarayu on the following day drew only some 7000 people – inflated by the media to 50,000 and even 100.000 – who listened to speeches from religious leaders from many different regions from India

[29] On the *Ekatmatayagna* campaign, see especially Janssen 1989; additional references may be found in Platvoet forthcoming-b.

[30] Mitra 1983: 36

[31] An explicit reference to one of the 'holiest' spots in Hindu India, the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna at Prayag, the most important *tirtha* on the Ganges, where these two rivers are believed to be joined by the (invisible) 'river' Sarasvati **that is believed to** descend from heaven at this place (Janssen 1989: 28, 34; Klosternmaier 1989: 313; Eck 1991: 146).

and from all Hindu religious divisions. They were seated in front of a large painting of armed Muslims attacking unarmed Hindu ascetics. The assassination of Indira Gandhi on 31 October caused the campaign to fall flat. The BJP, the RSS political arm, lost heavily in the general election, being reduced from 16 to 2 seats in lower house (*Lok Sabha*) of parliament.

However, the VHP booked major successes in 1985. On 7-8 April it convened the first *Dharmasansad* ever in Delhi: an assembly of over 900 representatives from 'just about every Hindu sect and order of sanyasis and sadhus [...] who took a vow [...] to eschew sectarian differences [...] and intra-religious litigation, and to fight for the purification of Hinduism and the propagation of Hindu nationalism'.[32] The meeting set D-day, for the liberation of Rama from his prison, on 9 March 1986. Thereupon, the VHP resumed the *Ramarathayathras*, in October 1985, conducting six processions with a large painting of Lord Ram in jail as the centre piece through the rural areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They had an electrifying effect. That increase in tension convinced Rajiv Gandhi, then in the process of pacifying the Muslims over the Shah Bano case, that he must also appease the Hindu majority. As a result, when the young lawyer, U.C. Pandey, filled a suit with the Faizabab judge K.M. Pandey on 1 February 1986 **requesting** that the gates of the Babri mosque be opened to Hindus in order that they might have *darshan* (sight) of Rama and Sita, the judge consented. The gates were opened within an hour, thousands of Hindus streamed into the mosque, and serious communal violence broke out in the cities of North India.

[140]

1989, the Ramshilas campaign

Though Hindus now had unlimited access to the mosque and Muslims were debarred by court order from using it, the RSS continued its campaign for the liberation of Rama from his Muslim jail. It demanded that the Babri mosque be demolished and that a huge temple for Rama be built on *Ramjanmabhumi*, to undo the affront of so many mosques having been built by an invading religion on the spots most holy to Hindus as an expression of its political **hegemony** over Hindus and its disdain for their religion. The method for the further mobilisation of sentiments chosen by the VHP was to have 300.000 bricks baked with the inscription *Jay Sri Ram*, 'victory to Lord Rama', and **to** send these out all over India and the Hindu diaspora with the request that solemn *shilapujas*, rituals for the consecration of bricks after an ancient Vedic model, be conducted in every temple, village, and town, and that donations be collected from every Hindu household for the rebuilding of the temple of Rama for which the first stone was to be laid on 9 November 1989.

As a result, *shilapujas* were conducted throughout the Hindu world in October 1989. In India, the bricks were put on decorated palanquins after they had been consecrated in the local temple and carried from door to door for the collection of donations in exchange for coupons with a colour picture of the temple to be built for Rama. Then they were carried to the block centres where *mahayagnas*, ceremonies for the presentation of 'major sacrifices', were held. From there they were solemnly transported back to Ayodhya in the first week of November, with particular display of Hindu sentiments in Muslim areas**;** which led to violence in several towns and districts. Permission to build the temple was not granted, but Rajiv Gandhi, hoping for electoral gains, permitted the *shilanyas* ritual of laying the first stone for the **projected** temple at a distance of sixty metres form the gate of the Babri mosque**. He** took part in the ceremony himself. To emphasise RSS opposition to caste divisions, a *Harijan* (untouchable) was selected for **the honour of** laying the first stone. In the election, Gandhi suffered a major defeat and the BJP a major

[32] Badhwar 1986: 34. Ianssen (1989: 17) reports that it was attended by 558 delegates representing 76 Hindu religious groups. Earlier meetings of Hindu religious leaders organised by the VHP had taken place on 29 August 1964 – when the VHP was founded – in Bombay; on 22 January 1966 in Allahabad; in 1979, also in Allahabad; and on 20 June 1982 in Delhi. It was only at this meeting that the VHP acquired its final shape (cf. Van der Veer 1994: 653-655).

victory: it went from 2 to 88 seats in the *Lok Sabha*, **the 'C**ouncil of the People' (House of Commons).

1990-6.12.1992, the Ramarathayatra and kar sevak campaign

The political arm of the RSS, the BJP, having become a considerable political force **by this electoral victory**, incited its leader, Advani, to play a major role in the mass mobilisation campaigns **the** VHP **and** BJP **together organised in 1990**. In September 1990, Advani led a 10,000 kilometre long 'procession of the war chariot of Rama'**. Its** central element was a jeep rebuilt into an oversize ancient war chariot on which the lotus flower, BJP's electoral symbol – and **the** symbol of liberating knowledge – and the Ohm mantra were prominently displayed. Exhorting his audiences the show *lokshakti*, the 'power of the people', he urged them to follow him to Ayodhya to perform *Sri Ramakarseva*, 'voluntary service for Lord Rama', as *Rambhakti*, devotion for Rama in order to 'build his temple there, and only there'[33], as was the slogan of this *Ramarathayatra*. When he entered **[141]** Ayodhya on 30 October 1990, he had 100,000 *karsevaks* in his train. On 31st October, they tried to storm the mosque **that** was guarded by thousands of troops. Thirty volunteers were killed in the battle with the troops**. S**ome *karsevaks*, however, managed to break through the cordon and the fences and scramble to the top of the *Babrimashid*. Their waving flags from it was flashed worldwide over the news that day, as did that about the communal violence in the days that followed. Advani was arrested and detained for some time.

The campaign and event brought huge profit for the BJP in the elections of 1991. It increased its seats from 88 to 119 in the Lok Sabha, and, more importantly, it gained absolute majorities in the parliaments of four states in the North: Uttar Pradesh in which Ayodhya itself was situated; Himachal Pradesh; Madhya Pradesh; and Rajasthan. A tense and often confused relation came about between the BJP-controlled government of Uttar Pradesh and the central government, in particular after 31 October 1992, when a *Dharmasansad* of over 5000 Hindu religious leaders announced that the *kar seva* for the rebuilding of the temple would be resumed on 6 December 1992 and all over India *Agnishapathdivas*, ritual fire services, were held at which *karsevaks* took the vow that they would continue their service till the temple had been built. While the government of Uttar Pradesh let it be known that the *karseva* would be ritual only and the mosque would remain undisturbed, Advani and another BJP leader undertook six mini *Ramarathayatras* on 1 December announcing that the voluntary service would be 'with bricks and shovel'.

The rank and file of the 200,000 to 300,000 *karsevaks* **that** poured into Ayodhya after 1 December, however, meant more thorough business: the 40,000 members of *Bajrang Dal*, the RSS militant youth movement were to function as storm troopers and assist a task force of 1200, that had been trained to destroy the mosque quickly and efficiently, in climbing onto the roof and the domes of the *Babrimashid*. The other major roles in the events of 6 December were played by the troops posted around the mosque by the government of Uttar Pradesh, which offered only limited resistance at first and none at all when the *karsevaks* had broken through their ranks; and the government of Uttar Pradesh itself which ordered the Magistrate of Faizabab to recall the troops of the central government when these were on their way to prevent the destruction of the Babri mosque. **I**t **was** reduced to rubble in less than six hours**. In this** operation four *karsevaks* were killed and six hundred injured. **Afterwards, while** a part of the 'volunteers' fanned out into the Muslim quarter of Ayodhya, where a hundred houses were burnt down and ten Muslims killed, the others built a makeshift temple on the rubble, in which they re-installed the statues of Rama and Sita. **They also** built a five foot high brick wall around it which they completed the next day.

[33] *Mandir wohin banayenge*, 'the temple, we will built it only there'.

From then on, the *karsevaks* began to leave Ayodhya by train and bus. They offered only a show of resistance when the government troops did arrive to take over the terrain and the 'temple' in the dead of the night of 7 December.

Communal violence followed nationwide, with 1700 dead and 5000 wounded. The central government dismissed the four BJP governments, banned the RSS, BJP, VHP and Bajrang Dal, arrested their leaders and forbade Hindus to enter the makeshift temple. The latter ban was, however, lifted by local authorities within **[142]** a month**. T**he central government also released the leaders of the banned *sangh parivar* shortly afterwards. The stalemate between the RSS and the central government – between the proponents of the Hinduisation and the secularisation of India – has continued ever since: **so far** neither the temple of Rama nor the *Babrimashid* has been rebuilt.

Seven anti-Durkheimian conclusions

By applying the analytical instruments developed in the first half of this paper to the data presented on the Ayodhya rituals of confrontation, a number of conclusions may be drawn that cannot be fitted into the Durkheimian paradigm **that has so far been dominant** in the study of ritual. I will briefly set out seven:

1. The data presented prove that in plural situations rituals may also explode a society instead of uni**fy** it. It should be added, however, that this finding does not undo ritual's perhaps universal function of unifying a congregation. Exactly by its explosive drive *ad extra*, a ritual increases its uni**fying** potential *ad intra*. However sad this is in view of the 'ethnic cleansing' in so many regions nowadays, it seems still true that there is no better means for increasing internal solidarity than to have close at hand an external enemy who may be presented and perceived as a threat to the community.[34]

2. The data presented also show that a ritual may be expressly meant to be explosive, and, moreover, that it may be invented, designed, and constructed for that very purpose. Rituals, therefore, need not always be the standardized repetition of earlier, conventionalized behaviour. It must, however, use elements of it and routinize innovation.

3. This proves also that a ritual need not be part of a continuing sequence of formalized behaviour but may be a one-event-only behaviour with no predecessor and no successor. Rituals may be invented to serve purposes limited to a specific historical moment and place**, e.g.** in order to fight a special battle in the balance of power in a plural society, or in order to achieve the different purpose of integration and accommodation in a pluralist one[35]. Rituals will most often, but not always, be repetitive events.

[143]

4. The data presented also indicate that it is wrong to oppose ritual as strategy of power, to ritual as a communication process in which messages of various kinds are sent, values transmitted and attitudes instilled. The Ayodhya rituals of confrontation show that ritual may be a strategy of power by the very fact that it has communicative properties.

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[34] For a more detailed analysis, cf. Platvoet 1995b.

[35] **By** 'plural societies' **I understand** communities **in which** different cultures, ethnic identities and/or religions coexist **that** severely restrict **and impose all kinds of rules and taboos upon** the communication between the members of its communities. Examples are apartheid, pillar, colour bar, and caste societies. **In** all **of them** strong 'communalist', religious and ethnic tensions are endemic. **By '**pluralist societies', **I understand communities in which** interaction between such groups is not **restricted but rather** generally encouraged. On this important distinction, cf. also Platvoet & Van der Toorn 1995.

5. The data presented also imply that ritual need not only use misrecognition as its sole tool of achieving its strategic goals, **for it** may **also** pursue them openly and explicitly. It should be added**, however,** that the goals, pursued openly by explicit communication to a ritual's several audiences, are additional to, and superimposed upon, **the** several other, latent power goals **of a ritual**. **For a** ritual seems the more uni**fying** the more it is explosive. **S**o it may also achieve its hidden goals more effectively and efficiently when it pursues explicit strategic goals.

6. The data presented also make clear that inter-group rituals, whether of confrontation as I have described, or of accommodation and integration, require a much expanded kit of conceptual tools for locating, analysing, comparing, and theorizing about, them. They respect in particular the concepts of:

1. the diverse audiences addressed;
2. the direct and indirect fields of communication;
3. the explicit and implicit messages sent;
4. the several sorts of communication processes in the different fields of communication: the *viva voce* sermon, speech, song, ritual act, etc., versus rumour, news coverage, and so on;
5. the different structures, in terms of the flow of events, of the several, often redundant communication processes operating simultaneously or in close connection in a ritual, and the different roles played in them by the persons participating and by the symbolic means of communication which they use, etc.; and
6. the codes, widely diverging and even squarely opposed, which determine the interpretation of the messages received and perceived in each communication process in a ritual.

7. The data presented sustain the heuristic and analytical usefulness of the inclusive definition of ritual **I have presented**. Its use may be justified on two additional grounds of which the second has a markedly anti-Durkheimian sting. The first is that the data presented and numerous other from anthropology of religion show that religious ritual, taken in the Tylorian, substantive meaning of cult towards unseen beings, cannot be clearly separated from 'secular' ritual, but is most often – i.e. in most societies, places and periods, with a few significant exceptions – intertwined and fused with **secular ritual**. No Durkheimian anthropologist or sociologist will find this a remarkable statement, but it must be pointed out that the clear and clean opposition in dogmatic dualist religions, such as Christianity, between religious ritual and secular **ceremonyal** behaviour provided Durkheim with the material and the model for developing his general theory of ritual.

The second reason is that though ritual – of whatever kind – evokes the felt experience that it is a distinct event and is therefore distinguishing behaviour, the data presented in this article and in most other ethnographies of ritual also show that ritual cannot usually be separated clearly and cleanly from ordinary social **[144]** interaction. It usually emerges from it by a number of diffuse transitions, as a mountain or hill rises gradually from a landscape. The clearly set apart behaviour towards the 'sacred', sharply opposed to that towards the 'profane', 'discovered' by Durkheim in Australian Aboriginal religion and cherished by his disciples, does, or did, exist in e.g. dualist religions, but is not a universal mark of ritual behaviour, certainly not of the Australian Aboriginal societies in which Durkheim thought he had discovered it. He made an exception paradigmatic and **extrapolated** it **to** the ritual behaviour of 'primitives', because he took it to be a universal mark of ritual and as belonging to its very nature or essence. If we **replace** his essentialist ap-

proach **by** an operational one, we may see with Bell[36] that ritual is the ritualization, for strategic purposes, of ordinary interactive, social, communicative, strategic behaviour by the often gradual introduction into it of the marks and mechanisms that cause it to shift, usually smoothly, back and forth into a ritual. Ritual is ordinary social interaction ritualised into a moment of distinctiveness. It is the hills and mountains in the landscape of our social life, most of them by smooth elevation though some stand out in sharp separation as if marked by steep cliffs or deep gorges.

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[36] See Bell 1992: 7-8, 74, 89, 140-141, *passim*.

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