
This edited volume, which includes fourteen essays by scholars of Indic and/or Judaic studies from across the humanities and social sciences, is the latest in a series of striking efforts to bring Indic (particularly Hindu) and Jewish history, culture, politics, sociology, anthropology, religion and the arts into conversation with one another. The lead editor, Nathan Katz, established the Society for Indo-Judaic Studies and the Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies over a decade ago to encourage ongoing scholarship in the comparative study of these two traditions. In 1994, Hananya Goodman’s edited volume Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism appeared as one of the first serious attempts to bring these two communities into scholarly relationship. Since that publication, multiple independent conferences have been held, and on-going groups have been established within professional organizations, such as the Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms Group within the American Academy of Religion.

Such comparative study is not without its critics. Many scholars are somewhat confounded by work comparing two traditions that are seemingly unconnected by history or geography. The present volume, as the most recent expression of Indo-Judaic scholarship, successfully argues three points: 1) that there has, in fact, been historical contact between these two communities that deserves research attention; 2) that even where there has been limited historical contact, there has been shared experience, largely as marginalized communities, that brings fresh perspective to dominant, hegemonic narratives; and 3) that comparative study of Indic and Jewish traditions has substantial contributions to make to the framing of fundamental categories and questions in the humanities and social sciences.

The volume is organized into four parts. Part I (Chakravarti, Weinstein, and Marks) focus on historical contact between Indo-Judaic communities, demonstrating that there was more contact between these communities (despite geographical distance) than one might initially image. Part II (Holdrege, Sinha, Katz) focuses on comparative work in religious studies. More importantly, this section articulates most clearly
the theoretical contributions that Indo-Judaic studies has to make. Part III (Johnson, Weil, Roland, and Parfitt) focuses on studies of Jewish communities in India. This section in particular raises questions about normative standards of identity and the value of highlighting marginalized experience to challenge dominant identity paradigms. Finally, Part IV (Egorova, Kumaraswamy, Kumar, and Chatterjee) explores contemporary Indo-Judaic interactions in politics.

In addition to the introduction, two chapters in particular are helpful for sketching the landscape of Indo-Judaic studies in terms of what it has to offer to scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Holdrege’s chapter traces the history of the field and articulates the reasons for and benefits of this specific comparative enterprise. Holdrege, along with Katz, is one of the leading spokespersons for this field. She notes that her own comparative work has served “as a means to dismantle the tyranny of prevailing paradigms and to construct a range of alternative epistemologies” (78) within religious studies. The comparative work of Indo-Judaic traditions raises questions about the “universality” of categories that have permeated the humanities and social sciences. Within religious studies, Holdrege notes, “we use categories as instruments of inclusion and exclusion by means of which we classify religious phenomena according to whether they share or do not share certain properties” (78). By examining indigenous categories from Hindu and Jewish traditions, we are forced to unseat dominant epistemologies that determine how we structure our view of specific religious communities and religious experience in general.

Katz’s chapter focuses on Hindu-Jewish dialogue, and he lists several significant conclusions emerging out his years of research in this field. He notes, for example, that “dialogue” is neither evangelization nor debate, although these phenomena often pose as dialogue. Dialogue also does not occur when a member of one community speaks on behalf of another community, either in a public forum or in print. Katz notes Raimundo Pannikar’s unmasking of “Hindu-Christian dialogue” as “Christian dialogue with Hinduism” (116) in which the conversation partners are on unequal footing. In perhaps his most disturbing anecdote, Katz recalls touring the Vatican Museum with a Thai Buddhist monk. First the monk and then Katz came across relics that had been stolen from each man’s historic cultural community. For Katz, that