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# Book Review: "India's Agony Over Religion"

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the book is actually *published* by the Order and is in its ninth edition.

The above examples are only a sampling of the book's failings. Sadly, there are inaccuracies of one sort or another on a majority of the book's pages. Kripal's hypotheses are based upon innuendo, prejudicial translation, and cultural misjudgments.

Obviously, this approach does little to

advance religious and cross-cultural understanding, and that is a larger issue at stake. Can a reductionist approach such as this offer insight into a mystic's world? In the end, *Kālī's Child* has value as a cautionary tale, for the reply it gives to this question is a resounding *no*.

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***India's Agony Over Religion.*** Gerald Larson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, xiv + 393pp.

**LARSON FOCUSES ON** India's contemporary agony over religion as manifested in five case studies: (1) Sikhs in the Punjab; (2) Muslims in Kashmir; (3) Difficulties in developing a uniform civil code (e.g. the Shah Bano Begum case); (4) Compensatory discrimination to help "backward classes"; and (5) the Ayodhya/BabriMasjid crisis. What makes Larson's discussion especially valuable is that he contextualizes these events in India's religious, philosophical, and cultural history stretching back some four thousand years. This gives Larson's approach a depth of understanding that is often lacking in social science studies that largely confine themselves to recent history.

Why is this book of interest to scholars in Hindu-Christian studies? Because Larson's thesis is that the Neo-Hindu reformist impulses of the Brahma Samaj, the Ramakrishnan Mission, and even the Hindu Mahasabha contain "a quasi-Protestant veneer of individualism and the privatization of religious belief" (p.285), that is in tension with what he calls the "old Indic" tradition that typified India before the coming of modernity – in which Christianity played a major role.

The first half of the book offers a comprehensive retracing of India's history. Larson argues that there is no pristine Indian essence; rather, there is a *continuity* of

Indian experience that may be traced through its discontinuities (p.140). That continuity is to be found precisely in the ongoing conversation (or cluster of conversations) about diverse cultural and religious values that has characterized India through the ages. India's genius has been its ability to maintain a reasonably stable community of communities over time in the context of mutually contested values. In teasing out the difference in the ongoing conversation between the pre-modern (which he calls "Old Indic") and the modern (which he calls "New Indic"), he helpfully makes use of the philosophical notion of absences (*ābhāva*). The "Old Indic" is characterized by the *absence* of separation between reason and experience; separation of mind (ideas) from body; psychological separation between birth and rebirth; separation of individual from collective self-identity; and theological separation between Divine and Human. Whereas the various "separations" were absent in the "Old Indic", in the modern, or "New Indic" sensibility such separations are taken for granted – so complete is the Protestantization of religion among India's ruling elite, though much less in the masses.

It is these "New-Indic" separations in conversation with the "Old-Indic" values, says Larson, that have fostered India's hybrid notion of itself as a secular state, within which its current "agonies over

religion" are being played out. This stimulating analysis forms the last half of the book and brings new dimensions of understanding to the discussions of India's law and polity. India's hybrid development, maintains Larson, sees the secular as religious and the community (rather than the individual) as citizen. He quotes Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan who described India's Neo-Hindu secularism: "Secularism here does not mean irreligion or atheism ... it lays stress on the universality of spiritual values which may be attained in a variety of ways" (p.197). Larson calls this "Indic Civil Religion", and identifies its critics as including: Muslims, Marxists, Ambedkar, the BJP, and the VHP. Larson's discussion of Gandhi, Nehru, and the Indian Constitution in this regard is very insightful.

Another helpful observation is Larson's distinction between citizenship (as we know it in the West), and "community-ship". In India the latter is stronger than the former. When "community-ship" is selfish and separatist in nature it becomes "communalism" and acts as a negation or distortion of the "community-ship". Partition is communalism's primary symbol. Rather than using religious, linguistic, and cultural identity to divide and destroy (communalism) community-ship finds strength, value, and even identity in the overarching conversation between communities that is for Larson the core Indian value. Today India is in agony

because this central Indian way is not being followed. On the one extreme the Neo-Hindu secular state rules out discourse regarding religion in public-policy matters. On the other extreme is the idea of a Hindu state where public policy is informed by only one religion. Larson's solution is a middle way in which India is a multireligious state with no established religion, but where all - including secularists and agnostics - would be recognized as discussants in the overarching conversation among groups on public-policy matters. While lacking in detail, Larson's idea is that then tax money could be used to foster a religious-studies-type educational curriculum at all levels in schools and universities.

While I learned much from Larson's book and plan to use it in my senior seminar, I have one quarrel with him, namely his interpretation of Sayid Ahmad Khan as the father of the idea of partition or two-nation separatism (p.184). Although Larson may be correct in seeing Sayid as playing a major role in developing a "neo-Muslim" perspective in response to the Neo-Hindu perspective, I find in Sayid's writings an emphasis on the purification of religious practice and the reform of Islam within a *unified India* and not the intention of creating a separate Muslim state.

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***Materialien zur Geschichte der Rāmānuja-Schule II.*** Gerhard Oberhammer. Wien: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996.

**THIS IS A** scholarly translation and presentation of Vātsya Varadaguru's (c.1190-1275) treatise on the Transcendence of Brahma belonging to the controversial theological discussions of the Ramanuja tradition. The *Materialien zur Geschichte der Rāmānuja-Schule I* was the first

presentation of another work of the same tradition: *Parāsarabhas Tattvaratnākaraḥ* (1979). The present treatise is a part of Varadaguru's *Prameyamālā*, a work on Rāmānuja's Śribhāṣyam in which the author treats the question of Brahma's transcendence and defends his position