Peter Gottschalk


Peter Gottschalk is Professor of Religion at Wesleyan University. His research, according to his official university site is "on cultural interpretation and conflict in the context of Islam, Hindu and the West. He is interested particularly in understanding how assumptions of mutual antagonism form between groups despite evidence of religious confluence." His interest in India and especially the village of Chainpur, in the northern part of India has resulted in two books: the one under review here and his earlier *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India* (New York, n.y.; Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), in which he explores the multiple identities of the people in northern Indian villages through their narratives of the past. Closely related to this is his interest in the new book to demonstrate how Hindu and Muslim identities are not mutually exclusive.

*Religion, Science, and Empire* complicates further the issue of Muslim and Hindu identity by showing how classification and comparison, before and during the British Raj (1858–1947) in India, done by means of the notions of "science" and "religion," shaped "British representations of Indians and [the British] themselves." According to Gottschalk, in the wake of British scientism and the various academic disciplines that were forming during the 18th and 19th centuries, representations of Indians and India relied heavily on the notion of religion, resulting in depictions of India as a fundamentally religious country. If this representation of India is to be challenged, according to Gottschalk, "we must understand the foundations of these views in theology, anthropology, cartography, demographics, folklore studies, archaeology, and the history of religion as well as the less formal forms of knowledge that foreshadowed them" (53). Furthermore, unlike those who either champion British forms of knowledge by dismissing Indian agency or those who overemphasize recovering indigenous knowledge by dismissing the impact of British hegemony, Gottschalk's approach "attempts to recognize Indian agency without overlooking the inherent limits of Indian resistance in epistemic, economic, and political systems dominated by Britons, while also recognizing that accommodation to or acceptance of Western-originated science could also be an expression of agency" (9). He cautions, though, that "without adequate local voices from the period, our focus on how outsiders produced representational forms of Chainpur puts us in danger of reducing Chainpur's historical inhabitants to mere objects, devoid of agency and subjectivity" (11), something that he tries
to fight against throughout the book but especially in his last chapter, “Chainpur Today.” There he interviews residents of the village regarding the notions of “religion” and “science” and their current understanding of the British Raj.

Gottschalk embarks on this journey in order to demonstrate the historicity and the changing meaning of “religion” and “science” – changes that, according to the author, were the result both of the changing British interests in South Asia but also the impact of local appropriations and understandings of those same terms. Gottschalk therefore offers a rich book in terms of the data he explores and the nuanced description showing that “religion and science derive often from ultimately entwined and interrelated currents of interest and tradition” (21). For this reason Religion, Science, and Empire is an important book concerning the emergence of various disciplines and the imperial production of knowledge.

The successive chapters illustrate the five modes of comparison as outlined by Jonathan Z. Smith (i.e., ethnographic, encyclopedic, morphologic, evolutionary and statistical), and the way they were each put into practice by Britons who tried to understand India and its people. Gottschalk demonstrates how those methods and categories (apart from “religion,” notions such as “race” and “nation” became prominent categories of comparison) created a specific representation of South Asia as inherently and uniformly religious – a representation that sometimes was challenged and other times was appropriated by Indians themselves.

In the first chapter Gottschalk clarifies the concepts of “religion,” “science,” and “scientism,” understanding the first two terms not as agents that did things “but only as terms used to refer to realms of particular types of discourse, praxis, and authority” (21), while scientism, according to Gottschalk, “refers to the ascent of Western-originated science as an ideology and as a hegemonic discourse in, first, Western and, then under imperialist impetus, non-Western cultures” (35). Throughout the book we see how prominent the role of “religion” and “science” was – from the creation of maps and the science of cartography (chapter 2), to ethnographic accounts of Christian missionaries (chapter 3), to humanistic travelogues (which became increasingly prominent, leading eventually to the new discipline of anthropology) (chapter 4), to statistics and demography (chapter 5), to folklore and ethnology (chapter 6), to historiography and archaeology (chapter 7). As already indicated, the last chapter demonstrates the specific impact of British imperialism and its epistemic order.

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